

CIS Countries Neutral on Crimea Annexation

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Vladimir Putin shaking hands with Crimea's Prime Minister Sergei Aksyonov, left, and Sevastopol Mayor Alexei Chaly at the Kremlin on Wednesday.

As Russia prepares to welcome Crimea as its 84th federal subject, most members of the Commonwealth of Independent States have remained silent in the face of Russia's intervention in Ukraine amid growing speculation that other former Soviet republics could be threatened by Russian territorial expansion.

Kyrgyzstan took arguably the boldest anti-Kremlin stance in the CIS last week. The Kyrgyz Foreign Ministry released a statement condemning "all acts aimed at destabilizing the situation in Ukraine" and expressing its support for "the early settlement of the situation in Ukraine by peaceful means, through negotiations and dialogue, in accordance with international law and the United Nations Charter."

Contrary to Russia's official position, Kyrgyzstan said it does not recognize Viktor Yanukovich as the president of Ukraine because "he lost the confidence of his people, presidential power and escaped from the country."

The press secretary of the Kyrgyz Foreign Ministry, Turdakun Sydykov, said that he could not elaborate further on his government's position when contacted by telephone last week.

But Kyrgyzstan's forthright statement, which nonetheless steered clear of finger-pointing and name-calling, remains the exception. The CIS members' official positions on the Ukrainian crisis have largely been shaped by the need to keep their various strategic partnerships afloat.

Kazakhstan, for example, has not formulated an official position on the situation in Ukraine because of the conflict's complexities, said Dosym Satpayev, director of the Kazakhstan Risks Assessment Group, an Almaty-based think tank. "There are many factors at play here that make it difficult for Kazakhstan to take a stance," Satpayev said in a telephone interview. "This is not only a conflict between Russia and Ukraine but also between Russia and the West. The U.S., Russia, Europe and China are all key partners for Kazakhstan. We have to find a good balance."

More than 30 percent of Kazakhstan's imported goods come from Russia, while Russia receives nearly 10 percent of the country's exports. Kazakhstan is also part of a Customs Union with Russia, Belarus and Armenia, which is meant to bolster economic ties between these former Soviet republics.

But Kazakhstan has also received extensive U.S. assistance, including more than \$1 billion for the dismantling of its weapons of mass destruction. And major U.S. companies such as ExxonMobil and ChevronTexaco have commercial interests in the oil-rich Central Asian state.

Given Kazakhstan's mixed allegiances, it is not surprising that it would opt for neutrality, just as all CIS members did during the Russia-Georgia war of 2008. They declined to recognize the breakaway Georgian republics of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Only Russia, Venezuela, Nicaragua and the Pacific islands of Nauru, Vanuatu and Tuvalu have recognized them as independent states.

Belarus, arguably Moscow's most loyal former Soviet republic, has adopted an ambiguous stance on the Ukraine crisis.

"I think Belarus will not support Crimea's entry into Russia, like it did not recognize Abkhazia's and South Ossetia's independence," said Dmitry Bolkunets, a Belarus scholar and economist at Moscow's Higher School of Economics. "Belarus is currently normalizing its relations with the European Union, but the economy is still heavily subsidized by Russia."

In 2012, Russian energy subsidies to Belarus amounted to 16 percent of the former Soviet republic's GDP.

Although Belarussian President Alexander Lukashenko said he supported maintaining "Ukrainian territorial integrity," six Russian Sukhoi-27 fighter jets were deployed to the Babruysk airfield in central Belarus last week in an effort to counter potential NATO threats.

Belarus and Russia are set to participate in a joint training exercise.

When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, 25 million Russians were living outside the Russian Soviet Republic. Demographics of CIS members, which some analysts believe could serve as a motive for future Russian territorial expansion, have in some cases assuaged worries about losing territory to Russia.

Nearly a quarter of Kazakhstan's 17.7 million inhabitants are Russian, and the Russian language is spoken by 95 percent of the population. But the large Russian population and the use of Russian as a lingua franca in Kazakhstan are not viewed as conditions for a Russian takeover. Rather, the country's demographics have instead served as a tool to mold the population's views on the Ukrainian crisis.

"While Kazakh media are not homogenous, many people get their news from Russian state-owned media outlets," Satpayev said. "Their vision of the conflict is shaped by what they are being shown. They do not believe that Russia could do the same thing to them because the 'enemies' presented in the Ukrainian conflict cannot be found in the country."

Russian media have depicted a humanitarian crisis in Crimea, one in which ultranationalists — or neo-fascists — threaten the Russian population. In Russia's narrative of World War II, Central Asia and the Caucasus are not linked to European fascism.

The dwindling Russian population in some other CIS members has dispelled fears that Russia could declare a "humanitarian crisis" within their borders.

"Azerbaijan is not worried about its Russian population," said Avaz Gasanov, director of the Azerbaijan Society of Social Science Research, in a telephone interview. "It diminishes every year, and Russian is not the second official language. Our Russian population has never requested special rights."

A mere 1.3 percent of the population of Azerbaijan is Russian, down from 5.6 percent in 1989.

Although Azerbaijani authorities have not adopted a formal position on the Ukrainian crisis, the country is wary of the fate of Crimean Tatars, another Turkic-speaking ethnic group, and is disgruntled about how Crimea was "pushed into" a referendum.

"It is still unclear what will happen to Crimean Tatars if Crimea joins Russia," Gasanov said. "We are not against the people of Crimea wanting to organize a referendum, but we are against the way it has been organized. The rush to hold the referendum and the presence of the Russian military is just not right."

Gasanov also said Azerbaijan was safer than other CIS members that have strengthened economic ties with Russia in recent years.

"Kazakhstan, Belarus and Armenia should be more worried than Azerbaijan because they are in the Customs Union with Russia," Gasanov said. "If there is a political crisis in their country, Russia can easily intervene to protect its economic interests."

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