

Timeline: The Sondland-Volker Texts, Contextualized

By Jeremy Venook

After the administration blocked his initially scheduled appearance, U.S. Ambassador to the European Union Gordon Sondland is now reportedly [set to testify](#) before the House under subpoena.

Prior to his appointment, Sondland, like President Donald Trump, was [a hotel developer with no known foreign policy experience or expertise](#). Moreover, Ukraine is not a part of the European Union, which means it falls outside of his purview as ambassador to the EU.

So why was Sondland such a key player in President Trump's [shadow Ukraine agenda](#)? [Text messages](#) released by the House Intelligence, Oversight, and Foreign Affairs Committees show that Sondland, at times, personally directed other State Department officials in executing [Trump's extortion scheme, which](#) sought a politically motivated investigation into former Vice President Joe Biden's family. Sondland also appears to have been intimately involved in [drafting a statement](#) for Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky about the opening of that investigation to ensure it met the president's standards.

The text messages are damning in their own right and only become more so when viewed in the context of the president's pressure campaign against Ukraine. The timeline below illustrates how the president circumvented the national security establishment to extort a foreign government for personal political gain—and that Sondland not only helped him do it but also helped him try to cover it up.

NOTE: Messages released by the House appear below in normal font. Commentary on those texts appear in **bold**. Significant outside events appear in **red**.

April 21, 2019

- **Zelensky [wins Ukraine's presidential election](#) over the incumbent, Petro Poroshenko. According to *The New York Times*, in his congratulatory phone call, Trump [pressures Zelensky](#) to open an investigation into the son of former Vice President and likely Trump political rival Joe Biden.**

April 25, 2019

- **Biden officially [announces](#) he is running for president.**

May 7:

- **The U.S. government [announces the recall](#) of the ambassador to Ukraine, Marie Yovanovitch, who has been the target of conspiracy theories by Ukrainian officials who**

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object to her anti-corruption push. *The Wall Street Journal* later [reports](#) that Yovanovitch was recalled in part because outside allies, including Rudy Giuliani, believed she was undermining Trump's efforts to pressure Zelensky to open an investigation into the Bidens.

May 20:

- Trump [praises Sondland](#) at an event in Louisiana.

May 26:

- Sondland [travels to Kyiv](#) as part of a delegation to Ukrainian President Zelensky's inauguration along with Secretary of Energy Rick Perry, Sen. Ron Johnson (R-WI), and U.S. Special Envoy for Ukraine Kurt Volker. During the trip, Volker reportedly [discusses](#) Rudy Giuliani's actions in Ukraine with Sondland and others. Upon their return, Trump reportedly [tells Sondland, Perry, and Volker](#) that "any in-person meeting between Trump and Zelensky would have to be approved by Giuliani."

June:

- Trump, National Security Adviser John Bolton and Secretary of Defense Mark Esper reportedly [begin discussing](#) "the prospect of putting a hold on the [Ukraine military assistance] funds while the administration reviewed them."

July 10:

- Sondland, Volker, and "a pair of advisers to" Zelensky [meet in the White House](#) with National Security Adviser Bolton. According to *The New York Times*, the meeting is so tense that Bolton [instructs top White House Russia expert Fiona Hill](#) to "notify the chief lawyer for the National Security Council about a rogue effort by Mr. Sondland, Mr. Giuliani, and [Office of Management and Budget Director and acting Chief of Staff] Mick Mulvaney" to "press Ukraine to investigate Democrats."

July 18:

- President Donald Trump tells Mulvaney to [put a hold on military aid](#) to Ukraine.

July 19:

- According to his text messages, Volker has breakfast with Giuliani. He subsequently texts Giuliani and introduces him to Andriy Yermak, a top aide to Zelensky who the *Kyiv Post* [describes](#) as Zelensky's "point man for international negotiations." Volker suggests they speak the following Monday.
- Volker texts Sondland and fellow diplomat Bill Taylor to set up a three-way call. Sondland says he "spike [sic] directly to Zelensky and gave him a full briefing. He's got it."

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- Volker responds that he has had breakfast with Giuliani and set up a call with Yermak, and that “Most imp’t is for Zelensky to say that he will help investigation—and address any specific personnel issues—if there are any.”

