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As Kiev Looks West, Putin Turns East to Build Eurasian Dream

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President Vladimir Putin sitting with Kazakhstan's Nursultan Nazarbayev and Belarus' Alexander Lukashenko.

ALMATY, Kazakhstan — With his biggest prize escaping his grasp in Ukraine, President Vladimir Putin is likely to turn to the autocrats of Central Asia, particularly Kazakhstan's Nursultan Nazarbayev, to further his aim of erecting a Eurasian Union comprised of former Soviet states.

The Russian president's swift annexation of Crimea has earned him huge popularity at home but ends his dream for now of bringing the rest of Ukraine voluntarily into the new structure he plans to build on as much as possible of the ex-Soviet space.

"Having lost Ukraine, Central Asia will be much more sought after by Moscow in striking its integration plans," said Lilit Gevorgyan, an analyst at IHS Global Insight.

Kazakhstan in particular was one of two ex-Soviet countries, along with Belarus, to join a customs union with Russia. Members plan to sign documents this year to form the Eurasian

Economic Union, a regional bloc within former Soviet borders intended eventually as a counterweight to the European Union.

While the other four former Soviet republics in Central Asia will not be founder members of the new body, all are likely to be drawn closer into Moscow's orbit as it restores influence in a region it ruled for most of the 19th and 20th centuries.

The Central Asian states — which cover an area the size of Western Europe stretching from the Caspian Sea to China — have responded to the events in Ukraine by staying silent or issuing cautiously worded statements to avoid irking Moscow.

Putin's distrust for Western-style politics is familiar here: Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan have rulers who keep tight lids on dissent, with only chronically unstable Kyrgyzstan making a go at parliamentary democracy.

Kazakhstan's Nazarbayev — whose country is the richest of the five, the closest to Russia and the one with the largest population of ethnic Russians — told Putin on March 10 he "understands" Moscow's stance on Crimea. He said Tuesday that work on the Eurasian Economic Union would continue.

"Integration allows us to remove customs barriers and boost competitiveness. Therefore, we have a purely pragmatic interest — to develop our country, modernize the economy and increase the size of our GDP," he said on the sidelines of a nuclear security summit in The Hague, according to his press service.

"Independence Is Sacrosanct"

But he also felt the need to point out that his country has no intention of once again falling under Moscow's rule.

"As far as our political independence is concerned, this is sacrosanct, and Kazakhstan will not cede its sovereignty to anyone," he said.

Those words were clearly meant to allay an alarmist mood among some of his compatriots in the mainly Muslim nation.

"Kazakh society and most ethnic Kazakhs view the events in Ukraine as a direct threat to Kazakhstan and its territorial integrity," said Aidos Sarym, a political analyst based in the Kazakh city of Almaty.

Although Kazakhstan declared independence from the Soviet Union more than 22 years ago, produces oil and natural gas and is holding accession talks with the World Trade Organization, its economy has remained closely intertwined with Moscow's.

"In our region, we have Kazakhstan, we have China and we have 7,000 kilometers of common border with Russia, so naturally you will not find a single sober-minded person in this country saying that he will not cooperate with Russia. The question is — how to do it and on what terms," Sarym said.

Nazarbayev, a 73-year-old former steelworker, has for more than two decades steered what

he calls a "multi-vector foreign policy," maneuvering between Russia, China and the West to guard his country's independence. He describes the proposed Eurasian Union as similar to the EU, not a new Russian empire.

"It is just how it is done in the EU, where the European Commission tackles customs issues, regulates trade, tariffs, transportation of oil and gas, electricity, railways and motorways," he said in The Hague. "Final decisions will be made with the consent of all three states."

No "Fifth Column" In Kazakhstan

Putin's March 1 declaration of Russia's right to invade its neighbors to protect ethnic Russians would have raised far greater alarm in Kazakhstan 20 years ago.

At independence in 1991, Kazakhs accounted for only about 40 percent of the population, about the same proportion as Russians. But today, thanks to Russian emigration and a higher birth rate among Kazakhs, Russians account for only about 22 percent of the population and Kazakhs about 65 percent.

Back in Moscow, some Russian nationalists, led by firebrand populist Vladimir Zhirinovsky, are still calling for a takeover of northern Kazakhstan, which includes historically Russian cities like Petropavlovsk on the Trans-Siberian railway.

But Nazarbayev's firm grip on power means there is little sign of overt Russian separatism, like that espoused by Crimea's Russian Unity party, which took power there after armed men seized its regional parliament building at the end of February.

Occasional outbursts of ethnic tension in the 1990s are now largely forgotten. Nazarbayev, a former member of the Soviet politburo, gives his speeches in both Kazakh and Russian.

"Kazakhstan's Russians are very different from Russians in Crimea who never saw themselves as Ukrainian citizens," said Almaty-based political analyst Alexander Knyazev. "Local Russians associate themselves with this country. Those who thought otherwise have left."

A 2010 cable from the U.S. Embassy in Kazakhstan said there was no threat of pro-Russia separatism in Kazakhstan.

"Ethnic Russians in Kazakhstan sometimes have been portrayed as a fifth column of support for the Russian Federation. Post considers this assessment grossly inaccurate," said the cable, among documents leaked by anti-secrecy group WikiLeaks.

Not All Neighbors Loyal

Kazakhstan's much poorer regional neighbors Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan have expressed their willingness to join the ustoms Union, but due to their dire economic plight it may take years before they can join the new Eurasian Economic Union.

Nevertheless, both are firmly in Moscow's orbit. As U.S.-led forces prepare to pull out of Afghanistan, Russia has secured the long-term presence of its military in both countries through generous aid packages that include writing off debts, better terms for their migrant

workers and supplies of arms and fuel.

Uzbekistan, the most populous Central Asian nation with 30 million people, has invited Russian energy firms to help tap its promising but underdeveloped hydrocarbon deposits.

President Islam Karimov, 76, a Soviet-era holdover in power for a quarter of a century, is largely shunned by Western countries because of a reputation among human rights bodies as one of the most repressive leaders on earth.

He has nevertheless managed to cooperate with NATO countries on security matters, but is likely to be drawn more toward Moscow as the Western alliance exits Afghanistan this year.

In much of Central Asia, the main rival to Putin for influence is not the West at all, but China.

Nowhere is that more apparent than in Turkmenistan, one of the world's most reclusive nations, ruled by President Gurbanguly Berdymukhammedov with a personality cult.

With the world's fourth-largest natural gas reserves, Turkmenistan still depends on a Soviet-era pipeline through Russia for exports, but a new pipeline commissioned in 2009 has allowed Beijing to supplant Moscow as its biggest buyer.

Last year, Chinese President Xi Jinping helped inaugurate the world's second-biggest natural gas field at Turkmenistan's Galkynysh. China's hunger, not Western outrage, may be the biggest obstacle to rebuilding Moscow's Asian empire.

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