



UKRAINE

Nord Stream 2 Critic Appointed To Oversee Ukraine Policy At State Department

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By Todd Prince

U.S. President Joe Biden's administration has appointed an outspoken critic of Russia's Nord Stream 2 pipeline to oversee policy for Central and Eastern Europe at the State Department following backlash over its decision to allow the project to move ahead.

Robin Dunnigan, who served as deputy assistant secretary for energy diplomacy in the State Department's Bureau of Energy Resources from 2014 to 2017, will help craft policy toward Ukraine, Belarus, and Moldova, as well as Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic, a spokesperson told RFE/RL.

She takes over Eastern Europe duties from Deputy Assistant Secretary George Kent, who served in 2019 as a key witness in the Ukraine-centric impeachment trial of then-President Donald Trump.

Dunnigan was an early critic of Russian plans to build a second natural-gas pipeline to Germany along the floor of the Baltic Sea to reroute European exports around Ukraine, potentially depriving Kyiv of as much as \$2 billion a year in transit fees.

The \$11 billion Nord Stream 2 project will soon be completed after the Biden administration in May agreed to waive sanctions on its Swiss-based operator in an attempt to deescalate tensions with Germany.

The decision angered countries in Central and Eastern Europe, which see the pipeline as a security threat.

"You have to ask: Why would you support Ukraine with one hand and strangle it with the other," she told a conference of policymakers in November 2015 as the West supported Kyiv with military and economic aid to **help it battle** Kremlin-backed fighters in eastern Ukraine.

"Nord Stream 2 actually threatens not only Ukraine's survivability and their resources, but it is a risk to fuel diversification in Europe, especially Southeastern Europe," Dunnigan said at the time.

The Biden administration and Germany reached an agreement in July on steps to help Ukraine handle the economic fallout resulting from the completion of Nord Stream 2, including investing in the country's alternative energy industry, a compromise that Kyiv considers inadequate.

The Biden administration recently appointed Amos Hochstein, who served as the State Department's energy envoy from 2014 to 2017, to oversee the implementation of the agreement with Germany.

Hochstein, who also served as a board member on Ukraine's state-owned natural gas company Naftogaz, oversaw the Bureau of Energy Resources when Dunnigan served there.

"I am hoping that Dunnigan's background in energy is going to help people in the State Department understand how critical energy security is for Ukraine as a country. It can't succeed unless it has energy security," said Daniel Vajdich, president of Washington-based lobby firm Yorktown Solutions, whose clients include Naftogaz.

Dunnigan took up her new position on September 7. Her focus on energy security will not be directed solely toward Ukraine.

The United States has been seeking to help the wider Central and Eastern Europe region reduce its dependency on Russian fossil fuels by investing in energy infrastructure projects through the Three Sea Initiative, a forum of 12 nations including Hungary, Czech Republic, Poland, and Austria.

Dunnigan had been serving at the U.S. Embassy in Austria for the past three years, first as deputy chief of mission and most recently as charge d'affaires to Austria.

Kent served as chief of mission at the U.S. Embassy in Kyiv from 2015 to 2018 before returning to Washington to oversee policy toward Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus.

He has been outspoken about endemic corruption in Ukraine and repeatedly called on the country's leaders to pursue investigations of top officials and tycoons, including Austria-based energy billionaire Dmytro Firtash.

Kent will hand over policy for Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia to Erika Olson, the former director for Northern European, Baltic, and Arctic security affairs at the State Department.

Olson will also oversee South Europe, including Turkey, Greece, and Cyprus, the State Department spokesperson said.

The moves are part of the regular rotation of staff at the State Department. The spokesperson did not say what position Kent will hold next.