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For Ukraine's Leader, Trump Memo On Their Call Is a Diplomatic Car Crash

By Reuters

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Volodymyr Zelenskiy **president.gov.ua**

For U.S. President Donald Trump, White House publication on Wednesday of a memo summarizing his call with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskiy fuelled a domestic political crisis.

For Zelenskiy, it was a far-reaching diplomatic disaster.

Zelenskiy's comments to the Republican Trump, disclosed in the summary, will likely irk U.S. Democrats, risking the bipartisan U.S. support Kiev requires while irritating France and Germany whom Zelenskiy criticized in the same exchange.

Locked in a geopolitical standoff with neighboring Russia after Moscow annexed the Crimea region and backed pro-Russian separatists fighting in eastern Ukraine in 2014, Ukraine needs all the international friends it can get.

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It relies heavily on Washington for aid and diplomatic help, and European countries like France and Germany are trying to help bring about talks aimed at breathing life into a stalled peace process over eastern Ukraine.

"Unfortunately the main consequence of this is that Ukraine could become toxic," said Alyona Getmanchuk, director of the New Europe Center in Ukraine.

"Maybe not as toxic as Russia became during the Mueller investigation, but toxic," she said, referring to a two-year U.S. investigation into contacts between Trump's successful 2016 election campaign and Russia.

The timing of the latest scandal is awkward for Zelenskiy, who is keen to reinvigorate parts of a stalled peace deal over eastern Ukraine, something for which he needs European and U.S. diplomatic muscle.

The White House memo summarizing the call shows Zelenskiy promised to reopen an investigation into a company that employed former U.S. Vice President Joe Biden's son and voiced frustration about what he said was a lack of support from German Chancellor Angela Merkel and French President Emmanuel Macron when it came to enforcing sanctions on Russia.

It also showed Zelenskiy had agreed with Trump that the former U.S. ambassador to Ukraine — Marie Yovanovitch — was "a bad ambassador."

'Eager to ingratiate'

"Zelenskiy does not come out looking good from this - giving the ex-U.S. ambassador a kicking, Merkel and the Europeans a kicking, and then agreeing to do Trump's dirty work on Biden," said Timothy Ash, a senior emerging markets strategist at Bluebay Asset Management.

"(He) seems very eager to ingratiate himself with Trump."

International investors have been hoping that Zelenskiy will make good on pledges to refashion Ukraine into a fully fledged transparent graft-free democracy. Ash's comments reflect growing skepticism on that score in some quarters.

The French foreign ministry declined to comment and the Elysee was not immediately available for comment. But French officials, speaking on condition of anonymity, said Macron had gone out of his way to meet Zelenskiy before he was elected, something that was uncommon in normal protocol.

There was no immediate comment from German officials.

Zelenskiy, who held talks with Trump in New York on Wednesday on the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly, had resisted calls for Ukraine to release details of the July 25 call with Trump during which the U.S. president asked him to investigate the son of Biden,

the front-runner in the Democratic Party race for the November 2020 election.

Zelenskiy told reporters on Wednesday he had thought that only Trump's side of the call would be published and that he believed that details of such calls "between presidents of independent countries" should sometimes not be published.

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He said he did not know the details of the investigation into Biden's son, saying it was one of many cases he discussed with world leaders if asked and that he wanted his new general prosecutor to investigate all cases without interference.

Zelenskiy also tried to smooth over things with Merkel and Macron, saying he was grateful for their help and that he had made his comments about them during "a difficult period."

"I don't want to say anything bad about anyone," Zelenskiy said after meeting Trump. "We thank everyone who helps us."

Damage done?

But some at home said the damage had already been done.

"Of course the background to relations with European leaders and especially Merkel will worsen," said Volodymyr Fesenko of the Penta think tank.

"There's no direct criticism (in the call summary) but the context and tonality is such that Zelenskiy sounds like he's complaining about Merkel to Trump."

Some Ukrainians fear that the damage the Trump scandal could inflict on U.S.-Ukraine ties could also play into Russia's hands as it might imperil future U.S. military aid among other things.

"For Ukraine there's a huge danger that it could find itself alone with its enemy the Russian Federation ... as the United States is a strategic partner in the military sphere and when it comes to pushing ahead with reforms," said Maria Ionova, a lawmaker from former president Petro Poroshenko's faction.

"The Russian Federation will definitely use this chance."

The Kremlin has said the matter is one for the United States and Ukraine and that it is merely observing.

"(The) facts are that Trump in effect asks Zelenskiy to dig dirt up on Biden, and Zelenskiy seemingly agreed," Ash said.

"After everything Biden did for the reform story in Ukraine, Zelenskiy stabs him in the back — along with the former U.S. ambassador, Merkel, et al.

"The winner — Putin!"

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