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Democracy Dies in Darkness



Hunter Biden's new job at a Ukrainian gas company is a problem for U.S. soft power

By **Adam Taylor**

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Around the world, there is a major perception that U.S. foreign policy is dictated by a thirst for oil and gas. For example, a 2002 Pew Research poll found that 75 percent of French respondents felt that the United States-led invasion of Iraq was a simple ruse to gain control of Iraqi oil. And that isn't just what the "cheese-eating surrender monkeys" think either: Establishment figures in the United States such as Sen. John McCain and former Federal Reserve chairman Alan Greenspan have both made statements that suggest they buy into it, too.

Such a perception is probably an oversimplification, but there is clearly some truth to the idea. And whether it is true or not, perceptions clearly matter when it comes to international relations.

Think about that when you read the announcement that Vice President Biden's son, Hunter Biden, has accepted a position on the board at Ukraine's largest private gas firm. According to a news release posted Tuesday, the vice president's son would join the board of Burisma Holdings. The Yale-educated lawyer would be in charge of the company's legal unit, the release said.

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Here's a small selection of the responses to the news, which ranged from the incredulous to the resigned:

**Robert Coalson**

@CoalsonR

Biden's son takes job a Ukraine gas firm. Boy, that looks really bad. What are they thinking"? bit.ly/RCzEE0

27 12:56 PM - May 13, 2014

[56 people are talking about this](#)**Olga Kuzmina**

@OlgaKuzminaDC

Joe Biden's son is now head of legal affairs at Ukraine's largest gas company. Speechless!

themoscowtimes.com/business/artic...

31 11:37 AM - May 13, 2014

[157 people are talking about this](#)**Tim Huelskamp**

@CongHuelskamp

Obama White House for sale or rent. Biden's son to head Ukrainian gas company. #Nefarious goo.gl/ZZ7W1U

75 12:20 PM - May 14, 2014

[99 people are talking about this](#)

While the general public appeared nonplussed, the official response has been muted. "Hunter Biden is a private citizen and a lawyer," White House spokesperson Kendra Barkoff told The Post. "The vice president does not endorse any particular company and has no involvement with this company."

Meanwhile, an ethics watchdog argued that it probably wasn't that big of a deal. "It can't be that because your dad is the vice president, you can't do anything," Melanie Sloan, executive director of Citizens for Responsibility and Ethics in Washington, told Reuters.

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It's true that there are no rules against Hunter Biden taking this position. And it's (fairly) safe to assume that his appointment was not part of a broader, U.S.-led plot to oust Moscow-backed Ukrainian president Viktor Yanukovich and steal all of Ukraine's gas. However, whatever the practical reality of this posting, its symbolic nature makes it look very bad.

For one thing, while Burisma is clearly trying to portray itself (perhaps genuinely) as an open, Western company, its ownership is more than a little murky. A [2012 investigation from Forbes Ukraine](#) noted that registration documents from Ukraine and Cyprus indicated that Nikolay Zlochevsky, a former government minister and representative of Yanukovich's Party of Regions, was in control of the company. There was speculation from Ukrainian energy analysts that Biden's appointment may have been an attempt to avoid sanctions by other, bigger Yanukovich allies.

It's also unclear why, exactly, Biden was hired: [At Yahoo News, Olivier Knox and Meredith Shiner](#) have speculated that the fact that so much of Burisma's permits are in Ukraine's troubled Dnieper-Donets Basin may play a role.

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Then there's the broader problem: The appointment of the vice president's son to a Ukrainian oil board looks nepotistic at best, nefarious at worst. No matter how qualified Biden is, it ties into the idea that U.S. foreign policy is self-interested, and that's a narrative [Vladimir Putin has pushed during Ukraine's crisis](#) with references to Iraq and Libya. It clashes with the U.S. narrative that this is all about international law and human rights.

To be fair, Hunter Biden isn't the only person linked to politics on the board of Burisma: The Wall Street Journal reports that Devon Archer, the college roommate of John Kerry's stepson, has also joined, and on Wednesday, Ukrainian media reported that former Polish president Aleksander Kwasniewski would also join the board. It's an impressive crowd.

And Biden is certainly not the first politically-linked person to get a dubiously high-paying job on a board. As Mikhail Korchemkin of East European Gas Analysis pointed out to me, more than a few children of Russian politicians have ended up in executive positions in companies at the top of the Forbes 500 list, and China's "princelings" have a similar habit. Bringing big names in has obvious political advantages for companies and other rewards for the names – just ask Gerhard Schröder, the former chancellor of Germany, who sits on the board of the Nord Stream and catches flack for hugging Vladimir Putin, or Dominique Strauss Kahn, now on the board at a subsidiary of Rosneft, the Russian state oil giant where former secretary of state Donald L. Evans once turned down a role.

Still, you have to wonder how big the salary has to be to put U.S. soft power at risk like this. Pretty big, we'd imagine.

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