

U.S.

# Bidens in Ukraine: An Explainer

Former vice president led anticorruption efforts in country; his son served on board of Ukraine firm



Joe Biden in Kiev, Ukraine, in 2017. PHOTO: VALENTYN OGIRENKO/REUTERS

*By Alan Cullison*

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KIEV, Ukraine—Joe Biden’s involvement with Ukraine and his son’s work in the country, which President Trump has repeatedly said should be investigated, began when the former vice president was serving as the Obama administration’s point man on relations with Ukraine and rooting out bureaucratic corruption.

Soon after Moscow invaded the country in 2014 and annexed its peninsula of Crimea, Mr. Biden took a lead role in U.S. efforts to support the fragile government in Kiev. He shuttled back and forth to the Ukrainian capital, coordinating U.S. aid packages and cajoling the officials to enact reforms even as the country fought off Russian-backed rebels in the country’s east.

Mr. Biden’s son Hunter took a board position with a Ukrainian natural gas extraction company, Burisma Holdings Ltd., in May 2014, months after the vice president took on his role in the country, which some anticorruption advocates feared would undermine the elder Mr. Biden’s work. According to one official with ties to the company, Hunter Biden’s compensation was around \$50,000 a month. His position at the company expired in April 2019.

The White House said at the time there was nothing wrong with Hunter Biden's work, and that it didn't create a conflict of interest since he was a private person.

"I've never spoken to my son about his overseas business dealings," Joe Biden told reporters on Saturday.

President Trump in a July phone call repeatedly pressured the president of Ukraine to investigate Hunter Biden, according to people familiar with the matter, urging Volodymyr Zelensky about eight times to work with his lawyer Rudy Giuliani on a probe.

Messrs. Trump and Giuliani have suggested that Joe Biden pushed for the firing of Ukraine's general prosecutor, Viktor Shokin, in March 2016 to stop an investigation into Burisma. In Ukraine, government officials and anticorruption advocates say that is a misrepresentation. Neither Mr. Biden nor his son have been accused of any wrongdoing.

Mr. Biden had called for the ouster of Mr. Shokin because he and others thought that the prosecutor wasn't aggressive enough.

The owner of Burisma, Mykola Zlochevsky, has been under the scrutiny of prosecutors. A minister of natural resources until 2012, Mr. Zlochevsky was accused of improperly granting gas extraction licenses to firms affiliated with him, and at times was investigated for alleged abuse of power, illegal enrichment and money laundering. Mr. Zlochevsky was never convicted of any crimes and denied any wrongdoing. His lawyer also denied that Mr. Zlochevsky ever benefited from his position in government.

Mr. Shokin had dragged his feet on those investigations, Western diplomats said, and effectively squashed one in London by failing to cooperate with U.K. authorities, who had frozen \$23.5 million of Mr. Zlochevsky's assets. In a speech in 2015, the U.S. ambassador to Ukraine, Geoffrey Pyatt, called the Ukrainian prosecutor "an obstacle" to anticorruption efforts, and mentioned the U.K. case, which he said led to the escape of illicit assets.

But Ukraine's government was slow to fire Mr. Shokin, despite warnings from the International Monetary Fund and others that Western aid to the country would be cut off if it didn't act. Mr. Biden, in one of his trips to Ukraine in 2016, pressured the government, telling them the U.S. would withhold \$1 billion in loan guarantees. At an event at the Council on Foreign Relations two years later, Mr. Biden said he told Ukraine officials: "If the prosecutor is not fired you're not getting the money. Well, son of a bitch. He got fired."

Mr. Shokin denied any misconduct, and said he was fired illegally. In an interview with a Ukrainian news service, he blamed his dismissal on Ukrainian "grant-eaters"—nonprofit groups seeking to curry favor with the West.

Anders Aslund, a senior fellow at the Atlantic Council in Washington, D.C., said that Mr. Biden was making the same demands that other lenders to the Ukrainian government were making.

“Everyone in the Western community wanted Shokin sacked,” he said. “The whole G-7, the IMF, the EBRD, everybody was united that Shokin must go, and the spokesman for this was Joe Biden.”

**Write to Alan Cullison at [alan.cullison@wsj.com](mailto:alan.cullison@wsj.com)**

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