Phone Call From Biden Said to Precipitate Ukraine’s UN ‘Yes’ Vote

December 27, 2016

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Tablet

<http://www.tabletmag.com/jewish-news-and-politics/221128/phone-call-from-biden-said-to-precipitate-ukraines-un-yes-vote?utm_content=bufferc19a3&utm_medium=social&utm_source=twitter.com&utm_campaign=buffer>

The repercussions of Friday’s United Nations Security Council vote in favor of a resolution urging Israel to “immediately and completely cease all settlement activities in the occupied Palestinian territory” continue to reverberate. The resolution, which declared Jewish settlement anywhere in the West Bank including the Old City of Jerusalem to be in violation of international law, passed by 14-0, with the United States abstaining—a game-changing action that broke with decades of diplomatic guarantees to Israel and which enraged American Jewish political leaders in both parties.

A wealth of evidence is now emerging that, far from simply abstaining from a UN vote, which is how the Administration and its press circle at first sought to characterize its actions, the anti-Israel resolution was actively vetted at the highest levels of the U.S. Administration, which then led a pressure campaign—both directly and [through Great Britain](http://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-1.761706)—to convince other countries to vote in favor of it.

Tablet has confirmed that one tangible consequence of the high-level U.S. campaign was a phone call from Vice President Joseph Biden to Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko, which succeeded in changing Ukraine’s vote from an expected abstention to a “yes.” According to one U.S. national security source, the Obama Administration needed a 14-0 vote to justify what the source called “the optics” of its own abstention.

“Did Biden put pressure on the Ukrainians? Categorically yes,” said a highly-placed figure within the Israeli government with strong connections to Ukrainian government sources, who confirmed to Tablet that the Americans had put direct pressure on both the Ukrainian delegation—and on Poroshenko personally in Kiev. “That Biden told them to do it is 1000% true,” the source affirmed.

The allegation supports the accusation leveled by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu against the Obama Administration at a Cabinet meeting on Sunday. “We have no doubt that the Obama administration initiated it, stood behind it, coordinated its versions and insisted upon its passage,” the Prime Minister said.

In Ukraine, the fall-out from the country’s UN vote has created a “domestic scandal,” a press secretary for President Poroshenko’s administration admitted to me on Monday morning in Kiev. Immediately after the vote, the official state visit to Tel Aviv by Ukraine’s Jewish prime minister, Volodymyr Groysman, was canceled by the Israelis. Groysman was scheduled to arrive in Israel on Tuesday morning for a two day long visit, which was due to be his first official visit as the prime minister of Ukraine. The UN vote also took place two days after the desecration with a pig’s head and fake blood of the synagogue at the gravesite of Rebbe Nachman in Uman, as well as reported assaults on Orthodox Jewish men praying there. As I reported last Friday, one of the topics on the agenda with the Israelis was to have been Groysman laying out a series of measures that the Ukrainian government intended to take to enhance the security of Jewish pilgrims to the mystic’s birthplace, which is a popular pilgrimage site for Israelis.

The phone call between Poroshenko and Biden, which took place on December 19th, has been officially acknowledged by both parties. The Ukrainian presidential administration’s official statement on the particulars of the discussion contains no mention that the settlement vote was discussed. Vice President Biden’s national security advisor Colin Kahl—who, incidentally, was one of the staffers instrumental in a failed attempt to have any [mention of Jerusalem removed](https://www.buzzfeed.com/bensmith/how-the-democrats-botched-their-israel-politics-in?utm_term=.jp1VjjEBoN#.ah5wmmPBnk) from the 2012 Democratic Party platform—has tweeted several denials.

But a spokesman for the Ukrainian Presidential administration pointedly refused to either confirm or deny that a section of Biden’s call not covered in the read-out consisted of the US Vice President personally lobbying Ukraine to vote “Yes” on the Security Council resolution. The American pressure campaign, according to multiple sources, went beyond the single phone call between Poroshenko and Biden; according to these sources, the Ukrainians had wanted to postpone the vote by several days as a gesture to the Israelis, but the U.S. refused.

“As much as we understand that they did not want to break or tarnish relations with Israel, they could not simply say ‘no’ to the Americans,” said one high-ranking Israeli government source. “Samantha Power personally put pressure on the Ukrainian ambassador in the UN and told them that the American side was not willing to accept a delay.”

There are conflicting accounts circulating around Kiev of the diplomatic pressure that was leveraged by the Israelis on the Ukrainians in order to make them, at the very least, abstain from the resolution. Persistent rumors assert that Netanyahu personally called Groysman to lobby for a vote against the resolution. However, a Jewish member of the Ukrainian parliament who is a close confidant of Groysman insisted Netanyahu never made a personal call. According to that account, Ukraine’s Jewish Prime Minister was as surprised as everyone else to find out, the next day, that he would not be traveling to Tel Aviv.

“I am not certain that he knew until the end,” he said, referring to Groysman. “A very small circle of people knew about the decision, and the people who know will not divulge this information because it looks bad, and they feel humiliated, because this shows that they cannot make their own decisions.”

Now, Ukrainians—including many Ukrainian Jewish leaders who were deeply invested in the Ukrainian-Israeli relationship—are left to sift through the rubble of a US-inspired diplomatic disaster for both countries. Oleksandr Suslenskyi, a head of Ukraine’s Jewish organization reacted to the news of the UN security council vote with the verbal equivalent of a deep sigh. “Poroshenko was greeted like a guest of honor in Israel. This is a total collapse of Ukraine diplomatic legitimacy,” he said. “Now Ukraine’s security and strategic partners will be Senegal, New Zealand and Venezuela.”

