



Will Ukraine bring down Trump?

Expert briefing

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BACKGROUND

Donald Trump faces impeachment charges as he is once more embroiled in Eastern Europe.

Three UCL academics assess what happens next, looking at Ukraine's neglected point of view, the prospects for the impeachment process in Washington, and the need for a new conceptual vocabulary in international politics.

This briefing document provides a summary of comments made by the three academics during an event on 8 October 2019 at UCL SSEES. Direct quotations are included within speech marks.

UKRAINIAN DIMENSION

Andrew Wilson, Professor of Ukrainian Studies, UCL SSEES (tjmsalw@ucl.ac.uk)

KEY POINT As the scandal has evolved, Trump and his team have adopted a disinformation strategy that creates a number of risks for the Ukrainian state.

1. Trump and his team follow the rule that “the best kind of conspiracy has a germ of truth.” In the Ukrainian case, this germ consists of the fact that Joe Biden’s son was a board member of the Ukrainian gas company Burisma and that Joe Biden pushed for the removal of Ukrainian Prosecutor General

Viktor Shokin. However, “Shokin was not a wonderful, marvellous prosecutor.” He was obstructing rather than advancing corruption investigations into Ukrainian businesses, including Burisma. Joe Biden was only one of many calling for Shokin’s removal in 2016, and there was no obvious linkage to the Burisma case. So, the true germ in Trump’s accusations is “not more than 5%”, and many claims of his team, such as the alleged interference of the CrowdStrike company in the 2016 US presidential election, are completely made up.

2. Nevertheless, Trump’s claims pose serious risks for Ukraine. Firstly, there is the danger that, for the foreseeable future, Ukraine will only be seen through the prism of the scandal and become “too toxic to touch” for any US politician. Secondly, several competent US diplomats working on Ukraine (and Russia) have resigned or been forced out, namely Kurt Volker, Fiona Hill, and the former US ambassador to Ukraine Marie Yovanovitch. Thirdly, Ukrainian oligarchs Dmytro Firtash and Ihor Kolomoyskyi are trying to use the scandal to their advantage.

US DIMENSION

Brian Klaas, Lecturer in Global Politics, UCL (b.klaas@ucl.ac.uk)

KEY POINT Two scandals have been rolled up together: a real one, of the US president using national security aid to solicit the investigation of

a domestic political rival; and a fake one, to try to connect the employment of Joe Biden's son at a Ukrainian energy firm to the former Vice President.

1. Is the scandal enough to sink Trump? Despite the presence of die-hard backing for Trump of 25-30%, US polls show public support for impeachment touching 57%. The House of Representatives would definitely move to impeach Trump. To succeed, it would require two-third support in the Senate, which might prove tougher. However, there were already signs of a "crack in the dam", as Mitt Romney, a Republican senator, has signalled that he might support impeachment and removal of Trump, although he is not yet certain. Trump's snap announcement of the withdrawal of US troops from Syria, unpopular among Republican politicians, could see more Republican Senators follow suit.
2. Were impeachment to succeed, it could result in Trump's forced resignation, in exchange for a pardon—as happened with Nixon in the 1970s.

2. Corruption in the presidency is nothing new for Eastern Europe, where ruling elites have long exploited the state for personal benefit. What is striking about the scandal is the fact that corruption and the presidency have entwined in a country that has exported liberal democratic institutions throughout its history.
3. "We are seeing revenge from the past" from those who do not find the democratic project to be profitable. The behaviour of the Trump administration has been reproduced by "illiberal democracies" such as Hungary and Poland. Checks on human rights and the rule of law have weakened, as the international liberal order seems on the verge of collapse.
4. Is the post-1989 project of democratisation beyond salvation? Perhaps, yet it is too early to dispense of the idea of liberal democracy because the alternatives are "dire". Instead, we need "a radical rethinking of how we promote democracy", whereby the West can no longer tell the East what to do, and we must be honest and clear about any problems as they emerge.

DEMOCRATIC IMPLICATIONS

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KEY POINT This episode marks a watershed moment for rethinking how democracy is done and promoted. We need a stronger defence of liberal democratic institutions.

1. Asking smaller states to do "black PR" in exchange for US aid – as is the accusation against Trump regarding Ukraine – is a sign of a populist and nationalist leader using all means possible to cling to power. Trump believes that this is how the presidency works. This time, corruption could no longer be contained within the state, threatening to undermine the diplomatic core on which US relations with other countries are built.

FURTHER INFORMATION

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