July 21:

- Taylor texts that “Zelenskyy is sensitive about Ukraine being taken seriously, not merely as an instrument in Washington domestic, reelection politics.”
 - **This confirms that Zelensky understood investigating Biden to be a matter of domestic U.S. politics and not actually about corruption in Ukraine.**
- Sondland responds, “[W]e need to get the conversation started and the relationship built, irrespective of the pretext. I am worried about the alternative.”
 - **This appears to show that Sondland views the allegations against Biden as merely a “pretext.”**

July 22:

- Volker texts that he “orchestrated a great phone call w Rudy and Yermak” and that the two will have a meeting in Madrid. He also says that “Rudy is now advocating for phone call.”
 - **This message shows that Sondland and Volker viewed Giuliani as a representative of the president. It also suggests Trump made his July 25 call to Zelensky at least partially at Giuliani’s suggestion.**
- Volker also arranges to tell John Bolton and incoming National Security Adviser Tim Morrison about the plan and suggests Sondland talk to “Mick” (presumably Mulvaney).
- Sondland confirms that he has talked to Morrison and says, “He is pushing but feel free as well.” (The texts themselves do not explicitly state what Morrison is pushing, but the House’s report [implies](#) they were discussing “a phone call between President Trump and President Zelensky.”)

July 24:

- **Special Counsel Robert Mueller [testifies](#) before Congress.**

July 25:

- Volker texts Yermak, saying, “Good lunch – thanks.” (The timing and content of this lunch remains unknown.) “Heard from White House—assuming President Z convinces trump he will investigate / ‘get to the bottom of what happened’ in 2016, we will nail down date for visit to Washington. Good luck! See you tomorrow- kurt.”
 - **This text message explicitly states that agreeing to investigate conspiracy theories about Clinton-Ukraine collusion in 2016 is a precondition for Trump meeting with Zelensky and that this message came from someone in the White House.**
- **Trump has a [phone call with Zelensky](#) in which the two discuss U.S. aid before Trump asks Zelensky to do him a “favor” by opening an investigation into the Bidens and conspiracy theories about the Russia investigation. Staffers reportedly listening to the call [include](#)**

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Tim Morrison, the National Security Council's senior director for Europe and Russia; Rob Blair, a national security aide to Mulvaney; and Keith Kellogg, Pence's national security adviser.

- Yermak texts Volker, "Phone call went well. President Trump proposed to choose any convenient dates. President Zelenskiy chose 20,21,22 September for the White House visit. Thank you again for your help! Please remind Mr. Mayor to share the Madrid's dates." Volker confirms that he will talk to Giuliani.

July 31:

- **Giuliani [meets with](#) Kyiv Mayor Vitali Klitschko in New York.**

August 2:

- **Giuliani [meets with](#) Yermak in Madrid.**

August 3:

- **Zelensky [announces](#) he will travel to the United States to meet with Trump in September.**

August 8:

- **Nadler [announces impeachment inquiry](#).**

August 9:

- Sondland texts Volker that Morrison is "ready to get dates as soon as Yermak confirms."
- Volker asks how Sondland "sway[ed]" Morrison.
- Sondland responds, "Not sure i did. I think potus really wants the deliverable."
- Volker asks, "does he know that?" Sondland confirms.
 - **Though neither explicitly states what "the deliverable" is, this strongly suggests that Morrison was also aware that Trump wants the Ukrainian government to announce an investigation into the Bidens and is using leverage to ensure they do.**
- Sondland texts that there are "Clearly lots of convos going on." Volker says, "Ok—then that's good it's coming from two separate sources."
- Sondland texts, "To avoid misunderstandings, might be helpful to ask Andrey for a draft statement [sic] (embargoed) so that we can see exactly what they propose to cover. Even though Ze does a live presser they can still summarize in a brief statement. Thoughts?" Volker responds, "Agree!"
 - **This shows that the Trump administration, through Volker and Sondland, were so invested in Ukraine announcing the investigation that they actively involved themselves in the drafting of a statement for Zelensky.**
- Volker texts Giuliani and Sondland about a "chat" he had with Yermak last night. **(The timing and content of this "chat" remains unknown.)** Volker says Yermak "was pleased with [Giuliani's] phone call. Mentioned Z making a statement. Can we all get on the phone

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to make sure I advise Z correctly as to what he should be saying? Want to make sure we get this done right.”

