

## Giuliani may be making a stronger case against Trump than Biden

Instead of validation by Ukraine, it has been validated by conservative media.

By **Philip Bump**

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Let's assume for the sake of argument that President Trump's motivation in asking Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky to investigate former vice president Joe Biden was not, in fact, generalized concern about corruption in that country. It's a fair assumption to make, given that he never publicly expressed concern about corruption in Ukraine before September and only rarely mentioned corruption elsewhere (save within the Democratic Party). But should you be inclined to give him the benefit of the doubt on that point, I ask that you set it aside for a moment.

Lots of things suddenly click neatly into place. That would explain, then, why Trump asked Zelensky only and specifically about Biden and his son Hunter instead of corruption more broadly. It would explain, too, why, asked several days after the rough transcript of his call was made public what he hoped Zelensky would do, he said he wanted the Ukrainian president to "start a major investigation into the Bidens" — not that he wanted Zelensky to focus broadly on potential issues of corruption. Particularly since there's no robust evidence that Biden or his son actually engaged in any corrupt activity.

By the time Trump made that request on July 25, his team within the administration had been agitating for Ukraine to launch an investigation for a month, using Zelensky's desire for a meeting at the White House as leverage. His team *outside* the administration — centralized in his personal attorney Rudolph W. Giuliani — had been on the case even longer, stretching back to late 2018. Despite sporadic efforts to distance himself from Giuliani's efforts in particular, Trump's embrace of Giuliani's singular focus on Biden has been obvious for some time and has been reinforced regularly even as the president has faced impeachment by the House.

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Giuliani recently returned from Ukraine, where he met with several current and former officials from that country who've contributed bits of information to Giuliani's theory of Biden malfeasance. He did so in the company of a personality from the unabashedly pro-Trump cable network One America News Network, who subsequently filed reports about the trip that would make a 2-year-old's assessment of the existence of Santa Claus seem measured and skeptical.

Most of what Giuliani alleges is centered on testimony from a handful of obviously conflicted witnesses and bolstered by other dubious characters. At the center is Viktor Shokin, Ukraine's prosecutor general until early 2016, when he was forced out under pressure from Biden and other U.S. and European leaders.

Shokin has repeatedly claimed that he was targeted by Biden solely because his office was investigating corruption at a Ukrainian company called Burisma Holdings, on the board of which Hunter Biden then served. Others, including a number of other officials, have denied that claim. No one has presented robust evidence that there was such an investigation underway while a number of individuals have flatly denied that Burisma was under investigation in the way Shokin claims. In fact, as Adam Entous reported in the New Yorker on Monday, much of the criticism Shokin engendered stemmed from his *failure* to prosecute corruption. But Shokin nonetheless has insisted to Giuliani that he was targeted solely because Biden wanted to protect his son.

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Shokin also told Giuliani that he'd twice been poisoned, had each time technically died and twice been brought back to life.

Giuliani reported this without amendment to his Twitter followers. There are no news articles reinforcing the claim that a former senior Ukrainian government official had narrowly cheated poisoning, despite the historical resonance of such a claim. But this, as we'll see, is how Giuliani's investigation works.

The Entous article focuses on another source of Giuliani's, Shokin's successor Yuri Lutsenko. Lutsenko was included in the OANN series, but his most dramatic mark on the Ukraine story was made in interviews with writer John Solomon for articles published at The Hill this year. In those interviews, he alleged wrongdoing by the Bidens and accused then-Ambassador to Ukraine Marie Yovanovitch of having given him a do-not-prosecute list — evidence, he suggested, of the government's willingness to steer law enforcement in Ukraine in particular directions.

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Neither of those claims was true. Lutsenko walked each back a few months after offering them and explained to Entous his rationale for making them in the first place. Entous's article also casts significant doubt on two stories Lutsenko is still peddling via Giuliani and OANN, involving money laundering allegations targeting an American financial company and Burisma itself. In the interview, Lutsenko also targets Yovanovitch again, this time claiming she lied under oath.

