



EXCLUSIVE

Senate panel look into Ukraine interference comes up short

Some Republican senators recently questioned whether Kyiv tried to sabotage Donald Trump’s campaign in 2016. But the GOP-led Intelligence Committee looked into the theory, and found scant evidence to support it.



Senate Intelligence Committee Chairman Richard Burr. | Mark Wilson/Getty Images

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With the impeachment inquiry charging forward, President Donald Trump’s

allies have defended his demand for political investigations from Ukraine by claiming that the government in Kyiv tried to sabotage his candidacy and boost Hillary Clinton in 2016.

“Russia was very aggressive and they're much more sophisticated, but the fact that Russia was so aggressive does not exclude the fact that President Poroshenko actively worked for Secretary Clinton,” Republican Sen. John Kennedy claimed on Sunday in an interview with NBC, referring to the former Ukrainian president.

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But the Republican-controlled Senate Intelligence Committee thoroughly investigated that theory, according to people with direct knowledge of the inquiry, and found no evidence that Ukraine waged a top-down interference campaign akin to the Kremlin's efforts to help Trump win in 2016.

The committee's Republican chairman, Richard Burr of North Carolina, [said in October 2017](#) that the panel would be examining “collusion by either campaign during the 2016 elections.”

But an interview that fall with the Democratic consultant at the heart of the accusation that Kyiv meddled, Alexandra Chalupa, was fruitless, a committee source said, and Republicans didn't follow up or request any more witnesses related to the issue.

The Senate interview largely focused on a POLITICO article published in January 2017, according to a person with direct knowledge of the closed-door hearing, in which Chalupa was quoted as saying officials at the Ukrainian Embassy were "helpful" to her effort to raise the alarm about Trump's campaign chairman Paul Manafort in 2016.

"If I asked a question, they would provide guidance, or if there was someone I needed to follow up with," she said at the time. She cautioned, however, that the embassy was "very careful" not to get involved politically because of the bipartisan support Ukraine has traditionally enjoyed from U.S. lawmakers. As the POLITICO article noted, there was "little evidence" of a "top-down effort" by the Ukrainian government to sabotage Trump's campaign. And the article did not allege that Poroshenko "actively worked" for Clinton, as Kennedy claimed.

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In her Senate testimony, Chalupa denied serving as an intermediary between the Ukrainian embassy and the DNC and said she had been targeted by a Russian active measures campaign. Intelligence officials have since briefed senators on Russia's attempts to pin blame for the 2016 interference on Kyiv as part of a disinformation operation, according to a source familiar with the briefings, which were first reported by the New York Times.

Chalupa confirmed to POLITICO that she was questioned by the panel. A spokesperson for Burr declined to comment. A spokesperson for the ranking member, Mark Warner, pointed to Warner's recent comments to PBS.

"I take very seriously the responsibility of, what I hear in classified settings needs to stay classified," Warner told the outlet. "But I think it is very clear to me, and this has been testified to by every leader of law enforcement, [and the]

intelligence community, that there's been absolutely no validity to this crazy conspiracy theory that Ukraine was behind the 2016 intervention."

In a brief hallway interview after this story was published, Burr declined to say if he believes Ukraine interfered in the 2016 election. But, he said, "The elected officials in Ukraine had a preference. Her name is Hillary Clinton."



Sen. Mark Warner. | Susan Walsh/AP Photo

Senate Intelligence Committee member Angus King of Maine, an independent who caucuses with the Democrats, declined to comment on what the committee has or hasn't investigated.

But he said in an interview that he's "probably been to between 20-30 briefings and hearings on this subject of election interference in 2016, and I have never heard one word about any culpability on the part of Ukraine."

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“It has never been mentioned in any of the briefings I’ve had on the Intelligence Committee,” King said. He called the claims about Ukraine’s interference in 2016 “unfortunate” because “it muddies the waters,” and noted that Russia’s attempts to blame Ukraine are not inconsistent with its standard disinformation tactics.

Chalupa, a Ukrainian-American activist who served as co-chair of the Democratic National Committee’s Ethnic Council, has never been to Ukraine, and the DNC has said she conducted the Manafort research and outreach to the embassy on her own.

But she has been at the heart of efforts by Trump’s allies to draw parallels between Russia’s large-scale hacking and propaganda operation with the scattershot actions of a small cadre of Ukrainian bureaucrats who tried to expose Manafort’s ties to Russia during the election.

Republicans have also pointed to [an op-ed written](#) by Ukraine’s ambassador to the U.S., Valeriy Chaly, in August 2016 that criticized Trump’s remark [days earlier that he would be “looking into” recognizing Crimea](#) as Russian territory.

In her testimony, Trump’s former top Russia adviser Fiona Hill acknowledged Chaly’s comments, but said she knew of “an awful lot of senior officials in many governments, including our allied governments” who had criticized Trump in 2016. And she called it “a fiction that the Ukrainian government was launching an effort to upend our election, upend our election to mess with our Democratic systems.”

Asked whether a Ukrainian-American might have been interested in “injecting” negative information about Manafort into the press, Hill retorted that the same could be said of the Ukrainian-American operatives Lev Parnas and Igor Fruman, two associates of Trump’s lawyer Rudy Giuliani “who were also trying to subvert our democracy and who managed to get one of our ambassadors sacked.” (Parnas and Fruman helped launch a smear campaign that culminated last spring in the early recall of Marie Yovanovitch, the former U.S. ambassador to Ukraine.)

