

GUEST ESSAY

## It's Now or Never. Biden Must Stop Putin's Beloved Pipeline.

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For the first time in over four years, a Ukrainian president is coming to the White House.

On Tuesday, President Volodymyr Zelensky of Ukraine will meet with his American counterpart. They're likely to cover a variety of issues: the state of relations with Russia; Ukraine's fight against corruption; and the challenges of the pandemic. After thanking President Biden for America's continued support and assistance, the Ukrainian leader may gently inquire about NATO membership.

It should be a good meeting. But there will be a large elephant in the room: Nord Stream 2. Beloved of President Vladimir Putin of Russia, the natural gas pipeline threatens the security of Europe — and Ukraine especially. The time to stop the project, now on the cusp of completion, is running out: It's now or never. At the risk of souring an enjoyable encounter, Mr. Zelensky should tell Mr. Biden in no uncertain terms that Nord Stream 2 must be stopped.

The Biden administration, to be sure, never had much time to stop the project. By the time Mr. Biden was sworn into office, more than 90 percent of the pipeline — the first parts of which were installed in July 2018 — had been completed. Even so, the early signals suggested the new administration was serious about stopping it. Mr. Biden previously stated that the pipeline was a “bad deal for Europe,” while Secretary of State Antony Blinken said that the government was “determined to do whatever we can” to prevent the project's completion. Then the administration changed course. In July, the United States issued a joint statement with Germany on Nord Stream 2 that effectively granted Russia permission to complete the project.

The move shocked America's other allies in Europe, where many countries oppose the project. Domestically, it went down badly, too: A bipartisan group of lawmakers, appalled by the about-face, tried to persuade the administration to stop the completion of the pipeline. But it was Ukraine and Poland, the two countries that have the most to lose from Nord Stream 2, whose response was most rancorous.

The countries' foreign ministers, neither of whom were involved in the negotiations between Germany and America, also issued their own statement, arguing that Europe's political, national and economic security would be threatened by Nord Stream 2. A completed project, they said, would give Russia the ability to “destabilize the security situation in Europe.” They have a point. There are numerous reasons Nord Stream 2 would be catastrophic, not only for Ukraine and Poland, but also for all of Europe.

Running from Russia to Germany under the Baltic Sea, Nord Stream 2 would give Russia a direct route into the heart of Europe. That would make Europe, which currently imports over a third of its natural gas from Russia, even more heavily reliant on the country — effectively conferring on it an energy monopoly over the continent. The deleterious effects are easy to foresee: If relations were to sour, Russia could turn off the flow of gas to Europe, potentially leaving millions of Europeans without it.

Then there's Ukraine. The country earns an annual \$1 billion in transit fees from its pipeline to Poland: If Nord Stream 2 were to be completed, the Ukrainian-Polish pipeline would be obsolete, depriving Ukraine — one of the poorest countries in Europe, according to the International Monetary Fund — of substantial revenue.

What's more, Europe's dependence on Russian gas could embolden the country to meddle further in Ukraine's affairs, without fear of repercussions. That could lead to an escalation in the Donbass conflict — a yearslong Russian military incursion in eastern Ukraine that has led to the deaths of over 14,000 people and the displacement of nearly two million — or even a Russian effort to unite eastern Ukraine with Crimea.

Lastly, there are the economic consequences for Poland. Currently, the country imports its gas from the Ukrainian-Polish pipeline. Nord Stream 2 would put an end to that. Instead, Poland would be forced to buy gas from Germany — at much higher rates. For all the country's relative economic health, that's something its citizens can ill afford.

The case is clear: For reasons of economy, energy and national security, the pipeline must be stopped. Crucially, that's still possible. U.S. sanctions on the project previously stopped it in its tracks, as the companies responsible for constructing and laying the pipeline abandoned the project. All it would take to stop it completely is for the Biden administration to reverse its recent waiver on additional sanctions on Nord Stream 2. Several congressional members and European leaders are in favor of this option. Objections from Germany, the project's chief beneficiary, can be eased by stressing the many long-term advantages for Europe.

That's the best-case scenario, and Mr. Zelensky should push hard for it. But he should also call for additional assurances in his meeting with Mr. Biden. While the U.S.-German joint statement offered various economic and energy provisions — such as investing in Ukraine's green-tech infrastructure and helping it transition to green energy — they are nowhere near the \$1 billion Ukraine would lose in annual transit fees.

Mr. Zelensky should demand, for both his own country and Poland, help with the financing and construction of the infrastructure needed for alternative energy. And he should press Mr. Biden to discuss how Ukraine — with American funds, training and assistance can bolster its defenses, reform its military and deter Russian aggression.

Tuesday's meeting presents Mr. Zelensky with an excellent opportunity to enhance the relationship between the two countries. But it's also a final chance to stop Nord Stream 2. If he can persuade Mr. Biden, it would be a major victory for all of Europe, protecting it from a strategically disastrous dependence on Russian gas.

But if Mr. Zelensky fails, the only winner will be Russia. And no amount of compensation can reverse that.

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