What's emerged since the beginning of the year was a willingness by Giuliani to share whatever information was presented to him, regardless of the credibility of the source or the information itself. Interviews with Shokin and Lutsenko conducted in January were documented and later passed along to the State Department without verification. While Trump presents Giuliani as "a great crime-fighter" — a function of his tenure as a U.S. attorney and as mayor of New York City — it's hard to come to the conclusion that Giuliani's current efforts are much more than partisan dirt-digging.

Entous reports on a call he had with Giuliani last month to that point.

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"Giuliani described some tips he was hearing from his sources in Ukraine, including allegations that a Ukrainian oligarch had made illegal campaign contributions to Hillary Clinton totaling forty million dollars, 'that Biden helped to facilitate,' " Entous writes. "In addition, he said, 'I was told Biden had participated in the hacking' — a reference to the penetration of Democratic National Committee computer servers in 2016, which U.S. intelligence agencies have attributed to Russia's military intelligence agency."

Giuliani shrugs at the fact that he's passing on dubious claims: "They may be true, they may be false." The important throughline, of course, is that they impugn Biden.

Trump has been kept apprised of Giuliani's activities. Last Friday, Giuliani spent several hours at the White House. In an interview with the Wall Street Journal published Saturday, he describes a phone conversation with Trump immediately upon landing back in the U.S. from Ukraine.

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According to Giuliani, Trump asked, "What did you get?"

Giuliani replied, "More than you can imagine."

On Dec. 7, Trump spoke to reporters outside the White House and discussed Giuliani's research.

"I just know he came back from someplace, and he's going to make a report, I think to the attorney general and to Congress," Trump said. "He says he has a lot of good information. I have not spoken to him about that information."

The president also retweeted part of Giuliani's thread about his "investigations" with OANN, including Lutsenko's accusation against Yovanovitch.

Yovanovitch's ouster in April—by the Trump administration's State Department—followed a public campaign by Giuliani, Fox News's Sean Hannity and Donald Trump Jr. suggesting that she had behaved inappropriately in office or was disloyal to Trump. To Entous, Giuliani expressed another rationale for getting her out of the way.

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"I believed that I needed Yovanovitch out of the way," Giuliani told Entous. "She was going to make the investigations difficult for everybody."

This, of course, is a central allegation from House Democrats, that the investigations sought by Trump — particularly targeting Biden — was the reason Trump's team wanted Yovanovitch gone.

Giuliani simply admitted it, just as he pushes forward on his Hooveresque (as in the vacuum, not the FBI director) investigation, sucking up any claim that includes a criminal statute, a verb and “Joe Biden.” The insistence by Trump allies that the president wanted Ukraine broadly to address corruption is flimsy at best, but Giuliani keeps kicking out pieces of the sagging scaffolding that the claim depends on. He does so while obviously still engaging with Trump — by his own admission. Trump has claimed that he didn’t direct Giuliani’s efforts in Ukraine, but Giuliani, who has said that he’s engaging in the probes on behalf of his client — Trump — also hasn’t been told to cut it out.

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There’s one more damning part of Entous’s article that bears mentioning. Lutsenko told the New Yorker reporter that “he suspected that an attention-grabbing announcement from Ukraine was more important to Giuliani than the proposed investigations themselves, which would drag on for years.” This, of course, was the claim made by Ambassador to the European Union Gordon Sondland, who testified during an open hearing as part of the House impeachment inquiry that Trump and Giuliani simply wanted an announcement of an investigation, getting the political benefit of the cloud that would hang over Biden, without having to worry about an eventual exoneration.

The irony is that this is where we already are. That cloud is there, thanks to the uncritical reiteration of Giuliani's claims in conservative media like OANN and thanks to Trump defenders during the impeachment process. It's a tidy little circle: Trump's request for a probe of Biden derived from concern about corruption, and that concern about corruption centered on Biden because of these unproven allegations that Trump wanted to learn more about.

Assume that perhaps this wasn't Trump's intent and things get a lot easier to explain — thanks in large part to Trump's personal attorney.

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