- **This text further demonstrates that Sondland and Volker viewed Giuliani as not only an authority on the president’s desires but also as somebody sufficiently important that they had to coordinate with him about their discussions with Zelensky and his government. It also reaffirms how invested Sondland and Volker were in the drafting of the statement for Zelensky to give opening an investigation.**
- **Volker, Sondland, and Giuliani hold a phone call. According to *The Wall Street Journal*, Giuliani [asks](#) for the statement to be sent to Zelensky to “specifically name Burisma Group.”**

August 10:

- Yermak texts Volker to set up a conversation, saying, “I think it’s possible to make this declaration and mention all these things. Which we discussed yesterday. But it will be logic to do after we receive a confirmation of date. WE inform about date of visit and about our expectations and our guarantees for future visit. Let discuss it.” Volker arranges a phone call for the morning, saying, “I agree with your approach. Let’s iron out statement and use that to get date and then PreZ can go forward with it?” Volker also confirms that Sondland will be on the conversation. Yermak says, “Once we have a date, will call for a press briefing, announcing upcoming visit and outlining vision for the reboot of US-UKRAINE relationship, including among other things Burisma and election meddling in investigations.”
 - **These conversations explicitly outline the quid pro quo between the U.S. and Ukrainian governments: The Ukrainian government will announce that they are opening an investigation into “Burisma and election meddling in investigations.” In return, the U.S. will agree to an in-person meeting between Trump and Zelensky.**

August 12:

- **Intel community whistleblower [files complaint](#) alleging wrongdoing by Trump on his July 25 phone call with Zelensky.**

August 13:

- Volker texts Sondland, “Special attention should be paid to the problem of interference in the political processes of the United States especially with the alleged involvement of some Ukrainian politicians. I want to declare that this is unacceptable. We intend to initiate and complete a transparent and unbiased investigation of all available facts and episodes, including those involving Burisma and the 2016 U.S. elections, which in turn will prevent the recurrence of this problem in the future.” Sondland responds, “Perfect. Lets [sic] send to Andrey after our call.”
 - **This appears to be text Volker and Sondland are writing for a statement for Zelensky to give outlining the opening of an investigation, showing their level of**

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involvement in the process. It specifically mentions an investigation into the Bidens (“Burisma”).

August 17:

- Sondland asks Volker, “Do we still want Ze to give us an unequivocal draft with 2016 and Boresma?” Volker confirms, “That’s the clear message so far.” He goes on to say, “I’m hoping we can put something out there that causes him to respond to that.”
 - **This appears to be Volker and Sondland discussing their intention to “put something out there” that will prompt Zelensky to announce an investigation into the Bidens.**
- Sondland responds, “Unless you think otherwise I will return Andreys call tomorrow and suggest they send us a clean draft.”
 - **This shows continued coordination between Sondland and Volker and Ukrainian officials on the statement for Zelensky to give.**

August 28:

- **The head of Ukraine’s National Defense and Security Council [meets with Bolton in Kyiv](#).**
- **A “senior administration official” [tells Politico](#) that the United States is withholding military aid from Ukraine.**

August 29:

- Yermak texts Volker, “Need to talk with you,” then follows with a link to the *Politico* article. Volker responds, “Hi Andrey — absolutely. When is good for you?”
 - **This shows the Ukrainian government receiving the message: The decision to withhold aid from Ukraine is linked to the ongoing discussions between Volker and Yermak about the opening of an investigation and a meeting between Trump and Zelensky.**
- **Trump [announces](#) he will not be traveling to Poland over the coming weekend to meet with Zelensky, citing the imminent landfall of Hurricane Dorian. (He is later seen [playing golf](#) at his club in Sterling, Virginia.)**
- **Ruslan Riaboshapka [replaces Yuriy Lutsenko](#) as Ukraine’s prosecutor general.**

August 30:

- Taylor texts Volker and Sondland to confirm that Trump’s trip has been canceled. Volker responds, “Hope VPOTUS keeps the bilat — and tees up WH visit... And hope Gordon and Perry still going ...” Sondland responds, “I am going. Pompeo is speaking to Potus today to see if he can go.”

