

Putin Uses Historical Ties to Woo Ukraine

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President Vladimir Putin and Patriarch Kirill visited Ukraine over the weekend and unleashed a range of arguments in favor of Ukraine's closer integration with Russia, from common spiritual and historical ties to economic expediency.

The president was accompanied by Patriarch Kirill of the Russian Orthodox Church in an apparent bid to use the historical celebration of the conversion of Kievan Rus into Christianity more than a thousand years ago, a fundamental event for the formation of modern Russia and Ukraine, as an argument for the two nations to grow closer.

The visit comes just months before Ukraine is set to sign an association agreement with the European Union at a summit in Vilnius, which would entail closer integration with the West. Russia has thus been trying to lure Ukraine to the Customs Union, which it dominates, with lucrative gas deals and promises of prolific investment.

In May, Ukraine acquired observer status in the Customs Union with no clear rights and responsibilities.

It is against this background that Putin, along with Patriarch Kirill, seemed to use all means of persuasion imaginable to bring Ukraine closer to Russia.

In a vivid show of stately grandeur, Patriarch Kirill arrived to Kiev on Saturday morning in a separate armored train consisting of five cars, one of which was a chapel. The Kiev train station and the surrounding area were purged of other passengers and passersby beforehand in order to prevent any possible political actions against the patriarch.

While the Russian church still presides over the majority of Orthodox believers in Ukraine, Christianity has historically been divided in the country, with some parishes forming a separate church, independent of Moscow, in the 1990s.

Addressing a group of the highest-ranking Orthodox clergy, Putin emphasized that "Orthodoxy has become a spiritual buttress of the Russian state and for our national consciousness, uniting Russia, Ukraine and Belarus through strong bonds of brotherhood."

Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovych was reluctant to reciprocate these apparent signs of courtship, however. Speaking on Sunday at Sevastopol, Russia's Navy stronghold on the Black sea where Putin and Yanukovych attended Navy Day celebrations, he said "Russia and Ukraine remain strategic partners," but stopped short of making any statements about the historical unity of Eastern Slavic peoples.

Yanukovych has plenty of reasons to be cautious: Only 31 percent of the Ukrainian population favors the country's accession to the Russia-led Customs Union, which would likely hinder Ukrainian hopes for EU membership, a preferred choice by 42 percent of the population, according to the Kiev-based Razumkov Center.

At the same time, the Ukrainian leadership has been under pressure recently due to the economic hardship the country is experiencing. Ukraine's economy is smaller overall than the economy of the city of Moscow, and 55 percent of Ukrainians say the standard of living is better in Russia.

But according to Zbigniew Brzezinski, a U.S. strategist, Russia has good reason to be persistent.

Brzezinski told the Voice of America that "if Ukraine survives and prospers, the chances in fact are greater in the long-run that Russia will become a post-Imperial democratic state; if Georgia or Ukraine falter, Russia again becomes an empire with growing ambitions."

Following the weekend's celebrations, Putin hinted that Russia could be the key to Ukraine's success at a roundtable called "Orthodox-Slavic Values: The Foundation of Ukraine's Civilizational Choice," where he listed Ukraine's achievements from the time when it was a part of the Russian Empire and later the Soviet Union.

"Ukraine was the most industrially developed part of the Soviet Union, with 20 percent of capital investments going there," he said.

But as with many other issues in Ukraine, there are divergent opinions as to what can boost its economy. While Putin promised that Ukraine's accession to the Customs Union would bring from 1.5 to 6.5 percent of GDP growth, analysts from the Kiev School of Economics estimated that integration with the European market would bring Ukraine \$19 billion to \$26 billion worth of additional exports in the long run, making it more attractive.

Yulia Tymoshenko, Yanukovich's main rival and an unequivocal advocate of European integration, lambasted attempts to "revive false unions" and called for the establishment of a "unified independent Ukrainian church" in a statement published on her website.

After having lost to the incumbent president by a margin of 3.5 percent, Tymoshenko was jailed for seven years for abuse of office. On Thursday, the UN Human Rights Committee denounced her sentencing as a "politically motivated" persecution.

While Russia is actively trying to persuade Ukraine to integrate with its historic brothers, the EU has made integration with it conditional on a number of issues, including trade tariffs and judicial independence.

Just Friday, the EU Delegation to Ukraine urged a timely resolution of these issues, saying in a press release: "There are increasing concerns that the time is running out to find mutually acceptable solutions."

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