

Kazakh Leader Nazarbayev Seeks Another Five Years in Early Election

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Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev

ALMATY — Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev said Wednesday he will seek re-election in a snap poll next month, which will almost certainly see him extend his 26 years at the helm of the oil-exporting former Soviet nation by another five.

The authoritarian leader's decision to run in the election on April 26 will for now end speculation over his would-be successor, a question closely followed by investors.

"I declare my consent to run as presidential candidate," Nazarbayev said to applause from loyalists in his Nur Otan party, who had asked him to seek re-election earlier on Wednesday.

"There is no bigger reward or happiness than to have the trust of my nation," he said in a speech broadcast live on national television from the capital Astana. "This inspires and invigorates me, and this is why I look youngish," the 74-year-old quipped with a smile.

Nazarbayev, a former steelworker nicknamed "Papa" and officially titled "Leader of the Nation," has run his Central Asian state since 1989 when he headed the local Communist Party.

He faces no real challenge from a small and disparate opposition in his steppe nation, a non-OPEC oil exporter five times the size of France.

A former member of the Soviet Communist Party's decision-making Politburo, he was last elected with almost 96 percent of votes in 2011. His current term ends only in late 2016.

Under Nazarbayev, Kazakhstan has put in place radical market reforms and attracted \$170 billion in foreign direct investment.

But the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe said the previous presidential election was marred by irregularities and that "reforms necessary for holding genuine democratic elections have yet to materialize."

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