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- **Having heard from Sondland that the Trump administration is demanding an investigation into Biden in exchange for military aid, Sen. Ron Johnson [calls Trump](#). Trump denies that there is a quid pro quo.**

September 1:

- Taylor texts, “Are we now saying that security assistance and WH meeting are conditioned on investigations?” Sondland asks Taylor to call him.
 - **This shows that Taylor understands the quid pro quo: “[S]ecurity assistance and WH meeting” in exchange for Ukraine’s government announcing an investigation into Biden. It also suggests that Sondland is wary about creating a written record of their discussion.**
- **Pence [meets with Zelensky](#) in Poland.**

September 5:

- ***The Washington Post* [reports](#) they have been “reliably told that the president has a second and more venal agenda: He is attempting to force Mr. Zelensky to intervene in the 2020 U.S. presidential election by launching an investigation of the leading Democratic candidate, Joe Biden.”**

September 8:

- Sondland texts that there have been “multiple convos with Ze, Potus” and tried to arrange a call with Volker and Taylor. Sondland and Taylor speak, but Volker says he could not get on the call. Taylor briefs Volker on the call, saying, “The nightmare is they give the interview and don’t get the security assistance. The Russians love it. (And I quit.)”
 - **This further confirms that Taylor understands the conversations with Ukraine to reflect a quid pro quo.**

September 9:

- **Intelligence Community Inspector General Michael Atkinson [writes to Sen. Richard Burr \(R-NC\) and Rep. Adam Schiff \(D-CA\)](#) about whistleblower complaint.**
- **Three House committees [announce](#) they are investigating Trump and Giuliani’s efforts to pressure the Ukrainian government into opening an investigation into the Bidens.**
- Taylor texts Sondland, “The message to the Ukrainians (and Russians) we send with the decision on security assistance is key. With the hold, we have already shaken their faith in us. Thus my nightmare scenario.” He later says, “As I said on the phone, I think it’s crazy to withhold security assistance for help with a political campaign.”
 - **This shows an understanding of the quid pro quo: Security assistance in exchange for “help with a political campaign.” It also shows that he directly raised his concerns with Sondland, who has been directly involved in sending the message to Ukraine.**
- **Sondland reportedly [calls Trump](#).**

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- Almost five hours after Taylor’s previous text, Sondland responds with a carefully worded and lengthy text: “I believe you are incorrect about President Trump’s intentions. The President has been crystal clear no quid pro quo. The President is trying to evaluate whether Ukraine is truly going to adopt the transparency and reforms that President Zelensky promised during his campaign I suggest we stop the back and forth by text If you still have concerns I recommend you give Lisa Kenna or S a call to discuss them directly. Thanks.”
 - **The Trump administration begins its efforts to spin their extortion efforts, claiming they are about “the transparency and reforms that President Zelensky promised during his campaign.” None of the five participants in the released text messages have previously alluded to Zelensky’s campaign promises. Sondland then cuts off the text message conversation. He also suggests that Taylor contact Secretary Pompeo, which raises questions about the extent of Pompeo’s involvement in the extortion scheme. (Sondland now reportedly [says](#) the “no quid pro quo” line came directly from the president, and reportedly believes “it was a quid pro quo, but not a corrupt one.”)**

September 10:

- **Rep. Adam Schiff, chair of the House Intelligence Committee, sends a [letter to the Acting Director of National Intelligence Joseph Maguire demanding he release the whistleblower complaint.](#)**

September 11:

- **Trump administration [releases aid to Ukraine.](#)**

Sondland’s text messages reveal the active role he played in pushing the president’s extortion scheme. They also demonstrate the president’s clear intention to circumvent official national security channels: Ukraine isn’t a member of the European Union and therefore does not fall under Sondland’s purview as EU ambassador. Volker [claims](#) that, at the time of the text exchanges, he did not consider Biden a central consideration in the negotiations. Sondland reportedly plans to go further in his testimony, in which he is expected to [claim](#) he was not aware at the time that Biden’s son had worked for Burisma. [Giuliani](#) and [Trump](#) have both admitted to pressuring Ukraine’s government.

If Trump truly cared about corruption in Ukraine, he could have used official channels to do so. Instead, he deputized not just his personal attorney but also an ambassador with no experience or expertise in the country to run a shadow agenda for his personal political benefit—and to help him with the coverup.

Trump knew he was abusing his power. So did Sondland.
It’s time for Congress to find out what he knows.