



Vice President Joe Biden's connections to Ukraine have become a subject of deep interest among the president's political allies. | Ethan Miller/Getty Images

2020 ELECTIONS

Trump: Discussing a Biden probe with Barr would be 'appropriate'

Rudy Giuliani, the president's personal attorney, is urging Ukraine to investigate Joe Biden, raising questions about whether Donald Trump would pressure his attorney general to do the same.

By **ELIANA JOHNSON, DARREN SAMUELSOHN, ANDREW RESTUCCIA** and **DANIEL LIPPMAN** | 05/10/2019 08:01 PM EDT | Updated 05/11/2019 12:32 AM EDT

President Donald Trump told POLITICO on Friday that it would be “appropriate” for him to speak to Attorney General Bill Barr about launching an investigation into his potential 2020 rival, Joe Biden, or his son, Hunter.

The question of whether Trump could pressure Barr to probe Biden is coming under scrutiny after Rudy Giuliani, the president's personal attorney, said he would be traveling to Ukraine to urge the incoming government there to look at Hunter Biden's involvement with a Ukrainian energy company that has reportedly been in prosecutors' crosshairs. The efforts appear to be part of a broader campaign by Trump's allies to damage the former Democratic vice president's White House campaign and have raised questions about whether Trump's team is trying to enlist a foreign government to aid the president's re-election bid.

“Certainly it would be an appropriate thing to speak to him about, but I have not done that as of yet. ... It could be a very big situation,” Trump said in a 15-minute telephone interview on Friday afternoon, which stemmed from POLITICO’s inquiries for a separate story.

Barr also drew attention during his recent congressional testimony when he demurred on a question about whether anybody in the White House had ever suggested that he launch an investigation.

WHITE HOUSE

Trump: Biden 2020 reminds me of Trump 2016

By ANDREW RESTUCCIA, DANIEL LIPPMAN and ELIANA JOHNSON

The two Bidens’ connections to Ukraine have become a subject of deep interest among the president’s political allies, who charge that Biden as vice president pressured the Ukrainian government to oust a prosecutor in order to benefit his son. The Ukrainian prosecutor had reportedly faced allegations of ignoring corruption among Ukraine’s business and political elite. No evidence has emerged that Joe Biden was acting to assist his son, and it is not clear that the official was probing the company at the time.

The New York Times earlier this month reported on Giuliani’s efforts to investigate and publicize the issue.

The president argued that the alleged conflict of interest, or appearance thereof, was not mushrooming into an all-out scandal because Biden is a Democrat.

“Because he’s a Democrat,” Trump said, the report had about “one-hundredth” the impact as it would have if he “were a Republican.”

That’s not for lack of effort by the president’s allies. As of Friday afternoon, Giuliani was about to travel to Ukraine in an effort to push the country’s president-elect to pursue the investigation into Hunter Biden’s involvement with the energy company, Burisma Holdings. He also wants Ukraine to probe whether the country’s officials were trying to help Hillary Clinton during the 2016 election by releasing forged documents tied to Paul Manafort.

Giuliani was planning to leave Sunday and return Wednesday, he told POLITICO in an interview Friday afternoon. During his trip, Giuliani was expecting to meet with Volodymyr Zelensky, a comedian who was elected president of Ukraine last month and who has reportedly said he’s looking to replace one of the prosecutors involved in the cases.

“I just want to tell him, ‘Don’t let these crooks talk you out of the investigation. There are real facts there they’ve got to investigate,’” Giuliani said. “A lot of this stuff is a lot easier for them to get. They do get nervous if they think the government is going to scuttle this investigation.”

But later Friday, Giuliani said he had canceled his trip, explaining his change of plans in a text message to POLITICO that the original offer for a meeting was a “set up” orchestrated by “several vocal critics” of Trump who are advising Ukraine’s new president-elect. “Only got name yesterday and told pres elect is in hands of avowed enemies of Pres Trump,” Giuliani wrote. “Useless meeting.”

Biden’s campaign did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

The president said Friday he didn’t know much about Giuliani’s planned trip but wanted to speak with him about it.

“I have not spoken to him at any great length, but I will,” Trump said in the interview. “I will speak to him about it before he leaves.”

The former New York mayor for weeks has been talking with reporters about the Biden-Ukraine connection, insisting it is a scandal.

“I don’t see how you get from here to the presidency without that being investigated,” Giuliani said earlier on Friday, swinging back at critics who say the president’s attorney is openly encouraging a foreign government to meddle in the American election.

“If I wanted to meddle in the election, I’d be talking about it a year from now,” Giuliani said. “I’d have kept it for myself and I’d have popped it right before the Democratic convention. That’d be fun.”

Trump’s critics have long feared that the president would pressure the Justice Department to investigate his political opponents.

During the 2016 campaign, Trump and his allies led chants of “Lock her up!” in reference to Clinton, though there has been no public follow-up on the Clinton investigation since the arrival of the Trump administration.

More recently, Barr has come under fire for his reply to Sen. Kamala Harris during a hearing last week where the attorney general did not explicitly answer the California Democrat's questions about whether Trump or anyone else in the White House asked or suggested the DOJ launch an investigation.

"I'm trying to grapple with the world 'suggest'," Barr replied during the hearing. "I mean there have been discussions of, of matters out there that uh ... they have not asked me open an investigation."

Harris, who is running for president, followed up by asking if the White House had hinted at an investigation, and the attorney general replied, "I don't know."

Several former national security and law enforcement officials took issue later Friday with the president's comment that he was within his right to approach Barr about a possible Biden investigation.

"Past Republican and Democratic administrations alike have recognized the critical importance of the wall of separation between the White House and DOJ when it comes to criminal investigations," said Matt Axelrod, a former senior Obama Justice Department official. "This president's belief that he can instruct the Attorney General to investigate his political rival is a wild break from past precedent and would represent a dangerous assault on the rule of law."

Susan Hennessey, a former attorney at the National Security Agency wrote on Twitter after this story published that Trump's comment was a "disturbing development people should pay attention to."

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