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OPINION | COMMENTARY

Reject Nord Stream 2 Once and for All

The pipeline puts Ukraine's national security at serious risk.

By Oleksii Reznikov

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A pipe bearing the Nord Stream 2 logo at a plant in Chelyabinsk, Russia, Feb. 26, 2020.

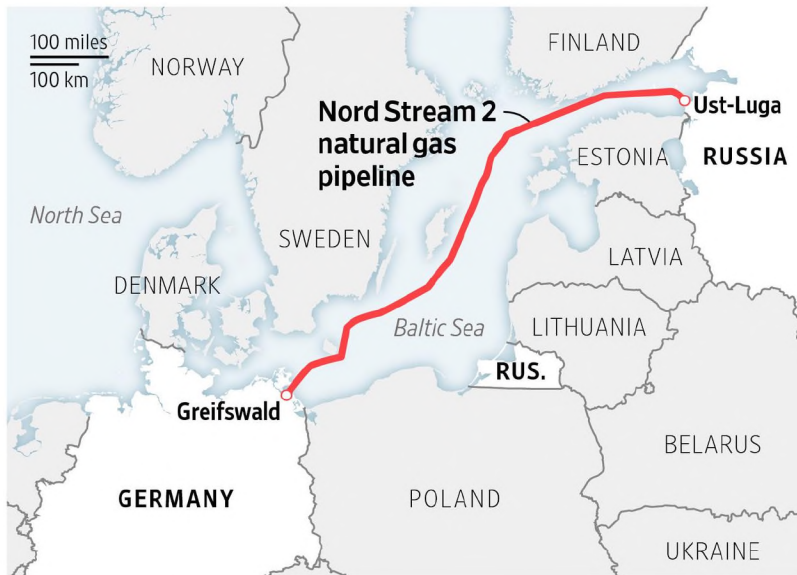
PHOTO: MAXIM SHEMETOV/REUTERS

Ukrainian President Leonid Kuchma found himself in the company of a political titan, France's President François Mitterrand, on a gloomy day in December 1994. "Young man, you will be tricked, one way or another," Mitterrand told Mr. Kuchma, who was then the leader of a newly independent nation. Unsettled as he felt, Mr. Kuchma accepted the security assurances of the U.S., U.K. and Russia and signed the Budapest Memorandum. In exchange, Ukraine gave up its nuclear arsenal, then the third-largest in the world. Little did we know that two decades later one of the signatories—Russia—would attack Ukraine and occupy its sovereign territory.

Now, after many years of wooing and cajoling, Russia's attitude toward Ukraine is again growing belligerent. The Minsk process to resolve the conflict is stalled, and foreign

troops have yet to leave the Donbas, the Ukrainian region where fighting rages on. Despite the supposed cessation of hostilities agreed to in September 2014, when the Minsk protocol was signed, little progress has been made.

Ukrainians therefore are bewildered by the continuing construction of the Baltic Sea pipeline, known as Nord Stream 2. Unlike the attack on Crimea, which came as a surprise, the pipeline's completion will have entirely predictable consequences for our national security. Ukraine will be irreparably weakened as soon as Russia has a new direct gas link to Germany.



Source: Nord Stream 2

With the Nord Stream 1 and Turk Stream pipelines already operational, Nord Stream 2 will complete the encirclement of Ukraine, Poland and the Baltic states, decoupling our energy security from Western Europe. Russia has tried to bully Ukraine by threatening gas cutoffs, most recently in June 2014. But Moscow has always had to be careful—a large percentage of Russia's gas reaches Europe through Ukraine. If Nord Stream 2 is built, this consideration will be null and void.

The Kremlin has demonstrated time and again its willingness to use energy trade to advance its geopolitical ambitions. It would be unwise, if not reckless, for Europe to increase its dependence on Gazprom, Russia's state-owned energy company, and give Moscow direct control over which countries are supplied with gas and which can be cut off.

The current contract between Gazprom and Ukraine's gas-transit operator guarantees the flow of westward exports via Ukraine until the end of 2024. But make no mistake: The day Nord Stream 2 is completed, that promise will be worthless. Even if some transit through Ukraine persists, Ukraine will be subject to the Kremlin's whims.

The fighting in the Donbas, where Russia operates through its proxies, mercenaries and even regular troops, has continued unabated for more than seven years. The gas pipeline has been spared from shelling—Russia needs uninterrupted gas flows through Ukraine as much as we do. This mutual dependence is a deterrent that Nord Stream 2 will remove.

Ukraine is grateful to the U.S. Congress, which recognized the true nature of this pipeline project, and the European Parliament, which voted 10-to-1 on Jan. 21 to demand a halt to construction with a resolution on the arrest of Russian dissident Alexei Navalny in Moscow.

Germany and Europe already have access to a massive gas-transit network spanning the Black and Baltic seas, Belarus and Ukraine. The existing capacity is more than 50% higher than current consumption of Russian gas in the European Union. Even if the demand increases as Germany is working to phase out nuclear and coal power generation, there is no commercial need for another pipeline.

While Germany has little to gain, Ukraine stands to lose billions of dollars in transit revenue if the second Baltic Sea gas link is built—a fact that Nord Stream 2 apologists often present as the only basis for Ukrainian opposition. The economic effect will be significant, but the claim is deliberately misleading. Ukrainian soldiers will be putting their lives on the line if Russia decides to escalate the conflict in the Donbas after it no longer needs to consider the effect on gas exports.

Ukraine understands the need to strengthen the trans-Atlantic alliance and the desire to find a solution that works for both Washington and Berlin. It is, however, incumbent on the Kremlin first to demonstrate respect for international law. The ball is in Moscow's court. It can and should end hostilities in the Donbas region, withdraw its troops from the Crimean Peninsula and restore Ukrainian sovereignty.

President Biden was right to call the pipeline “a bad deal for Europe.” As the project inches closer to completion, Ukrainians can't help but recall Mitterrand's words from nearly 30 years ago. Ukraine was tricked, just as the French president predicted. Let us

not repeat history but learn from it. We must come together and reject Nord Stream 2 once and for all.

Mr. Reznikov is Ukraine's deputy prime minister for reintegration of the temporarily occupied territories.

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