Others noted that on December 19, a mere four days earlier, Israel had sided with Ukraine on the [issue of a line vote](http://nv.ua/opinion/briman/ukraina-izrail-obmen-poshchechinami-358033.html) on the human rights situation in Crimea. “By voting for the resolution, Ukraine has inflicted catastrophic damage on 25 years of relations between the two countries” Eduard Dolinsky, the Director General of the Ukrainian Jewish Committee, told Tablet. “The Jewish community in Ukraine is deeply despondent and disappointed over this.”

It should be remembered—and has been by many unhappy Ukrainian Jews and Israelis—that Israel voted in defense of Ukraine’s territorial integrity during the UN’s censure of the Russian Federation a week and a half after the annexation of Crimea in March of 2014 and has followed up with half a dozen more such friendly votes in UN on issues dealing with the Russian/Ukrainian conflict.

The Ukrainian vote was also constrained by concerns over accusations of hypocrisy and double standards over the issue of Russian’s illegal occupation and annexation of the Crimean peninsula. Ukraine, the argument goes, is reliant on the application of the same exact statutes of international law on the issues of settlement and occupation in it’s own international crusade to have Russia withdraw from the territories that it has occupied. It would be counterproductive for Ukraine to take positions that would leave it open to diplomatic mockery—or worse—from the Russian side. By Sunday night, the general outcry had forced the Ukrainian Ministry of Foreign Affairs to issue a [statement](http://mfa.gov.ua/en/press-center/comments/6689-komentar-mzs-ukrajini-stosovno-poziciji-delegaciji-ukrajini-pid-chas-rozglyadu-rezolyuciji-rb-oon-2334-shhodo-stanovishha-na-blizykomu-skhodi) explaining the reasoning behind its vote.

Though America has been an ally of Ukraine during the course of the conflict, Obama vetoed the arming of the Ukrainians with lethal offensive weaponry. With the incoming Trump administration keen to reverse policies across the board, Ukrainians have been placed in a situation of serious political liability, in which they have been pitted against an ally, while also looking like Obama’s lapdog in the eyes of the incoming Trump administration—which was not likely from the outset to be sympathetic to its claims against Russia.

What’s left is the tantalizing question of what, if anything, Ukraine might have received from the Obama administration in exchange for its vote. Since security guarantees can hardly be expected to carry over from one administration to the next, as Obama’s own actions have made plain, it seems likely that whatever was offered was something more concrete.

“An out-going Administration really only has ‘here and now’ carrots (and few sticks) that cannot be repealed/undone by an incoming Administration. So that carrot may not yet have been delivered—or perhaps it has been behind the curtain, depending upon what that carrot was,” said an intelligence source in Kiev. “If it was a particularly sensitive carrot, Ukraine may not want anybody to know that it received such a carrot for some time.”

Now entering into its third year of a conflict with Russia, Ukraine has endeavored to improve its trade and economic ties with Jerusalem. Relations between Israel and Ukraine have been very good recently, with a widespread sense among Ukrainians that the country had much to learn from the Israeli example of living life as a continuously besieged nation under the shadow of political violence. Needless to say that the blowback from this diplomatic incident will be much more serious for Ukraine than it will be for New Zealand or Senegal.

Israel’s own diplomatic position in between Russia and Ukraine has been a delicate one, as it is home to hundreds of thousands of citizens with roots, family, and property in both countries. As an additional consideration, it also needs to balance the safety of hundreds of thousands of Jews living in both against the fact that Russian troops are now fighting shoulder to shoulder with Hezbollah and officers of Iranian Al Quods expeditionary forces not far from its borders.

The Ukrainian state went all-out at the end of September for the 75th anniversary of Baby Yar massacre, organizing a large number of state-backed events and thus demonstrating historical solidarity, political acuity and historical maturity. The significance of President Poroshenko’s own trip to Jerusalem last year was greatly underreported in the Western press. Upon returning, several members of the Ukrainian Jewish elite who had been part of the Ukrainian delegation on that trip, informed me that an anxious Putin had placed several personal calls to Netanyahu while the Ukrainian delegation had been there, just to check in.

Dolinsky, the director-general of the Ukrainian Jewish Committee, offered his suspicion that the government had also likely relied heavily on the advice of Kiev’s representative at the United Nations, Volodymyr Yelchenko, in formulating its policy. Yelchenko’s aggressive twitter diplomacy conducted over his official account has been a particularly odd portion of the whole saga. Over the last few days, Yelchenko has let loose at least half a dozen undiplomatic tweets rationalizing the government’s decision, which make for interesting reading:

“There is one International law for all! You can not twist it around like the tail of a dog!”

“The Israeli settlements in the occupied territories are contrary to international law just like the occupation of Crimea by Russia!”

“In the UN, Ukraine understands many of Israel’s sensitive issues. But there are also questions principles. Our partnership must be above intrigue.”

Yelchenko is by all accounts a product of the Soviet system and diplomatic training, with his father having been an undersecretary of the central committee of the Ukrainian Communist party. He had also been Ukraine’s ambassador to Moscow before being recalled in March of 2014. A source in Kiev described the undiplomatic tweeting as simply the ambassador covering his political back, as the Ukrainian sector of Twitter as well as various sectors of civil society erupted in recriminations and confused questioning about the vote. Many wondered at the wisdom of bowing to pressure to vote against a traditional American ally and a crucial Ukrainian ally in favor of the Obama administration’s own position a mere three weeks before Donald Trump would be sworn in as president of the United States.