

The Washington Post

Democracy Dies in Darkness

Ukraine desperately wants the U.S. on its side. They just don't know who has Trump's ear anymore.

By **Michael Birnbaum**

November 22, 2019 at 12:49 p.m. EST

KYIV, Ukraine — The top U.S. diplomat in Ukraine was testifying on the Hill — and President Trump was tweeting about him.

“NEVER TRUMPERS!” Trump wrote on Nov. 13.

Days later, the diplomat, acting ambassador William B. Taylor Jr., was back in Kyiv at an early Thanksgiving event. He joked that he'd far rather be in Ukraine than Washington these days, according to one person who was there.

But in Kyiv, the status of the U.S. Embassy is shaky at best with many top officials under attack from Trump and his allies. It has left Ukrainians questioning whether U.S. diplomats can really connect them to the White House and have Trump's ear.

The slimmed-down access leaves Ukraine without strong U.S. backing at a high-stakes moment for Kyiv. Many in Ukraine fear it plays to Russia's advantage. And ahead of December peace talks with the Kremlin, it means Trump is spouting angry rhetoric about Ukraine instead of coordinating strategy with its leaders.

Get exclusive analysis on the most important global story of the day, in your inbox



AD

“Before, the United States spoke to us with one voice,” said Bohdan Yaremenko, the chairman of the foreign affairs committee of the Ukrainian parliament. “It seems like the United States is not united any more in terms of foreign policy.”

One after another, the top U.S. officials charged with Ukraine policy have been drawn into the House impeachment inquiry. And one by one, they have been forced to resign, left sidelined or have been seriously undermined by Trump himself.

'Weaker side'

The result is jarring contrast for Ukraine. It's at the center of attention in Washington. But the country's leaders are also cut off from their normal channels of diplomatic communication to the U.S. Capitol as never before.

AD

The challenge is even more acute because contacts with U.S. officials have themselves become part of the currency of Trump's demands.

In his July 25 phone call with Ukraine President Volodymyr Zelensky, Trump suggested that a White House meeting could be forthcoming in exchange for Ukrainian investigations into the 2016 elections and the Bidens, according to testimony before the House. The White House also directed Vice President Pence not to attend Zelensky's inauguration in May.

With Ukrainians continuing to die in eastern Ukraine — another Ukrainian soldier was killed Monday, and deaths total more than 13,000 since 2014 — Zelensky is searching for a route to peace with pro-Moscow separatists. He plans to meet Russian President Vladimir Putin in Paris on Dec. 9.

AD

But he will go into the meeting without the same degree of robust U.S. backing that accompanied previous encounters with the Kremlin, a challenge some of his allies say could weaken his position.

“We are engaged in negotiations as the weaker side, and U.S. support is part of the leverage we have,” said Yaremenko, a Zelensky ally. The delay in U.S. military aid for Ukraine “is making us rethink how U.S. policy is operating.”

And Ukrainians aren't sure where they can turn.

Taylor — a Vietnam veteran and three-decade ambassador — doesn't speak for Trump, as the president has made clear. Kurt Volker, a U.S. special envoy charged with helping broker peace between Ukraine and Russia who was beloved by Ukrainians, resigned.

AD

Lt. Col. Alexander Vindman, the Purple Heart combat vet and director for European affairs on the National Security Council, had his patriotism questioned by House Republicans. Marie Yovanovitch, the former ambassador in Ukraine, was pulled back after a campaign against her by Trump's personal lawyer, Rudolph W. Giuliani, and Ukrainian officials she accused of corruption.

Nor does Ukraine currently have an ambassador in Washington. The previous one, Valeriy Chaly, was close to former president Petro Poroshenko and was recalled by Zelensky, who has yet to send a replacement.

'Ukraine hated me'

Officially, Ukrainian leaders say that they are plunging onward with their plans despite the tumult in Washington. They have done their best not to get further caught in the partisan dispute, seeing little payoff in becoming ammunition for one side to fire at the other.

AD

“I hope that not all partners of Ukraine are included in the impeachment process,” Ukrainian Foreign Minister Vadym Prystaiko told The Washington Post at the end of a news conference this week. Among others, he said, “a minimum of 800,000 Ukrainians live in the U.S. and are our natural partners. And not all of them are included in the process.”

He said he wanted to preserve support from “both sides of Congress.”

The currently serving U.S. officials tried to do just that this week in their public testimony, saying that U.S. support was crucial for Ukraine’s efforts to stand up to Russia and make reforms at home.

“They still need us now, going forward,” said David Holmes, a political counselor at the U.S. Embassy in Kyiv, in his testimony on Thursday. Zelensky “needs our support. He needs President Putin to understand that America supports President Zelensky at the highest levels.”

AD

And the State Department maintains that nothing has changed.

“We have a policy, we have a strategy, and it’s actually moving forward,” Ambassador Philip T. Reeker, the acting assistant secretary of State of European and Eurasian Affairs, said at a briefing in Brussels this week.

But Trump sends different signals. On Friday, he again appeared to fan a conspiracy theory — supported by no evidence — that Ukraine might have hacked the Democratic National Committee’s network in 2016 and framed Russia for the act.

“Ukraine hated me. They were after me in the election. They wanted Hillary Clinton to win,” Trump said on Fox News.

Still, some work goes on. The nearly \$400 million in U.S. assistance was restored in mid-September — after a delay many of Trump's own officials testified at the impeachment hearings they believed to be connected to the effort to get Zelensky to investigate the Bidens.

AD

'Russia will be benefiting'

U.S. Embassy officials are also involved in helping Ukrainians in their effort to vet thousands of prosecutors as part of a wide-ranging reform of the judicial system.

But many officials in Kyiv say that the consequences of the impeachment drama are obvious.

“It's not clear what the U.S. Embassy represents these days,” said one European diplomat in Kyiv, who spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss a sensitive security topic. “There isn't the same sort of pressure. Who do they speak for?”

Some Ukrainian policymakers — particularly when speaking privately — complain bitterly at what they see as U.S. corruption now spilling over into Ukraine, rather than Washington serving as a clean-government example to which they could aspire.

AD

“Russia will be benefiting from this,” Oksana Syroid, the head of the Self Reliance political party and an advocate of strong ties to the United States. “For Ukraine and the Ukrainian people, American support is very symbolic. The partnership we have is that we are not alone here.”

The worry that Ukraine was increasingly standing alone was exacerbated by Trump’s directive to Zelensky in September, during a meeting on the sidelines of the U.N. General Assembly.

“I really hope that you and President Putin get together and can solve your problem,” Trump said. “That would be a tremendous achievement.”

Many Ukrainians heard that directive as a signal that Trump would not back up Zelensky in those meetings.

“That created an uncomfortable spot,” said Roman Bezsmertnyi, a former Ukrainian official who has been involved in negotiations to bring the conflict in eastern Ukraine to a close. “Everything depends on us. But it’s pleasant to know someone’s at your back.”

Natalie Gryvnyak contributed to this report.

