

Kazakhstan distances itself from Moscow's integration projects

Aleksandra Jarosiewicz

On 18 January, at a meeting with the heads of foreign missions accredited in Astana, Kazakhstan's President Nursultan Nazarbayev questioned the need for deeper integration in the Eurasian Union which has been jointly developed with Russia and Belarus. Nazarbayev recalled that he was the initiator of the project; but he also clearly stated that the Union is to be purely economic in nature, and there is no way it can become a political organisation. He added that there would be no return to the USSR. The president's statement is the most serious criticism of the Eurasian Union; it was preceded by criticism of the idea of establishing a Eurasian parliament from lower-level officials, including the head of the ruling Nur Otan party and a presidential adviser last September, as well as by the decision in December for Kazakhstan to adopt the Latin alphabet by 2025, replacing the Cyrillic alphabet in use today.

Commentary

- The integration processes within the framework of the Customs Union, the Common Economic Area and the Eurasian Union currently being created are now the main axis of the relationship between Kazakhstan and Russia, which along with China is Astana's most important economic partner. However, the last several months have seen Astana distancing itself from these Russian projects increasingly clearly, as differences of interest between the organisation's members have arisen.
- Kazakhstan is not opposed to integration *per se*, but it is against the transformation of economic projects into a platform of political integration, with Russia as the leader and representative of the member states' interests. This kind of integration is in fact contrary to the policy Nazarbayev has maintained over the last two decades, of strengthening Kazakhstan's sovereignty and independence, and harbouring ambitions for his country to play an independent role on the global stage, as evidenced in Nazarbayev's ideas to resolve global economic crisis. Integration with Russia has also been criticised by the opposition, as well as in nationalist circles.
- The first few years of the integration projects have shown that the conflicts of economic interests between Russia and Kazakhstan have not been eliminated. Questions

concerning the supply of Russian oil and petroleum products have not been resolved, and Astana has been forced to process crude oil on the basis of the tolling agreement with China. The Customs Union has also led to price rises for many commodities in Kazakhstan (such as food and cars), which has caused public dissatisfaction.

- The consistent criticism of the political aspect of integration with Russia shows that the nature of these projects remains a major bone of contention in relations between Astana and Moscow, which is also affecting other areas of cooperation (such as the question of the principles for Russian use of the Baikonur Cosmodrome). Kazakhstan will be supported in its resistance by Belarus, which has also distanced itself from strengthening political cooperation with Russia (as seen in President Alaksandr Lukashenka's statement of 15 January). This means that, contrary to Russia's intentions, the integration projects do not currently offer a counterbalance to the European Union, nor are there any clear prospects of this happening in the future.