

Putin Signs Nuclear Energy Deal With Argentina

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President Vladimir Putin signed agreements on nuclear energy generation with Argentina on Saturday as part of a Latin American tour aimed at building Russia's influence in the region.

Argentina has been building nuclear-powered electricity plants to revive its nuclear program and reduce its dependence on fossil fuels amid an energy crunch. Putin and President Cristina Fernandez said the Russian atomic energy corporation, Rosatom, would be involved with the construction of units in Argentina's Atucha III nuclear power plant.

"These are very important agreements," said Fernandez, who had been out of the public eye for a week due to a throat infection.

"Argentina is a leader in Latin America in terms of nuclear energy generation," Fernandez said at a joint news conference at the presidential palace. "They reaffirm our bonds of friendship and strategic links."

Argentina has one of the world's largest deposits of shale oil and gas, but only a few companies have made commitments to develop the fields as many fear the government's interventionist energy policies.

Although a deal on the shale deposits was not announced Saturday, Fernandez said members of the Russian delegation traveling with Putin will visit Argentina's Vaca Muerta (Dead Cow) deposit in Neuquen province.

"We're talking about Russia — one of the world's top producers of gas and oil in the world. But we Argentines also have our own and it seems like others have noticed," Fernandez said.

After a dinner, the Russian leader was heading to Brazil for a summit of leaders from the BRICS nations: Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa.

"Argentina is one of Russia's top strategic partners in Latin America. We cooperate in vast sectors and I'm in constant contact with the president," Putin said. "We also have similar positions in the international arena."

About 150 members of the local Ukrainian community waved flags and held large banners outside the Pink House presidential palace to protest Russia's annexation of Crimea and alleged support for separatists elsewhere in Ukraine.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel and French President Francois Hollande urged Russia this week to use its influence on rebels in eastern Ukraine so a meeting on a possible cease-fire can take place as soon as possible.

Merkel is due to watch her country's team play Argentina in the World Cup final in Rio de Janeiro on Sunday. Putin, whose country is hosting the 2018 tournament, also is attending the game, and Brazil's Foreign Ministry announced Saturday that Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko also would be there.

So far, the countries on Putin's itinerary have been sympathetic or uncritical of Russia's position on the conflict. Fernandez has accused the United States and Britain of a double standard for criticizing a pro-Russian secession vote held in Crimea while backing a status referendum in the Falkland Islands claimed by Argentina.

A few dozen activists also turned out to protest anti-gay laws and prejudice in Russia, which does not recognize gay marriages or civil unions. Putin approved a law last year banning what it calls gay "propaganda" from reaching minors.

"It's not only the government's problem but the Russian society, which discriminates against us. I have friends who have committed suicide because of this," said Marina Mironova, a teacher who said she lost her job in Russia because of her sexual orientation and who is now seeking asylum in Argentina with her partner.

"We want to stay here and marry legally. There's freedom, nice people and the president is tolerant."

Argentina is the first country in Latin America to legalize gay marriage. Two Russian homosexuals married in Argentina earlier this year and are also seeking asylum.

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