

As impeachment tide swirls around Trump, Giuliani drops anchor in Ukraine

By **Paul Sonne**, **Greg Miller** and **Josh Dawsey**

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Even as the House of Representatives began drafting charges against President Trump this week, his private attorney, who many believe is partly responsible for leading Trump on the path to his likely impeachment, made an audacious trip to the country at the center of the scandal.

Rudolph W. Giuliani departed Kyiv after meeting with a range of Ukrainians who have been feeding him unproven allegations against former vice president Joe Biden and helping construct a counternarrative that is taking hold in the Republican Party. The latter story line asserts that Ukraine interfered in the 2016 election, including with the baseless theory that Ukraine, rather than Russia, was behind the hacking of the Democratic National Committee.

The purported purpose of the trip was to conduct interviews for a documentary on a right-wing media network. But Giuliani's travel also appeared designed to send a broader and more brazen signal of the disregard that he and Trump have for the unfolding impeachment process.



As if to underscore that, Giuliani used his Twitter account while on the trip to describe the impeachment hearings as a “witch hunt,” attack the former U.S. ambassador whom he helped oust earlier this year, and assert that Trump’s demands for politically beneficial investigations by Ukraine’s government were appropriate.

The flurry of messages seemed designed to taunt Democrats in Washington.

Current and former officials in Washington expressed astonishment at how Giuliani — apparently on behalf of the president — seemed to be mocking impeachment investigators, if not the very idea that either he or his client should answer any articles of impeachment.

“It’s unbelievable to me the open way in which the administration and Giuliani are still pursuing this,” said Jeffrey Edmonds, who served as Russia director at the White House National Security Council under both Barack Obama and Trump. “It is a way of . . . asserting that everything that we’re doing is perfectly normal, perfectly fine and we’re going to keep doing it.”

Giuliani couldn’t be reached for comment on his trip.

The aftermath of Giuliani’s trip came as the White House signaled that it would not mount a formal defense of Trump in the House impeachment proceedings. White House counsel Pat A. Cipollone sent a letter to the chairman of the House Judiciary Committee on Friday, saying adopting articles of impeachment “would be a reckless abuse of power by House Democrats.”

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Giuliani’s trip also represented an affront to Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, whose government was welcoming a high-level State Department diplomat at the same time and hoping to return relations with the United States to normal after more than two months at the center of an American political maelstrom.

Zelensky, who didn't meet with Giuliani, is preparing for a high-stakes summit on Monday in Paris, where he is scheduled to meet Russian President Vladimir Putin alongside the leaders of Germany and France in a renewed attempt to bring an end to the war between Russia-backed proxies and Ukrainian forces in the nation's east. More than 13,000 people have died in the conflict.

The disruption in U.S.-Ukraine relations caused by Giuliani's activities and the resulting impeachment inquiry have led some Ukrainians to fear that Zelensky, who promised an end to the conflict during his campaign, will cut a bad deal with Putin, owing partly to a growing sentiment in Kyiv that Ukraine can no longer count on support from the United States.

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Such concerns appeared to be far from Giuliani's mind.

During his trip, he sat down with a mustachioed Ukrainian lawmaker who has promoted Russian interests in Ukraine and once studied at a KGB academy in Moscow.

He was accompanied by a former Ukrainian diplomat who has won renown in U.S. right-wing circles by alleging Ukraine colluded with the DNC to undermine Trump in 2016.

He received a bon voyage message from a former Ukrainian parliamentarian, who once sent a peace proposal to the White House that would have lifted sanctions on Russia and recognized the Kremlin's annexation of Crimea.

The trip also served a practical purpose ahead of a likely Senate trial of his client. Giuliani brought a correspondent from the right-wing One America News to interview many of the Ukrainians he has interacted with in the past year — people who are willing to make allegations against Biden and the Democrats.

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The footage will help inject the theories Giuliani has gathered over the past year even further into the American public discourse, as the Senate prepares to embark on a trial that some Republican lawmakers want to make as much about Biden as it is about the president.

Giuliani has alleged that Biden pushed for the 2016 firing of Ukraine's top prosecutor to help his son, Hunter Biden, who at the time was a board member of a Ukrainian gas company whose owner was under investigation in Ukraine. Apart from a claim by the top prosecutor in question that Biden had him fired for that reason, no evidence has surfaced to show that is why Biden sought his removal. European Union leaders also wanted the prosecutor removed.

During the trip, Giuliani said on Twitter that until the matter is resolved, the issue "will be a major obstacle to the U.S. assisting Ukraine with its anti-corruption efforts."

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In Kyiv, Giuliani met with two members of Ukraine's parliament, Andriy Derkach and Oleksandr Dubinsky, who have called for a joint U.S.-Ukrainian parliamentary investigation into the gas company. The One America News correspondent traveling with Giuliani posted photos of them interviewing former Ukrainian Prosecutor General Yuri Lutsenko in Budapest, where they stopped before traveling on to Ukraine.

On Capitol Hill, Democrats were shocked by Giuliani's nerve.

“It’s a brazen move,” said Rep. Raja Krishnamoorthi (D-Ill.), a member of the House Intelligence Committee, which led the impeachment inquiry. “This is emblematic of this White House: When they are in the wrong, they double down. And in this case, they are tripling down.”

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House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) called the trip an indication of “the arrogance of it all” in comments at a CNN Town Hall on Thursday night.

Some Republicans were left scratching their heads.

Asked about the trip, Rep. Mo Brooks (R-Ala.) replied, “Rudy does what Rudy does.”

Others were surprised. “The fact that Giuliani is back in Ukraine is like a murder suspect returning to the crime scene to live-stream themselves moon dancing,” said Dan Eberhart, a prominent Republican donor and Trump supporter. “It’s brazen on a galactic level.”

At the White House, deputy press secretary Hogan Gidley sidestepped the matter.

“That’s a question between Rudy and the president,” Gidley said.

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Privately, however, two officials involved in the White House's impeachment response said Trump aides were not told Giuliani was traveling to Ukraine and do not view it as helpful.

Some House Republicans have sought to create distance between Trump and Giuliani, but the president has not yet signaled a willingness to support such a move, the two officials said. On Friday, Gidley said that as far as he was aware, Giuliani remained Trump's personal attorney.

Robyn Dixon in Moscow, David L. Stern in Kyiv and Rachael Bade and Mike DeBonis in Washington contributed to this report.

Impeachment: What you need to read

Updated December 30, 2019

Here's what you need to know to understand the impeachment of President Trump.

What's happening now: Trump is now the third U.S. president to be impeached, after the House of Representatives adopted both articles of impeachment against him.

What happens next: Impeachment does not mean that the president has been removed from office. The Senate must hold a trial to make that determination. A trial is expected to take place in January. Here's more on what happens next.

How we got here: A whistleblower complaint led Pelosi to announce the beginning of an official impeachment inquiry on Sept. 24. Closed-door hearings and subpoenaed documents related to the president's July 25 phone call with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky followed. After two weeks of public hearings in November, the House Intelligence Committee wrote a report that was sent to the House Judiciary Committee, which held its own hearings. Pelosi and House Democrats announced the articles of impeachment against Trump on Dec. 10. The Judiciary Committee approved two articles of impeachment against Trump: abuse of power and obstruction of Congress.

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