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Trump's Ukraine comments focus spotlight on how much money US has already sent

Sarah Bedford

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Former President Donald Trump's comment on Sunday that he would send even more resources to Ukraine than President Joe Biden has, contradicting his prior criticism of the U.S. involvement in the war, has drawn fire from the growing number of conservatives opposed to supporting the Ukrainians.

It's also refocused attention on how much taxpayer money has already gone to Ukraine — and how little the federal government knows about what it bought.

GOP presidential candidates are split on whether the United States should continue funneling money into the war indefinitely.

Congress has sent as much as \$113 billion to Ukraine since Russia invaded it last year. Most of the funding has funded direct military support, but billions of dollars have also gone toward propping up the Ukrainian government, humanitarian aid, and financial support.

Under Trump's new plan, the U.S. would offer the Ukrainians “more than they ever got” from Biden to defeat the Russians.

How effective the aid has been so far, however, remains unclear.

And the amount of resources Ukraine has received to date has been staggering.

The Department of Defense's watchdog found that the military has not consistently taken inventory of which Ukraine-bound weapons are going where, clouding the Pentagon's picture of whether military resources are being used according to the agreements the U.S. has struck with Ukraine, the inspector general said in a report published June 28.

U.S. officials in Poland “were not always physically present” to document the weapons the Pentagon was transferring from logistics hubs in Poland to Ukraine, the inspector general found. Military officials are supposed to keep track of the serial numbers of certain weapons, such as Javelin missiles, that they send to Ukraine in order to ensure each and every one makes it to its intended destination.

“As a result, the DoD is currently not fully conducting inventories” of all the defense materials that require extra scrutiny under the law.

Part of the problem, the inspector general found, was that there was “only one person who conducts the serial number inventories in Poland before the defense articles enter Ukraine.”

“However, this is a significant challenge because at least one of the logistics locations is around 90 miles, or approximately a two hour drive, from the others,” the watchdog noted.

The lack of documentation of those specific materials going from Poland to Ukraine is just one of many problems watchdogs from various agencies have warned could arise or have uncovered so far as they attempt to oversee the piles of money Congress has sent.

In another report published on June 8, the Defense Department inspector general wrote that military officials weren’t following procedures for tracking defense supplies sent to Ukraine by air and “could not confirm the quantities of defense items received against the quantity of items shipped” for most of the shipments the watchdog observed.

In other words, the Pentagon’s inspector general has repeatedly found that the military is not keeping adequate tabs on the expensive supplies it is sending to Ukraine.

Ukraine’s thriving black markets and its struggles with corruption have heightened concerns among some critics about the influx of money and weapons, although many lawmakers have downplayed those concerns.

Ukraine had one of the biggest illegal gun markets in the world before the Russian invasion, and after the annexation of Crimea in 2013, as many as 300,000 firearms and other weapons disappeared, with most hitting the black market, according to the Cato Institute.

A handful of unproven reports have suggested the weapons and ammunition the U.S. is giving to Ukraine have already ended up elsewhere, although concrete evidence of widespread fraud has not yet emerged.

The president of Nigeria claimed last year that weapons meant for the Ukrainian war have ended up in Africa. A veteran American journalist reported that smugglers in Romania and Poland were selling weapons meant for Ukraine.

Republican critics of the effort have noted that, for the more than \$65 billion in defense support that Ukraine has received from the U.S., the dynamics of the war have remained relatively unchanged and appear set for the foreseeable future.

Biden stirred controversy earlier this month when he said the U.S. will begin sending powerful cluster munitions to Ukraine as an alternative for another type of ammunition the military was already sending the Ukrainians because, he told CNN, “they’re running out of that ammunition, and we’re low on it.”

The comments sparked fears that Biden's commitment to arming Ukraine is starting to come at the expense of U.S. readiness to defend itself.

Beyond the military aid that Trump has said he would consider increasing, Congress has sent a significant amount of other types of support.

Nearly \$4 billion of the aid has been humanitarian, ostensibly providing things like food and emergency medical care to Ukrainians.

Humanitarian aid is notoriously difficult to track in combat or disaster zones.

After a devastating earthquake in Haiti in 2010, for example, the U.S. government poured millions of dollars through the U.S. Agency for International Development and other agencies into the recovery effort; only 1% went to the actual Haitian government, and most of the money went to American private development companies.

The Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction has said as much as 30% of the funding it reviewed was wasted or lost to fraud, resulting in billions of dollars for Afghanistan that did not go to their intended destinations.

USAID's watchdog said that as of April, it had received 226 complaints from Ukraine.

Some of the complaints disclosed involved false bank statements and invoices from people trying to steal some of the aid money USAID had provided.

Congress is already poised to send more money to Ukraine.

Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene (R-GA) introduced an amendment last week to strip out the \$300 million of funding for Ukraine from the National Defense Authorization Act, the annual defense spending bill; Republicans joined with Democrats to defeat it 89-341.

Biden pledged even more aid for Ukraine last week at the NATO summit in Lithuania, laying out what amounted to a long-term commitment of support for Ukrainian forces.

Trump's proposal to increase the amount of aid Ukraine has received would therefore have to overcome a lack of transparency into where the existing money has already gone, the inability of the military to provide certain types of ammunition as it is, and the heightened risk that more powerful and plentiful American weapons could drag the U.S. directly into a conflict Trump has previously said he does not want to fight.