Will Kyrgyzstan Support Russia in the Voting for the Right to Host Expo 2020

The World’s Fair, or Expo as it is also known, is not just one of the most prestigious international events, it also yields significant economic benefits from the influx of tourists and increased business interest in the region. Yekaterinburg is currently fighting for the right to host Expo 2020 as a matter of principle. It is a matter of principle because in the entire history of the world’s fair none has ever been held in Russia. But can Russia count on the support of its long-standing strategic partners during the vote for the right to host Expo 2020, and will Kyrgyzstan, in particular, vote for Yekaterinburg?

That question will be answered soon. The list of applicants includes five cities, among which Russia’s Yekaterinburg and Turkey’s Izmir are deserving of special mention. Hosting an Expo would be an honor for any city in the world. Indeed, it can be considered an indicator of a city’s credit worthiness, investment appeal and ability to organize an event of that magnitude. However, the opportunity to host Expo 2020 is a matter of principle for both Moscow and Ankara. Russia’s leaders have traditionally attempted to hold major international events outside the capital, in the regions, even though prior to holding them they are sometimes unable to boast of having a mature infrastructure, or they do not have enough of it. We do not need to look far in order to find an example of that: the 2014 Olympics in Sochi or the G20 summit to be held in St. Petersburg this coming September. It is no wonder that when President Vladimir Putin met with the International Exhibitions Bureau President Vicente Loscertales in March he said that if Yekaterinburg is chosen Russia will meet all of the Bureau’s requirements.

Turkey’s interest has less to do with the economic benefits it would derive from the fair (although they should not be ruled out) than with its unmet ambitions. On the one hand, Turkey is eager to get revenge for losing out on Expo 2010, which Shanghai won with a small margin of the vote. On the other hand, Turkey wants to show the European Union that it deserves a spot in the Eurozone.

In this principled confrontation, the position of each side in the voting is important, and to some extent it is behind Turkey’s recent showing of greater interest in Kyrgyzstan. Ankara believes that Kyrgyz President Almazbek Atambayev may be an important factor in Izmir’s candidacy. He has long shown an interest in developing relations with Turkey, where he has personal business interests. Also, that is where his son received his education. In addition, Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan visited Bishkek in April to secure a bilateral partnership. Together with his Kyrgyz colleagues, he signed several economic, air travel and tourism agreements. Erdoğan said that at present “the volume of trade between Kyrgyzstan and Turkey has reached $320 million, but it could grow to $1 billion in the near term.”

In Bishkek, Erdoğan certainly discussed informally what country Kyrgyzstan will support in the voting for Expo 2020, although Kyrgyzstan has not mentioned that in discussions with Russian officials.

As far as Russia’s relations with Kyrgyzstan are concerned, Moscow treats Bishkek as a long-term strategic partner. Trade between Russia and Kyrgyzstan currently amounts to $2 billion. In consideration of this bilateral cooperation, Moscow agreed to write off the Kyrgyzstan’s debt and signed an intergovernmental agreement to construct two hydroelectric power plants in that country. Completion of the Kambarata-1 hydropower plant will cost Russia at least $2 billion, and as a project that will pay for itself within 5 to 6 years it will bring Kyrgyzstan billions of dollars in profits that will strengthen the entire country’s economy.
Experts in both countries are currently working to draw up a road map that would permit Bishkek’s accession to the Customs Union, which is in its interest. In April, Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev held talks in Russia with his Kyrgyz counterpart, Jantoro Satybaldiev, that were a logical continuation of Putin’s visit to Bishkek in September 2012. Medvedev supported Kyrgyzstan’s decision to join the Customs Union and, of course, the common economic space as well.

A solid delegation from Kyrgyzstan visited Yekaterinburg in late January for a series of high-level meetings. Kyrgyz Parliament Vice Speaker Asiya Sasykbaeva led the delegation. She promised the Russian side against a backdrop of speeches about friendly relations and partnership between the two countries that she would initiate a discussion in Kyrgyzstan about supporting Yekaterinburg in the voting for the right to host World Expo 2020. The final vote is scheduled to take place in Paris in late November 2013 at the 154th session of the General Assembly of the International Exhibitions Bureau. Ms. Sasykbaeva assured us that the issue would be discussed in parliament upon her return to Bishkek, following which the matter would be referred to Kyrgyzstan’s president. As far as we know, however, that did not happen.

Oddly enough, there was no reaction in Bishkek to a speech by Mikael Fyodorov, the Expo ambassador from Russia, who appealed to the country’s parliament at a meeting of the Committee on Education, Science and sports. His appeal was not heard by Kyrgyzstan’s leaders, who had recently given assurances that they were prepared to vote for Yekaterinburg. Instead, Bishkek has been looking increasingly sympathetic towards Turkey.

Russia is somewhat concerned that its Kyrgyz partners may again fail to keep their word, as happened earlier with their repeated assurances that they were prepared to close the US Manas base outside Bishkek and has happened on a number of other issues. It appears that Kyrgyzstan may ignore the interests of its faithful partner in pursuing political and economic dividends. If that happens, however, once again its actions will cause a crisis of confidence in relations between our countries to the detriment of the bilateral strategic partnership and long-term Russian investments in the Kyrgyz economy.

According to official data, tens, if not hundreds, of thousands of Kyrgyz are currently working at jobs in the Urals region. If Russia’s application for Expo 2020 wins, it will doubtless give those workers jobs for the seven years it will take to complete infrastructure projects in preparation for this major international event. That will enable people from Kyrgyzstan working in the region to help their families back home financially.

Kyrgyzstan has officially given Russia’s Foreign Ministry repeated assurances that it will support Yekaterinburg’s candidacy at the session in Paris. Hopefully, it still intends to do so and we can expect a gesture of goodwill from our traditional strategic partner. Kyrgyzstan’s friends, and we count ourselves among them, hope that common sense will prevail and Russia will not be disappointed by the Kyrgyz government.

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