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Kazakhstan Opposition Fears Ukraine's "Russian Spring"

Many Kazakhs worry about Moscow's annexation of Crimea and what it means for their own country's relations with Russia.

By Ryskeldi Satke

April 12, 2014

Russia's invasion of Ukraine and annexation of Crimea have alarmed the ranks of the marginalized opposition of Kazakhstan, along with local experts who see Moscow's integration projects as a threat to Kazakhstan's independence.

At the outset of the regional crisis in Ukraine, Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev appeared to be respectful of the sovereignty of Ukraine. Within weeks, however, Kazakhstan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs changed tack and endorsed the outcome of the controversial Crimea referendum. In light of the rapid developments in Ukraine, a number of Kazakh public figures, experts and anti-Eurasian Union activists have voiced concern over the possible implications of Russia's actions for the future of their country. Some leading Kazakh experts agree that Kazakhstan is facing potential political consequences set by the new realities in the former Soviet bloc. Overall, however, opinion in Kazakhstan on the Crimea crisis appears to be divided along ethnic lines: Northern Kazakhstan, which is dominated by an ethnic Russian population tends to be supportive of Russian President Vladimir Putin's strategy in Ukraine, whereas the rest of the republic harbors decidedly mixed feelings on the subject.

Kazakhstan's mission to the UN abstained from voting on the recent resolution that called on the international community not to recognize any change in the status of Crimea. Kazakh activists have meanwhile announced plans for an anti-Eurasian Forum in the city of Almaty this weekend. The "Russian spring" in southeastern Ukraine seems to have encouraged more anti-integration sentiment than ever before in Kazakhstan. The forum organizers had this to say: "Before entering the Customs Union, prominent Kazakh figures did not support membership, emphasizing misguided decision-making by the authorities. Back then, experts foresaw 'rising prices,' 'limits on imported automobiles' and a deteriorating socioeconomic situation in the republic. Unfortunately, the public was not listening. And now those predictions have come true: Russia dominates the Kazakhstan market. And where is the guarantee that the Kazakh government, known for ignoring the will of its own people, will not allow the country to lose its independence. The future of the state must not be decided by a handful of individuals, but all the people of Kazakhstan."

A week prior to the March 16 referendum in Crimea, Nazarbayev conveyed to Putin in a telephone conversation Kazakhstan's strategic partnership with Russia and said that Astana "understands" the Kremlin's oversight in Ukraine is to protect the security interests of the ethnic Russian population in the peninsula. In contrast, Kazakhstan's neighbor Uzbekistan called for respect of UN Charter principles on the territorial integrity and political independence of any state.

Kazakhstan's cultural and historical links with Russia within Central Asia highlights the complexity of the crisis in Ukraine for Nazarbayev. Alexander Cooley, a professor of Political Science at Barnard College and author of the book *Great Games, Local Rules*, told *The Diplomat* that "Russia's annexation of Crimea has sounded alarm bells throughout Kazakhstan. Though officially supportive of Crimea's referendum, Kazakh authorities are concerned about the potential for Russia to similarly interfere in Kazakhstan on the pretext of defending the rights of the country's sizable Russian minority (many of who hold Russian passports), as well as the potential damaging impact of Russian media campaigns."

Predominantly ethnic Russian northern Kazakhstan has been a source of political tension between the Kazakh government and pro-Russian activists as far back as the creation of the autonomous republics. Over the course of two decades since then, Nazarbayev has navigated his way through the highly sensitive issue of preserving Kazakhstan's territorial integrity in the North. His efforts to establish Kazakhstan's capital Astana close to its border with Russia and to create The Assembly of People of Kazakhstan in 1995, to settle the subject of representation of ethnic minorities in the Kazakh state, have effectively kept Russian nationalist dissent at bay without provoking the Kremlin. (Although calls from Russian politicians to incorporate Central Asian territories including Kazakhstan are occasionally heard on Russia's airwaves and at public rallies in Moscow.)

But with Putin's bold move on Ukraine, the Kazakh leadership's task to stay on course with the Moscow-led Eurasian Union is coming under scrutiny by anti-integration Kazakh intellectuals. One of the outspoken critics of Russia's integration projects, Kazakh political analyst Aidos Sarym, says, "the question is – how to do it and on what terms" in a republic that cannot simply ignore Russia's interests without consequences. Meanwhile, the Carnegie Moscow Center's

Russian studies expert Alexei Malashenko presumes that Moscow's misconduct has "caused immense damage" to Russia's political initiatives in Central Asia. In an unprecedented show of solidarity with Ukraine, popular Kazakh artist and theater director Bolat Atabayev's theater Aksaray composed a collective address to the Ukrainian people after Kazakhstan approved the Crimea referendum results.

Nazarbayev brushed off concerns in the Kazakh media over any loss of statehood, reiterating Astana's strategic priorities. Speaking at the Hague on March 25 during the Nuclear Security Summit, the Kazakh leader said, "Integration allows removing trade barriers and increasing competitiveness. So we have here a purely pragmatic interest – to develop the country, boost the economy and increase the gross domestic product. As for our political independence, it is a constant, and Kazakhstan will cede sovereignty to no one. But we will voluntarily transfer some economic powers to supranational authorities, as is done, for example, in the European Union where the European Commission makes decisions relating to customs, regulates trade, tariffs, transportation of oil and gas, electricity, railways and highways." With those remarks, Nazarbayev reaffirmed that Astana intended to push forward with the Eurasian Union economic project together with Russia and Belarus.

Cooley believes that "In the medium-term, Crimea calls into question Kazakhstan's political room to remain Moscow's close economic and strategic partner, while still cultivating friendly relations and engagements with the West, China and other emerging powers. In particular, if Russia continues to use regional organizations like the Customs Union and CSTO to lock Kazakhstan into exclusive relations with Moscow, the political reaction will be highly negative, even if publicly muted."