


Ukrainian lives hung in balance as Trump held up aid

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Ukrainian soldiers on the front line in the eastern Donbass region in June 2018. (Oleksandr Rupeta/NurPhoto via Getty Images)

On June 6, Russian-allied forces in Ukraine's eastern Donbass region fired a volley of artillery shells on Ukrainian soldiers based in a rural area, even though Moscow had signed a ceasefire agreement the day before.

Two young Ukrainian soldiers — 28-year-old Dmytro Pryhlo and 23-year-old Maksym Oleksiuk — were killed in their dugout by that shelling in the settlement of Novoluhanske, Ukrainian commanders said at the time. Eight other Ukrainian soldiers suffered concussions and other injuries.

Pryhlo and Oleksiuk were just two men. But the day before, the Russians had killed another Ukrainian soldier. The day before that, they had killed two others. And in the nearly five-plus years before that, thousands more had fallen.

In total, upward of 13,000 people, at least a quarter of them civilians, have been killed since 2014, when Russia annexed Ukraine's Crimea region and started a separatist uprising in Donbass, where some 35,000 Russian-backed fighters are said to still be stationed.

The pace of casualties in the war in Donbass has waned — due largely, experts say, to some \$1.5 billion in U.S. military aid in the last five years. So has press coverage of the conflict. But lives are still lost on a weekly, and sometimes daily, basis.

The deaths of Pryhlo and Oleksiuk came at a critical time and highlighted a key battlefield vulnerability. Less than two weeks after they were killed, the Pentagon announced that \$250 million in new U.S. military aid — weapons, training, medical supplies and more — would arrive soon in Ukraine, part of a roughly \$391 million fiscal 2019 aid package.

Significantly, the new aid included not just weapons like grenade launchers and rifles but also counter-artillery radars and other defensive systems that, though they would arrive too late to have detected and defended against the shelling in Novoluhanske, might very well help Ukraine see and defend against similar artillery attacks in the future, experts said.

Moreover, the delay in delivering those radars and other aid deferred the Ukrainian military's ability to upgrade its capabilities.

Much more important than its operational benefits, these observers say, the aid has conveyed the message to Ukraine — and above all, to Russia — that the United States stands with Ukraine.

The White House's withholding of this support — which administration officials, including the president, had directly or indirectly told top Ukrainian government officials about last summer — sent the opposite message.

"It is a significant mistake to withhold this aid for any reason, and particularly for domestic considerations," said retired Adm. James Stavridis, who commanded U.S. forces in Europe from 2009 to 2013. "Doing so is a gift to Vladimir Putin."

Psychological, operational effect

Trump's monthslong freeze on the money, which he dropped in September, is a key basis for the House impeachment inquiry. But the support to Ukraine is usually discussed in almost clinical terms — as an "aid package" or "security assistance" or similarly abstract terms.

To the contrary, however, Trump's apparent decision to use the aid money to coerce a partner nation into helping his political fortunes posed life-and-death risks to Ukrainian families like Pryhlo's and Oleksiuk's, according to lawmakers from both parties, U.S. military officers and analysts who focus on Ukraine.

[Mulvaney acknowledges 2016 election investigation was tied to Ukraine aid freeze]

Americans have mostly forgotten about the simmering conflict in Ukraine, but the war is still a lethal reality for those in the middle of it. And to Ukrainians, U.S. support for their military against Russia's much larger force is an existential issue.

“There is no doubt the U.S. assistance plays a very significant role in the Ukrainian military’s ability to fight the war in Donbass,” said Mariya Omelicheva, a professor of strategy at the National War College in Washington. “The delay has a profound impact on the tactical and operational preparedness and, more importantly, psychological preparedness and trust in the ally.”

Congressional proponents of Ukraine aid told CQ Roll Call that the American weapons and training are critical to saving lives.

“Ukraine’s ability to defend itself is directly linked to the unimpeded flow of U.S. military assistance,” said Democratic Sen. Jeanne Shaheen of New Hampshire, a member of the Armed Services Committee. “For this reason, Congress — on a bipartisan basis — demanded that the administration lift its hold before more people died. It was a grim realization to learn that these lives were being threatened because of political interference from the White House.”

Sen. Rob Portman, an Ohio Republican and member of the Foreign Relations Committee, was among the lawmakers who pressed the administration to free the money for Ukraine after the hold became public in late August. Trump, in fact, cited Portman’s entreaties in September as being critical in the decision to belatedly release the aid money, which Trump had claimed was being withheld to try to get other countries to contribute more and because Ukraine was too corrupt to properly handle the money.

Portman said the aid makes a real tactical and strategic difference in Ukraine.

“With this recent funding, we have provided vital assistance to help the Ukrainian military continue on their path of reform and implement improved training and readiness to be able to defend their homeland against Russian aggression,” he said.

‘Undoubtedly’ more deaths

Less than two months after the attack in Novoluhanske, the now well-known Trump administration campaign to coerce Ukraine into investigating unfounded allegations into one of Trump’s top political opponents crested, a growing number of U.S. government officials have told Congress in testimony and whistleblower complaints.

A centerpiece of the pressure campaign was withholding the latest tranche of military aid, a threat that was communicated directly and indirectly by multiple administration officials up to and including the president last summer, his critics have charged.

The acting U.S. ambassador to Ukraine, William Taylor, told House lawmakers behind closed doors Tuesday about a visit he paid, apparently in late July, to Ukrainian commanders on the front lines in the country’s eastern region of Donbass.

In the testimony, Taylor recounted being able to see “the armed and hostile Russian forces on the other side of the damaged bridge across the line of contact.”

Taylor knew by then that the aid money had been held up to coerce Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskiy — and so did Zelenskiy and other Ukrainian officials, Taylor said.

But the commanders whom Taylor visited on the front lines did not know about it, and that made Taylor “uncomfortable,” the ambassador wrote in testimony to House impeachment investigators, a document first made public by The Washington Post.

“Over 13,000 Ukrainians had been killed in the war, one or two a week,” he said in his prepared remarks.

“More Ukrainians would undoubtedly die without the U.S. assistance,” he added matter-of-factly.

Russian roulette

The Trump administration’s freeze on aid to Ukraine threatened, if only temporarily, to undercut a U.S. ally suffering casualties in a shooting war and to instead serve the interests of Russia.

A similar dynamic is at play in the Middle East. Trump apparently acquiesced to Turkey’s invasion of northern Syria earlier this month and in the bargain cut off U.S. support for the Syrian Kurds, another long-time partner ensnared in battle. There, too, Russia benefited, having stepped into the vacuum and seen its influence grow.

Trump’s Syria move has triggered GOP outrage, while Republicans have largely defended Trump in the impeachment probe despite bipartisan support on Capitol Hill for the Ukraine aid package. The Syria decision is still unfolding, while the Ukraine aid is back on; and the Syrian Kurds’ plight is more pressing now than a handful of Ukrainian deaths seem to be.

In any event, bipartisan congressional backing for continuing to arm Ukraine was shown this year when the continuing resolution that the U.S. government is currently operating under was written to extend for another year the statutory authority for the military aid for Ukraine.

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