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Pete Buttigieg makes surprise trip to Ukraine as private jet controversy simmers

Піт Буттіджіч здійснив несподівану поїздку в Україну

Політичний репортер «New York Post» Джош Крістенсон повідомляє про неоголошений візит до Києва міністра транспорту США Піта Буттіджеджа. Американський політик відвідав Київ, щоб зустрітися з керівниками українського уряду та обговорити плани щодо відродження зруйнованої війною економіки країни, у тому числі шляхом підтримки інвестицій у транспортну інфраструктуру. Президент України Володимир Зеленський під час зустрічі з П. Буттіджеджем обговорив відновлення інфраструктури України та розвиток транспортних можливостей для експорту українських товарів на міжнародні ринки. П. Буттіджедж також призначив Роберта Марінера новим радником, який перебуватиме в столиці України.

<https://nypost.com/2023/11/08/news/pete-buttigieg-makes-surprise-trip-to-ukraine-as-private-jet-controversy-simmers/>

Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg made an unexpected visit to Ukraine on Wednesday, as controversy dogs him over taxpayer-funded flights he took on private jets last year.

Buttigieg, 41, visited Kyiv to meet with government leaders and discuss plans to revive the war-torn nation's economy, including by "supporting investments in transportation infrastructure," according to a Department of Transportation press release.

The Cabinet member also appointed Robert Mariner as a senior adviser to be stationed in Ukraine's capital, citing his previous role advising the the US Embassy in Kabul, Afghanistan.

The trip took place as Buttigieg is battling a lawsuit filed by a conservative watchdog group hoping to obtain the taxpayer costs of at least 18 trips by the former South Bend, Ind. mayor, including eight jaunts in August 2022 to the battleground states of Arizona, Florida, Minnesota, Ohio, Nevada and New Hampshire.

"The Secretary travels by commercial airline the vast majority of the time and has directed that travel and logistical decisions be grounded in efficient and responsible use of taxpayer dollars," a DOT spokesperson told the outlet.

"The exceptions have been when the Department's career ethics officials, who have served under both Democratic and Republican administrations, determined that the use of a 9-seat FAA [Federal Aviation Administration] aircraft would be either more cost-effective or should be approved for exceptional scheduling or security reasons."

Those journeys were taken to highlight infrastructure grants provided by President Biden's 2021 Infrastructure and Investment Jobs Act — and 10 of the flights cost taxpayers a total of \$31,255.72, the FAA told APT.

Caitlin Sutherland, the executive director of Americans for Public Trust, said Buttigieg appeared "to be politicizing his role" in making the swing-state trips and was evading "accountability and transparency."

"Secretary Buttigieg continues to blow off the American people who simply want to know the true cost of his taxpayer-funded private jet trips," Sutherland said in a statement.

“After multiple FOIA requests, a lawsuit, and an ongoing inspector general investigation, Buttigieg’s office still refuses to provide vital details about using a private government jet for a swing state tour, which appears more akin to campaigning than official DOT business.”

In September, Buttigieg addressed the controversy during a House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure hearing.

“I appreciate the chance to discuss this, because I can’t help [but] get the sense that some people want to make it sound as if I don’t travel most of the time on commercial aircraft, which of course is untrue,” Buttigieg said in response to a question from Rep. Eric Burlison (R-Mo.) about the flights.

“I think the irony for most people in my district is that they’re being told they’re going to have to convert to electric vehicles, to reduce their carbon footprint, and yet not everyone gets to travel the way that you do,” Burlison retorted.

November 8, 2023 shows the President Volodymyr Zelensky meeting with US Secretary of Transportation Pete Buttigieg prior to their meeting in Kyiv.

“The way I usually travel is in economy class aboard an airliner, like everybody else,” Buttigieg shot back. “When we do it differently, it’s often because it will save taxpayer money.”

The 2020 Democratic presidential candidate informed the House panel that he had taken 638 flights during his time as Transportation Secretary — 607 of which were commercial, 10 of which were on military aircraft like Air Force One and 21 of which were on FAA aircraft.

Americans for Public Trust revealed in December 2022 that 18 of those 21 trips were on FAA-managed Cessna 560XL private jets.

Two months later, the Department of Transportation’s Office of the Inspector General launched its own probe into the flights.

Buttigieg is not the only Cabinet official to have taken such trips. His predecessor, Elaine Chao, took seven private flights in 2017, totaling \$94,000 in taxpayer funds, according to Politico.

Former Health and Human Services Secretary Tom Price resigned that same year for having cost taxpayers \$1.2 million over 26 private jet journeys.