

# Nazarbayev Confidant Dies, Leaving Leadership Gap

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ALMATY, Kazakhstan — A long-time confidant of Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev, Vladimir Ni, died Thursday after a long illness, leaving a gap in the inner circle that surrounds the veteran leader of Central Asia's largest economy.

Ni, who was 77, was a board member of copper miner Kazakhmys. The group announced his death in a statement Friday.

"Mr. Ni, first and foremost, was one of President Nursultan Nazarbayev's longest-serving and most faithful associates, a representative of the old guard," said Andrei Chebotaryov, director of Alternative, a think tank.

"His passing is a major loss for the president and his circle of associates," he said, adding, "The president needs seriously to think about his personnel and create new, younger groups of associates."

Nazarbayev, 70, has never publicly named a chosen successor, and an intensifying succession

struggle among Kazakhstan's political elite is often cited as the single biggest investment risk in the country, which is the world's largest uranium miner and home to the biggest oil discovery in 40 years.

Several groups led by Nazarbayev's relatives and allies are competing for influence.

Ni, who had Korean roots, was always part of the inner circle. Born in 1933 in Vladivostok, he qualified as a mining engineer before serving — like Nazarbayev — in the government of the Soviet republic of Kazakhstan.

"Ni fell into the category of gray cardinal, a man who spent a very long time side by side with the president and had his ear. In Kazakhstan, this is very important," said Dosym Satpayev, an Almaty-based political analyst.

A former government employee, who declined to be identified, described Ni as a "very significant figure" who played a key role in running the affairs of Kazakhstan's Communist Party in Soviet times.

"He kept a very low profile, but he was a key link between the local clan of rich Koreans and the nation's leader," the former employee said. "One cannot rule out that the influence of the Koreans in society may begin to subside after his death."

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