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Kazakh Autocrat Shows Putin How to Keep Power

The way he is ostensibly relinquishing power could be an example for a younger counterpart Vladimir Putin.

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Vladimir Putin and Nursultan Nazarbayev **Kremlin.ru**

Nursultan Nazarbayev, the president of Kazakhstan since 1990, announced that he is stepping down at age 78. The way he is ostensibly relinquishing power could be an example for a younger counterpart and, in some ways, faithful student: President Vladimir Putin of Russia.

Post-Soviet Central Asian dictators don't resign. The first presidents of Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, who, like Nazarbayev, ascended to their posts while the Soviet Union still existed, died in office, leaving behind regimes reminiscent of the absolute monarchies of the ancient Orient.

Tajikistan still has the same leader as in 1992. In Kyrgyzstan, the first two presidents were overthrown, and the first peaceful power transition took place in 2017 (though the current president, who won a relatively competitive election, was an ally of his authoritarian predecessor).

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But Nazarbayev always towered over the other Central Asian leaders. Kazakhstan is the biggest and most resource-rich of these countries, and the regime has been softer than all the others save chaotic, dirt-poor Kyrgyzstan.

By using his country's oil wealth, Nazarbayev achieved an international legitimacy the neighboring countries' dictators could only dream of. Putin's pet project, the Eurasian Economic Union, implements an old Nazarbayev idea, and it has helped the Kazakh leader maintain a friendly relationship with Russia without completely falling under Putin's sway. Russia and China are just about equally important as Kazakhstan's trading partners.

Under Putin, Russia's regime has become progressively more like Kazakhstan's. Both have been run by the same leader, continuously "re-elected" against token opponents. Both also have a single, pro-presidential political party, which harasses dissenters rather than brutally suppressing dissent, and attempts to emulate the Chinese model of authoritarian development.

In late 2011 and early 2012, middle class protests in Russia's biggest cities gave Putin the idea that the West was trying to overthrow him, and he built up Russia's police state, adopting increasingly repressive laws.

Nazarbayev got tough almost simultaneously, in December 2011, when miners rebelled in the remote town of Zhanaozen, prompting the Kazakh leader to step up policing and the suppression of the opposition.

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Both countries suffered from a resource curse that fed corrupt government systems that are unable to ensure prosperity despite an oil price windfall and economies that remain dependent on exports of raw materials.

Meanwhile, both dictators funded massive white elephant projects; Nazarbayev built a new capital city, Astana, and Putin chased major sports events such as the Olympics and the soccer World Cup.

Nazarbayev, however, has avoided errors like Putin's aggression against Ukraine. He's made no enemies among nations that are important for Kazakshtan's trading relationships. He also has gained respect as an elder statesman rather than a crackpot dictator despite his Soviet manner of humiliating his government ministers for real and imagined failings and his strange marketing ideas, such as the failed effort to rename the country to lose the "-stan" suffix.

Freedom House, the U.S.-based democracy support organization, even gives Kazakhstan a slightly higher freedom score than Russia.

The Kazakh leader is of the same political generation as Putin's predecessor, Boris Yeltsin, who also resigned ahead of time, as ill health caught up with him and oligarchs played tug of war with state power.

Nazarbayev delivered an emotional resignation speech on Tuesday — but unlike the former Russian leader, he didn't apologize for any of his actions. And he'd made expensive preparations to ensure a continued role in running the country.

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In 2010, Kazakhstan's constitution was changed to make Nazarbayev the national leader for life, or yelbasy, giving him immunity from prosecution and a supervisory role over policy making.

In 2017, another constitutional reform weakened the president's powers and made the security council the country's most important body, charging it with developing policies and coordinating work on their implementation.

In June 2018, Nazarbayev was granted lifelong chairmanship of the council.

Nazarbayev's chosen successor, Kasym-Zhomart Tokayev, an experienced diplomat and fluent Chinese and English speaker, will likely win the early presidential election after Nazarbayev's resignation. But, as head of the security council and the ruling party, Nazarbayev will remain in charge of Kazakhstan's direction with less pressure to micromanage.

A similar scenario has long been discussed for Putin, too. All it would take is some constitutional changes to empower Russia's security council and give Putin lifelong tenure as its head.

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But Putin has always been hesitant to hold personal power as nakedly as Nazarbayev. Under Putin's rule, the Russian constitution has only changed, or was interpreted, relatively subtly in his favor, when he was allowed to run for a third term after a four-year hiatus and when the presidential term was extended from four to six years.

But Putin, 66, isn't getting any younger, and he would be required to take a six-year hiatus after he steps down in 2024 before he can run again. That doesn't look like a viable option. Putin needs to ensure his family's security as his current term ends, and he doesn't appear ready to let go of the reins.

If he's unable — as it currently appears — to force Belarus to rejoin Russia, creating a new nation where he would have a shot at being leader, the Nazarbayev option is one of very few

left to him. He'll watch the Kazakh transition with much interest. If it works, expect the Kremlin to develop a Russian version.

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