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Ukrainian leaders to Biden: Standing with the world's democracies means changing course on Nord Stream 2

UkraineAlert by a group of Ukrainian lawmakers, leaders, civil society activists, and experts

Corruption

Geopolitics & Energy Security

Russia

Ukraine

United States and Canada



Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline project logo seen on a pipe at Chelyabinsk Pipe Rolling Plant in Chelyabinsk, Russia. February 26, 2020.
REUTERS/Maxim Shemetov

Editor's note: Below is a significant statement from Ukrainian reformers, civil society activists, and members of Ukraine's parliament, the Verkhovna Rada, criticizing the decision by the Biden administration to lift sanctions on the company responsible for the Nord Stream 2 pipeline, Nord Stream AG, and its CEO Matthias Warnig. As followers of the Atlantic Council know, we value intellectual independence and diversity of thought, and there are a variety of views among the Council's experts regarding sanctions and policies relating to this issue. One of the core elements of the Eurasia Center's mission is to provide our community with the most important information on Ukraine. With that in mind, we have chosen to share this letter with our readers.

Dear President Biden,

We write to you because of your consistent record as a friend of Ukraine's young democracy and because of your longtime record of commitment to Ukraine's territorial integrity and sovereignty. We write to you as Ukrainian reformers who have known you as a key ally in our effort to simultaneously reform the country and resist Russian aggression.

During your visits to Ukraine in 2014 and 2015, you looked into the eyes of those who had shed blood on the Maidan and to whose bodies have still not healed from bullets and fragments of Russian mines and shells. Then you spoke of common values and asserted that the United States will never abandon Ukraine in its struggle for freedom. We were encouraged by your great understanding of Ukraine and the dangers of Moscow's aggressive foreign policy, by your stated intention to rally the democratic world against the authoritarian challenge and by your commitment to address corruption as a national security danger. As a centerpiece of that policy, as presidential candidate, you promised to be tough on Russia and repeatedly promised to do everything to stop its Nord Stream 2 pipeline.

For these reasons, together with most of our fellow Ukrainians and many Ukrainian-Americans, we took heart in your victory in the US presidential election.

Today, these hopes have been dashed by your administration's decision to oppose sanctions against and so to greenlight Nord Stream 2, allowing the Kremlin to bring it to completion.

The terms of the agreement you made with German Chancellor Angela Merkel and the measures it offers to prevent Moscow from using the pipeline as leverage are inadequate, vague, and have unclear legal implications. They remind us of the empty "assurances" that were made to Ukraine in the 1994 Budapest Memorandum in exchange for our country's voluntary renunciation of nuclear weapons.

The US-German agreement your administration has negotiated jeopardizes the considerable US assistance that has been invested in transatlantic security and Ukraine's transformation, and foresees no effective security guarantees for the countries affected by the project.

Your decision on Nord Stream 2, announced in late July, rewards Russian President Vladimir Putin with tens of billions of dollars for the Russian state budget at a time when Russia spends billions to fund malign activities in the United States and pursue military aggression against Ukraine. This money will be used to prop up despotic regimes and to crush the aspirations of not only the Ukrainian people but the Belarusians, Georgians and any other Russian neighbor that dares to seek its own destiny.

Should Nord Stream 2 become operational, Ukraine will lose a critical deterrent against escalated Russian aggression and the Kremlin's hands will be untied to engage in sabotage, terrorism, and large-scale offensive operations against Ukraine. Your administration's support for Nord Stream 2 enhances Russia's ability to blackmail Ukraine and Europe by stopping or reducing gas deliveries, and create the conditions for Russia to sabotage and significantly damage Ukrainian gas transmission to make any gas transit through Ukraine impossible.

Nord Stream 2 is the crown jewel in a series of bypass pipelines constructed by Russia during Putin's rule. All of them were built to enhance the Putin regime's goal of using them as infrastructural weapons, as instruments to deprive neighboring countries of transit revenues as punishment for their independent geopolitical orientations and foreign policy, and to further Europe's dependence on Russian energy resources, a continuation of a Soviet-era strategy to weaken the West.

Nord Stream 2 is the culmination of Putin's two-decade-long program of reconfiguration of Eurasian pipeline networks aimed at disconnecting the EU from the US and imposing a Eurasian model of cooperation on Europe with Russia and China.

While Ukrainians have despaired, Russian state media are gleefully declaring that the failure of the Biden administration to stop Nord Stream 2 marks the end of American hegemony in Europe and American superpower status globally.

We, the signatories of this letter, have been on the frontlines of Ukraine's fight for democracy and reform. Today, these efforts, as well as your declared effort to rally the democratic world against authoritarianism and global corruption, are weakened by your administration's decision to indulge Germany on Nord Stream 2.

This decision completely contradicts the anti-corruption memorandum of the White House, issued on June 3, 2021, which asserts: "*Corruption... provides authoritarian leaders a means to undermine democracies worldwide.*" Allowing Russian state-owned energy company Gazprom to finish and operationalize its kleptocratic Nord Stream 2 project means no less than gifting authoritarian leader Vladimir Putin an extra tool with which to undermine democracies across Europe.

On August 31, almost three months after you met with the tyrant Putin in Geneva, you and the president of Ukraine will meet. That meeting will be an opportunity for the US and Ukraine to renew their strategic cooperation.

On August 17, your administration issued a mandatory sanctions report to Congress. That date was an opportunity for your administration to reverse course and remove its unjustifiable sanctions waiver against Nord Stream 2 AG and fully implement all certification sanctions as required under US law by imposing sanctions that can still block the pipeline. Regrettably, you did not choose to do so.

We believe that you well know that Nord Stream 2 is a corrupt scheme that enriches and empowers business interests in Europe that serve as apologists for Putin's authoritarian policies. It gives Putin additional resources to "hire" more western politicians such as former German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder and French Prime Minister François Fillon.

Unless you reverse course, you will not only encourage Putin in his aggressive and deadly policies, but you will also be weakening the solidarity of the democratic world you have promised to deepen, and you will undermine your commitment to a global war on corruption and kleptocracy.

As veterans of the 2014 Ukrainian Revolution of Dignity, as fighters in the war against Russian aggression, and as Ukrainian civil society activists, many of whom you met in 2014-2015, we urge you to change course and send a clear message of resolve to President Putin that America stands with Ukraine and the entire global community of democracies.

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The views expressed in this letter are solely those of its signatories and do not necessarily represent the views of the Atlantic Council.

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