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Putin to Ukraine: You belong with Russia, not Europe

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Fred Weir 9 hours ago
Politics Foreign Policy Russia Ukraine Vladimir Putin

Russian President Vladimir Putin visited Ukraine over the weekend to attend a joint commemoration marking the 1,025th anniversary of Russia's conversion to Christianity, which took place in the original Russian state centered in Kiev.



Mr. Putin used the occasion to press a far more secular and, for the Kremlin, urgent agenda. Ukraine is facing an historic choice that may determine its development for decades to come. Much of Russia's own strategic future plans also revolve around what it decides.

The Kremlin wants Ukraine to integrate economically with Russia by joining a Moscow-led customs union and then go on to become part of Putin's grand "Eurasian Union" of former-Soviet states, which would have an eastward-looking focus.

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But Ukraine plans to sign a landmark association agreement with the European Union in November, which would grant it trade preferences with Europe and preclude membership in an alternative trading bloc such as Russia's customs union.

Putin arrived in Kiev Saturday, with Patriarch Kirill of the Russian Orthodox Church in tow, to attend lavish celebrations marking the day in 988 AD when Prince Vladimir of Kiev adopted Orthodox Christianity and then ordered a mass baptism of his subjects in the Dneiper River. Though the church has since fragmented, millions of Ukrainians still adhere to the Moscow-based church headed by Kirill.

But Putin's mind was clearly elsewhere.

"This day marks the unity of our peoples. We have several common questions we will be able to discuss during these days of celebrations. There will be another meeting tomorrow... where we will talk security," the Kremlin-funded English-language RT network quoted Putin as telling Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich.

Ukraine was on a pro-Western path following the 2004 Orange Revolution, but that movement was reversed after the Russian-speaking Mr. Yanukovich won a hard-fought 2010 election, in part on pledges to repair Ukraine's tattered relations with Russia.

In the months that followed Yanukovich's election, he largely succeeded in reversing the Orange Revolution and, in particular, derailed Ukraine's bid to join the Western military alliance NATO. He also sealed good ties with Moscow by extending Russia's lease on Sevastopol, headquarters of the Russian navy's Black Sea fleet, by another 25 years.

However, Yanukovich has been unable – or unwilling – to deliver Ukrainian agreement to join the customs union, whose main members are Russia, Belarus, and Kazakhstan, a

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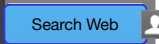
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At a meeting with Ukrainian religious and political leaders Saturday, Putin made his best pitch for choosing the Russian path.

"Competition on global markets is very fierce today. I am sure that most of you realize that only by joining forces can we be competitive and stand a chance of winning in this tough environment. We have every reason too, to be confident that we should and can achieve this," Putin said, according to a [Kremlin transcript](#) of his remarks.

Putin argued that Ukraine was built up and industrialized within the USSR, and it still shares a considerable amount of common infrastructure with Russia. He claimed that living standards in Soviet Ukraine were even better than in some European countries, such as Italy.

"As you know, there are various integration processes underway now in the post-Soviet area.... There are facts that speak for themselves. Our bilateral trade with Ukraine fell by slightly over 18 percent in the first quarter of this year. Our trade with the customs union countries increased by 34 percent in 2011, by 11 percent, I think, in 2012, and was up by 2 or 3 percent in the first quarter of this year, despite the downturn in the global economy. We have steady growth," he said.

Putin added that Russia will respect Ukraine's choice, whatever it may be.

"Russia is really desperate, because Ukraine is the major trophy in Putin's Eurasian Union project. That's what leads Putin to pull out all the stops in the race to win this," says Sergei Strokan, a foreign affairs columnist with the Moscow daily Kommersant.

"Ukraine is trying to delay this choice as much as possible, because it wants to keep its European window open. But the Europeans have been quite tough, basically telling Ukraine that it can't sit on two chairs. Ukrainian public opinion is divided over this, but it seems that the dominant mood – at least of the younger part of the population – is for a European strategy. Trying to sit on two chairs is probably the best Yanukovich can do for Putin. But the European option is looming, and Ukraine will probably try to use it – regardless of what Putin wants," Mr. Strokan says.

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