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Ukraine Crisis Undermining Putin's Dreams of Uniting Ex-Soviet States

By The Moscow Times

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From left to right: CIS Executive Secretary Sergei Lebedev, Azerbaijan's President Ilham Aliyev, Armenia's President Serzh Sargsyan, Kazakhstan's President Nursultan Nazarbayev, Kyrgyzstan's President Almazbek Atambayev, Moldova's President Nicolae Timofti, Belarus' President Alexander Lukashenko, Russia's President Vladimir Putin, Tajikistan's President Emomali Rahmon, Turkmenistan's President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov, Uzbekistan's President Islam Karimov and Ukrainian Ambassador to Belarus Mykhailo Yezhel pose for a family photo in Minsk on Oct. 10.

Vulgar chants about Vladimir Putin before he arrived for a regional summit in Belarus did not augur well for the Russian president's hopes of bringing the leaders of former Soviet republics closer together.

Matters got even worse when bickering broke out at the start of the meeting, revealing fault lines over the Ukraine crisis and deepening doubts about the future of the loose grouping known as the Commonwealth of Independent States.

Jibes between Putin and the leader of Moldova, and barbs aimed at the absent Ukrainian leader, raised new questions about his ability to woo countries to the Eurasian Economic Union he is creating to try to rival the European Union's economic might.

"Unfortunately disintegration tendencies are growing in the Commonwealth, especially considering attempts by individual well-wishers to bury the CIS," Belarussian President Alexander Lukashenko told the leaders, seated at a vast, ornate round table in the huge Independence Palace in the capital Minsk.

Underlining the need to end the bloodshed in Ukraine, he said: "The fighting directly affects the security and undermines the economic development of both Ukraine and the entire post-Soviet region as a whole."

Lukashenko is a supporter of the CIS but his warning showed the extent of the problems Putin faces trying to rebuild ties between countries that were once part of the Soviet Union but are wary of letting Moscow come to dominate them again.

As Russia seeks to avoid international isolation because of Western sanctions over the Ukraine conflict, tension is growing rather than falling among the former Soviet states. Strains among some, such as Armenia and Azerbaijan, go deep.

This ensures that though the Eurasian Economic Union groups countries with a shared population of 170 million, a combined annual GDP of $2.7 trillion and vast energy riches, Putin is a long way from achieving his dream of building a bloc to match the EU, the United States and China as an economic power.

Resentment

The chants of fans at the soccer match between Ukraine and Belarus on Thursday night highlighted the resentment felt towards Moscow in some ex-Soviet states.

Scores of Ukrainians and Belarussians were detained after shouting patriotic Ukrainian slogans such as "Glory to the Heroes!" and "Glory to Ukraine!" — rallying cries in Kiev's conflict against Russian-backed separatists — as well as chanting abuse about Putin, a rights group and local media said.

The CIS groups 11 of the 15 former Soviet republics including Ukraine. The Baltic countries of Estonia, Lithuania and Latvia have all joined the EU. Georgia pulled out if the CIS after waging a brief war with Russia in 2008.

Putin has looked to Asia, and particularly China, to avoid isolation over the sanctions initially imposed on Russia for reclaiming Crimea and tightened over its backing for the separatists in east Ukraine.

He has also stepped up efforts to rebuild ties within the CIS since the Ukraine crisis began, but with mixed success.

Ukraine upset Moscow by deciding not to join the customs union and to deepen ties with the EU instead. Georgia and Moldova have also signed trade deals with the EU and Russia has banned imports of some Moldovan products such as wine.

"We still haven't received any convincing arguments to explain such an embargo," Moldovan President Nicolae Timofti told the summit in comments broadcast live on Russian television. "Unfortunately such actions undermine trust and agreements in the CIS."

Putin hit back, saying agreements with the EU should be signed in a "timely" manner as otherwise they could damage "our own market."

"This goes for Moldova and Ukraine," he said.

Noting that Russia had managed to come to an agreement with the EU to delay Ukraine's moves to deepen ties with the EU, he asked: "And where was Moldova?"

The Russian and Moldovan leaders then leant towards each other and exchanged words that were not picked up by the microphone, briefly ignoring the summit proceedings.

Recriminations worsened when Uzbek President Islam Karimov then spoke out against Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko for not attending the meeting, accusing him of preferring to go to Brussels to talk to Western leaders rather than meet his CIS colleagues. Kiev was represented by its envoy to Minsk.

Karimov challenged Poroshenko to decide once and for all whether CIS membership was in his country's interests.

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