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Exclusive: Zelensky «surprised» and «disappointed» by Biden pipeline move

Ексклюзивно: Зеленський "здивований" і "розчарований" рішенням Байдена щодо трубопроводу

Президент України Володимир Зеленський в інтерв'ю розповів про свою реакцію на рішення Д. Байдена припинити спроби блокувати російський трубопровід, який Україна розглядає як загрозу національній безпеці.

<https://www.axios.com/zelensky-biden-ukraine-russia-nord-stream-pipeline-fe50756b-6b82-43f0-b390-734ea3e95de0.html>

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky says he learned through the press — not any direct heads-up — that President Biden had decided to stop trying to block a Russian pipeline that Ukraine sees as a dire national security threat.

Driving the news: Zelensky used an hourlong Zoom interview with Axios on Friday to beseech Biden to meet with him face to face before a June 16 summit with Russian President Vladimir Putin — offering to join him "at any moment and at any spot on the planet."

- The embattled leader spoke of Putin's psychological pressure campaign; his own anger-turned-disappointment at the U.S.; and his hope that Biden, whom he compares to basketball great Michael Jordan, can still outmaneuver Russia and rescue Ukraine.

Why it matters: Russian gas currently flows through Ukraine en route to Europe. Nord Stream 2, a Russia-to-Germany natural gas pipeline, would allow Russia to circumvent and isolate Kyiv, Ukraine's capital. Zelensky said the U.S. is the only power capable of stopping Russia.

- "This is a weapon, a real weapon ... in the hands of the Russian Federation," he said. "It is not very understandable ... that the bullets to this weapon can possibly be provided by such a great country as the United States."

- Putin is already wielding his additional leverage over Ukraine. The Russian president [said](#) on Friday that Ukraine must show good will if it still wants Russian gas to pass through the country.

What they're saying: "The State Department has regularly engaged with Ukrainian officials regarding Nord Stream 2. Prior to the transmission of the most recent report to Congress, the State Department notified the Ukrainian ambassador in

Washington and senior officials in Kyiv, including the president's chief of staff, of the contents of the report," a White House spokesperson told Axios.

- "The administration is committed to continuing to consult with Ukraine as we press Germany to address the risks Nord Stream 2 poses to Ukraine and European energy security. We also welcome Ukraine's direct engagement with the German government about their concerns."

- "When President Biden meets with President Putin in Geneva, he will stand up for Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity, as he has done in both of his earlier calls to President Putin."

- An administration source said the White House was considering inviting Zelensky to Washington before Biden's summit with Putin but declined to move ahead with the meeting after Zelensky's decision to replace the management of state energy company Naftogaz. That move led to concerns in the administration he was backsliding on anti-corruption efforts.

Where things stand: Putin announced Friday the first of two lines is complete and said energy giant Gazprom is "ready to start filling Nord Stream 2 with gas."

- The White House has called the pipeline "a Kremlin geopolitical project that threatens European energy security." But Biden nonetheless backed off U.S. sanctions on the company working to finish the pipeline.

- Zelensky said he has moved past anger and would now describe his feeling as one of disappointment.

Behind the scenes: Zelensky says Biden had offered him "direct signals" that the U.S. was prepared to block the pipeline. Then came the news that Biden would be waiving the sanctions.

- Zelensky said he had to listen to a White House press briefing to obtain an explanation: The administration said the pipeline was already nearly complete and cited the importance of good relations with Germany.

- Zelensky said he understands the importance of that relationship, but he asked: "How many Ukrainian lives does the relationship between the United States and Germany cost?"

Zelensky says he is "positive" Biden could still stop the pipeline. "I still believe, after all, that Biden is a Jordan in politics," he said.

- He recalled how Michael Jordan would lull opponents into a "false sense of victory" then "grab the victory at the very last minute."

- "If this is not the case, that will be a great pity, not only for me," he said. "There will be a feeling that in these circumstances Russia will have a great chance to prevail over the United States."

The White House says it proposed the Putin summit to seek a "stable and predictable" relationship with Putin.

- Biden is hardly the first U.S. president to seek that, Zelensky said. "But, if you ask me, the better scenario would be for the U.S. to make it so that Russia starts aiming to forge the relationship with the United States."

Zelensky has not enjoyed stability or predictability from Moscow since taking office in 2019. He thinks Russia's recent military build-up on the borders was an attempt to inflict "psychological pressure" but noted that the threat still looms.

- Zelensky expressed appreciation for the support Biden offered during that showdown, but he said the Nord Stream decision could "dampen the confidence" Ukrainians feel in the U.S.

- He also said he's discussed with the Biden administration a "possible increase in military assistance" to expand security in the Black Sea and the Sea of Azov around Ukraine's shoreline. It's unclear whether Biden will follow through on those discussions.

What's next: A source familiar with the U.S. interactions said they had told the Ukrainian side several days ago they would hold a call this week, as early as Monday. It could be a contentious conversation.