“I’ve learned in the last few days that there were some individual people in Ukraine who preferred Hillary Clinton to Donald Trump,” King said in the interview, adding that that was “not surprising” given Trump’s comments about Crimea. “But as near as I can tell, it was simply individuals expressing a preference,” King said. “Not in any way, shape or form the kind of influence operation we saw from Russia in 2016.”

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GOP lawmakers have invoked Chalupa’s name repeatedly throughout the impeachment inquiry—the House Intelligence Committee’s top Republican, Devin Nunes, alone has mentioned her nearly a dozen times in his opening statements and questioning—to show that it was not unreasonable for Trump to demand that Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky announce an investigation into the unsubstantiated allegations of Ukraine’s interference in 2016. Trump also asked Zelensky to investigate Joe Biden and his son Hunter.

Those requests, which Hill described as “a political errand” at odds with official U.S. policy, are at the center of the ongoing impeachment inquiry.



President Donald Trump's former top Russia adviser Fiona Hill. | Chip Somodevilla/Getty Images

Republicans have also pointed to the publication of the so-called black ledger outlining off-the-books payments Manafort received from Ukraine’s pro-Russia Party of Regions as evidence of a Ukrainian interference plot. The revelation led Manafort to resign from the Trump campaign, which was already under scrutiny for its Russia ties.

But the ledger was released by an independent Ukrainian government agency, the National Anti-Corruption Bureau of Ukraine, and publicized by Sergii Leshchenko—a Ukrainian member of Parliament who, despite Senator Kennedy’s claims that Poroshenko “worked” with Clinton in 2016, [grew to oppose Poroshenko](#) and [accused him](#) of launching a politically motivated investigation into the ledger’s release to curry favor with Trump. That investigation was spearheaded by ousted Ukrainian prosecutor Yuriy Lutsenko.

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Leshchenko recently described his motivations in publicizing the black ledger in an article for the Kyiv Post, an English-language newspaper in Ukraine. “On May 31, 2016, I gave a press conference and released the 22 pages [of the ledger] that I had,” Leshchenko wrote. “Manafort was not mentioned there. His role became known only three months later, in August 2016, when the New York Times reported about it.”

“In Ukraine, it was no secret to anyone that Manafort worked for Yanukovych and was generously paid,” he continued. “And since Manafort at that time became the head of Trump’s campaign, it was predictable enough that American journalists would dig for Manafort’s name in Yanukovych’s black ledger.”

Ukraine’s Sixth Administrative Court of Appeals canceled a court ruling in July that said Leshchenko and the head of NABU, Artem Sytnyk, had unlawfully interfered in the 2016 election by publicizing the fact that Manafort’s name and signature appeared on the ledger, [according to the Kyiv Post](#).

The Ukrainian lawmaker who initiated the court case alleging interference in the U.S., Boryslav Rozenblat, was himself [under investigation on corruption charges](#) when he filed the suit, raising questions about its legitimacy.

Trump’s request to Zelensky to investigate Ukraine’s election interference, however, invoked a debunked conspiracy theory that few Republicans have entertained—that the Democratic National Committee gave its server to a

“Ukrainian company” to examine after it had been hacked, ostensibly in an effort to frame Russia for the attack.

In reality, the DNC hired CrowdStrike—a cybersecurity firm used by Democrats and Republicans that was co-founded by a Russian—to investigate, and the company shared the forensic evidence, which demonstrated Russia’s involvement, with the FBI.

Trump’s own former homeland security adviser, Tom Bossert, has described his fruitless attempts to convince the president that the Crowdstrike theory was bogus. “It’s not only a conspiracy, it is completely debunked,” Bossert told ABC in September. “And at this point I am deeply frustrated with what he and the legal team is doing and repeating that debunked theory to the president. It sticks in his mind when he hears it over and over again and for clarity here ... let me just again repeat that it has no validity.”

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Asked about CrowdStrike’s work with the DNC and coordination with the FBI, Adam Hickey, the deputy assistant attorney general for the DOJ’s National Security Division, [told the House Judiciary Committee](#) in October that “it’s pretty common for us to work with a security vendor in connection with an investigation of a computer intrusion.”

Asked by Rep. Debbie Lesko (R-Ariz.) “what other countries had shown an interest or tried to interfere in the 2016 election,” Hickey replied, “based on

what I've read, both from what the IC has put out and also investigations by Congress, what I've seen only refers to Russia, that I'm aware of.”

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The Senate Intelligence Committee concluded in a bipartisan report—after conducting “interviews of key individuals who have provided additional insights into these incidents—that Russia hacked the DNC, and agreed with the intelligence community’s 2017 assessment that “Putin and the Russian Government aspired to help President-elect Trump's election chances when possible by discrediting Secretary Clinton.”

Two volumes of the committee’s final report, entitled “Russian Active Measures Campaigns and Interference in the 2016 U.S. Election,” have been released so far, and neither address the theory that Ukraine interfered in the 2016 election.

In Volume 2, however, which focuses on Russia’s use of social media to wage disinformation campaigns, the committee flagged another episode in which Russia sought to blame Ukraine for its own misconduct: specifically, the “menu of conspiracy theories and false narratives” Russia introduced in 2014 to account for the downing of Malaysian Airlines Flight 17.

Russia has repeatedly pointed the finger at Kyiv, [despite the conclusion](#) by a team of international investigators that the plane was destroyed by Russia-backed Ukrainian separatists—aided by three Russians close to Russian intelligence services—operating in separatist territory using Russia-provided weapons systems.

Marianne Levine contributed reporting.

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