

Customs Union summit in the context of Ukraine

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Leaders from Russia, Kazakhstan and Belarus, the countries which form the Customs Union and the Common Economic Space and which are preparing to set up the Eurasian Union on 1 January 2015, met at a summit on 5 March in Moscow. Officially, the integration process is taking place as planned. However, disagreements between Russia on one side and Kazakhstan and Belarus on the other have once again been laid bare and have been seriously strengthened by the Russian-Ukrainian crisis. Another meaningful fact is that Russia did not hear a declaration of support as regards the Ukrainian issue from its partners. One direct consequence of the growing concern about the further development of the situation in the CIS area (especially in Ukraine) is that Kazakhstan is making efforts to reinforce its international position, including attempts to become a mediator between Russia and the West in connection with the crisis.

The Moscow summit – moderate progress in integration processes

The summit of leaders was conducted in the format of the Supreme Eurasian Economic Council and its aim was to demonstrate the effectiveness of the integration projects being pushed through by Russia; this was achieved to a limited extent. Although the member states declared they are willing to sign the founding documents of the Eurasian Union in May this year, as planned, the shape and the rules of operation have not been finally defined for this organisation. Kazakhstan's president, Nursultan Nazarbayev, expressed the opinion that the organisation needed to be set up first, and only then its prerogatives would be determined in more detail. Such an approach would mean that the Eurasian Union would only be a façade organisation. This would be in line with Astana's interests, since it fears that the integration projects fostered by Russia could pose a threat to Kazakhstan's sovereignty.

Belarus adopted a similar selective approach to the integration processes. During the summit, President Alyaksandr Lukashenka again focused primarily on his proposal to cancel the requirement to pay customs duty on the re-export of petroleum products made from Russian oil. This could have a great impact on Belarus, especially given its present economic problems.

However, the progress in negotiations and the likely signing of the Eurasian Union's founding documents as scheduled do count as a limited success for Moscow. Russia will continue its efforts to set up the Eurasian Union, even though one of its major goals, – Ukraine's accession – is no longer on the table for the time being. The implementation of the integration projects, even if these are to be merely façade projects, will be viewed by

Moscow as confirmation of its role in the post-Soviet area (hence Russia's declaration to include Armenia and Kyrgyzstan in the Eurasian integration process) and consequently a reinforcement of its international position.

Ukraine casts a shadow over the meeting in Moscow

Contrary to expectations, Astana and Minsk failed to back Moscow's standing in the conflict with Ukraine. Even though the summit was held one week ahead of schedule due to the ongoing Ukrainian crisis, no declaration concerning Ukraine was made at its conclusion. Nor did Nazarbayev and Lukashenka mention the Ukrainian issue in their statements. It needs to be assumed that this was an expression of disapproval from Moscow's integration partners over the Russian-Ukrainian conflict.

The developments in Ukraine surprised Belarus and worried its government. In effect, Minsk did not support Russian moves, claiming on several occasions that it was important to maintain stability and the territorial integrity of Ukraine and provided assurances of its readiness to co-operate with its new leaders. Belarus is interested in keeping good relations with Kyiv for economic (Ukraine is Belarus's second largest trade partner after Russia and a key market for Belarusian petroleum products) and political reasons (since it enables it to weaken its dependence on Russia). The events in Ukraine have also affected a number of declarations and actions from the Belarusian regime proving that it wants to warm its relations with the West (for example, the launch of negotiations concerning agreements on visa facilitations and readmission was announced on 29 January this year), which could be an attempt to extend the very limited room Minsk has for political manoeuvre.

Kazakhstan also views the Russian moves towards Ukraine in negative terms and as a potential threat to its own sovereignty (ethnic Russians form 22% of Kazakhstan's population). An emergency meeting with the Minister of Defence during which Nazarbayev stated that the Kazakh people had the right to believe that the army was able to perform military tasks was a vivid expression of Astana's deep concern. Furthermore, Nazarbayev issued an order to continue action aimed at strengthening its southern and western borders. Russian moves in Ukraine are also viewed in Kazakhstan through the prism of claims made by the deputy speaker of the Russian parliament, Vladimir Zhirinovsky, who is known for controversial statements. His suggestion that Central Asia should be included in the Russian Federation was broadly publicised in the Kazakh media and provoked a negative reaction from Kazakhstan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Given this context, the action taken by Nazarbayev was a manifestation of his attempt at internal consolidation in view of threats that could potentially ensue from the Russian-Ukrainian conflict.

Kazakhstan – a counter-offensive through mediation

Concerns about the consequences of the Russian policy have mobilised Kazakhstan to reinforce its position by cementing relations with its key partners. At a meeting with China's deputy minister of foreign affairs in Astana (6 March), Nazarbayev declared he was willing to continue enhancing economic and political relations with China (Kazakhstan is a major source of raw materials for China). At the same time, Nazarbayev made an attempt to dart forward by offering to join the conflict as a mediator between Russia and the West. On

10–11 March, he had telephone conversations with the Russian president, Vladimir Putin, the German chancellor, Angela Merkel, and the US president, Barack Obama. Kazakhstan could use its strong position in the post-Soviet area and the respect Nazarbayev is treated with in the CIS area as the basis for its role as mediator in the conflict over Ukraine.

Even though President Obama even appealed to Kazakhstan to become actively engaged in finding a peaceful solution to the conflict during the telephone call, it is still unclear whether Kazakhstan's mediation will take place. Germany has not taken a stance on this issue as yet, and Russia is not interested in raising Kazakhstan's prestige by accepting it as a mediator. Nazarbayev's declaration on 10 March that "Kazakhstan understands the position of Russia defending the rights of national minorities in Ukraine and its interests in the area of security" needs to be seen in the context of the country's attempts to be granted the role of mediator.

Conclusions

The continuing conflict in Ukraine has raised concerns among Russia's key partners in the CIS area and has affected the implementation of the integration projects fostered by Russia. Even though some progress has been made in the Eurasian integration process, still the stances adopted by Kazakhstan and Belarus indicate that they view their participation in these projects more and more as an offer they cannot refuse rather than as an effect of the benefits of economic and political co-operation with Russia. The situation in Ukraine has beyond any doubt compounded their fears concerning integration. This means that these countries will be interested more than ever before in creating an institution with limited functionality in their attempt to weaken Russia's expansionist policy. Since Minsk and Astana have negatively evaluated Russia's policy towards Ukraine, they are unlikely to recognise Crimea as an independent state, if one is set up, or its incorporation into the Russian Federation. Furthermore, concern about Russian policy in the CIS area will be growing but will at the same time motivate especially Kazakhstan to take action to release the tension and build up its own position on the international political scene.

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