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Ukraine Still Firm On Union

By The Moscow Times

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KIEV — Ukraine's Prime Minister Mykola Azarov reiterated that his country wouldn't join a Russia-led customs union after the two countries failed to review their natural gas agreement and Russia banned imports of some Ukrainian cheese.

"Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan signed all accords without us," Azarov told journalists Saturday in Kiev. "We offered to use the formula three-plus-one, but we were told that such a format is not suitable." He added that he hoped the format will eventually be accepted "because it is the only possible way."

Russia's Prime Minister Vladimir Putin has tried to persuade Ukraine to join the customs union, which includes Kazakhstan and Belarus, instead of seeking European Union membership. Putin, who said the bid to join the EU is "absolutely unrealistic," tried to persuade Ukraine to join the union by promising discounts for gas prices that Ukraine said were "enslaving."

"Our relations with our strategic partner Russia are not simple," Azarov said. "We still cannot

review this one-sided accord on gas supplies."

Russian also banned the import of Ukrainian cheese from three plants last week, citing low quality. Azarov denied the accusation Friday, saying Russian cheese producers want to protect their markets.

More than 80 percent of Ukraine's cheese exports go to Russia, Agriculture Minister Mykola Prysyazhnyuk said Friday. Of that amount, 30 percent is produced at the three plants that were affected, he said.

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