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Democracy Dies in Darkness

Zelensky planned to announce Trump's 'quo' on my show. Here's what happened.

By **Fareed Zakaria**

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The phrase “quid pro quo” is usually translated as “something for something.” In the case of President Trump’s communications with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, it appears that the “quo” was supposed to have been a declaration of Zelensky’s commitment to undertake investigations into the 2016 election and Joe Biden. The New York Times has reported that a public announcement was set to be made on my CNN program. So I think I owe readers my best understanding of what actually happened.

Ever since Zelensky was elected president in April, my team and I have been interested in having him appear on the show. He is a fascinating political figure, a total outsider who swept into power. I had visited Ukraine several times and interviewed the previous president of the country three times, so I was familiar with the place and had good contacts.

We began the process of establishing connections with the new administration, which was cordial and efficient throughout. Heads of state often find it useful to give interviews around the time of the annual U.N. General Assembly in September, and that was our target.

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About a week before the main U.N. gathering, another major conference was taking place in Kyiv, an annual event that brings together Ukrainian elites with Western politicians, diplomats, intellectuals and journalists. Since I was scheduled to participate, I queried as to whether I could meet with Zelensky to secure the televised interview and get him comfortable with me. His office readily agreed.

On Sept. 13, I met with Zelensky in Kyiv, on the sidelines of the conference. He came across as smart, energetic and with a much sharper feel for politics than you might expect from a neophyte. It was a brief conversation, but we did discuss most of the big issues he faced — Ukraine's relations with Russia and the United States, economic reform and corruption. We also talked about whether he wanted to do the interview in English — which he speaks well — or Ukrainian. I left with the sense that all was well. Zelensky had perhaps seemed a bit distracted, but I assumed that this was because of the many challenges he faced.

It's a testament to Zelensky's skill that he did not let on in any way the immense pressure he was under. As we now know, for months the Trump White House had been mounting an intense campaign to force him to publicly announce the election-related investigations. He had tried to resist and put them off in various ways, but ultimately decided he would have to give in, according to the Times. His team apparently concluded that since he was planning an interview with me anyway, that would be the forum in which he would make the announcement, though neither he nor any of his team ever gave us any inkling that this was their plan. However, after my meeting with him in Kyiv, my team began to discuss potential logistics of the interview with his team — time and place.

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But I had not realized how much the ground had already begun to shift before our meeting. On Sept. 5, The Post published an editorial revealing that it had been “reliably told” that Trump was trying to force Zelensky to investigate Biden. On Sept. 9, four days before my visit to Kyiv, House Democrats initiated an investigation into the allegations. That same day, the intelligence community inspector general notified the House and Senate intelligence committees of the whistleblower complaint. The next day, Sept. 10, House Intelligence Committee Chairman Adam B. Schiff (D-Calif.) sent a letter to acting director of national intelligence Joseph Maguire demanding that he turn over the complaint. That is also the day Trump announced he had fired John Bolton as national security adviser. And then, on Sept. 11, aid to Ukraine was unfrozen with no conditions.

Imagine Zelensky's dilemma. By the time I met with him in Kyiv, he knew the aid had been released, but the backstory had not yet broken into public view. Ukrainian officials I spoke to about the release of the aid were delighted but a little surprised and unsure as to what had happened. Zelensky and his team were probably trying to figure out whether they should still do the interview.

A few days later, on Sept. 18 and 19, The Post broke the story wide open. The interview was called off. We are, of course, still trying to get it.

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