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Putin Visits Kazakhstan After Remarks Cause Alarm

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Russian President Vladimir Putin visited Kazakhstan on Tuesday to stress the need for close ties between the two countries, a month after he caused alarm in the former Soviet republic by seeming to question its future as an independent state.

During a meeting with counterpart Nursultan Nazarbayev, Putin said Russia and Kazakhstan were "connected historically and today by a thousand threads that unite us and help us develop, supporting each other."

Speaking to young Russians in late August, Putin said Kazakhstan had only become a state under Nazarbayev.

"The Kazakhs had never had statehood," Putin said at the time. "He created it. In this sense he is a unique person for the former Soviet space and for Kazakhstan, too."

His remarks were interpreted as suggesting that Kazakhstan's independence might not survive Nazarbayev, who is 74 and has been president since the fall of the Soviet Union

in 1991.

Putin went on to say that most people in Kazakhstan wanted closer relations with Russia and to remain part of the "big Russian world."

Russia justified its annexation of the Crimean Peninsula and support for separatists in eastern Ukraine by saying it has a responsibility to protect ethnic Russians outside Russia. Like Ukraine, Kazakhstan has a large ethnic Russian population.

Putin and Nazarbayev had been counting on Ukraine joining the Eurasian Economic Union, a counterweight to the European Union that they are forming together with Belarus. These plans were spoiled when Ukraine's former pro-Moscow president was ousted in February and the new government decided to sign an economic and political cooperation agreement with the EU instead.

The Ukraine conflict has strained ties between Putin and Nazarbayev, while trade between their two countries has dropped significantly, largely because of the damage caused to the Russian economy by Western sanctions.

Shortly before Putin's remarks in August, Nazarbayev insisted that Kazakhstan wasn't giving up its independence in joining the Russia-centered economic union. He also didn't go along with Moscow in banning food imports from the EU, U.S. and other countries that have imposed sanctions on Russia because of its actions in Ukraine.

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