

'Count on Russia,' Putin Tells Tajikistan After Deadly Gun Battles

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President Vladimir Putin talks to Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov during a session of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) in Dushanbe, Tajikistan, Sept. 15, 2015.

DUSHANBE — President Vladimir Putin on Tuesday said Russia would help Tajikistan ensure stability after gun battles killed more than 20 people this month, stoking fears of Islamist-related unrest in the ex-Soviet state.

Putin, on a visit to the Tajik capital Dushanbe, was speaking after gunmen loyal to the country's ex-deputy defense minister clashed with government forces in circumstances that have not been fully explained.

Putin said Moscow was worried about a possible spillover of violence from Afghanistan into Tajikistan and other Central Asian states.

"Here in Tajikistan you are confronted with problems, with encroachments and attempts to rock the situation, and I would like to say that you can always count on our assistance and

support," Putin told a summit of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), a security body of six ex-Soviet states.

Russia's support has long been vital for Tajik President Imomali Rakhmon, the former head of a Soviet state farm who has ruled since 1992 with little tolerance of dissent. Moscow backed his secular government in a 1992-97 civil war against Islamic militants in which tens of thousands were killed.

The CSTO, which Rakhmon is chairing this year, is seen by analysts as a regional counterbalance to NATO. It has joint rapid reaction forces set up to combat terrorism, drug trafficking and religious extremism.

Russia dominates the organization, which also includes Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. The Kremlin keeps a 6,000-strong base in Tajikistan and a military airbase in next-door Kyrgyzstan.

Some Russian politicians refer to Central Asia as "Russia's soft underbelly" and Moscow has watched the pullout of NATO troops from Afghanistan with unease. Putin, addressing other CSTO heads of state, said the situation there was deteriorating because of the withdrawal.

"The real threat of terrorist and extremist groups infiltrating the countries neighboring Afghanistan is rising," he said, in a clear reference to the Central Asian nations of Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan.

Putin said he was also concerned about Russian citizens who had left to fight with Islamic State militants returning home.

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