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## **KAZAKHSTAN: ACTIVISTS WALK AS NAZARBAYEV TALKS IN BRUSSELS**

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President Nursultan Nazarbayev has been courting European Union officials in Brussels in the hope of bolstering Kazakhstan's trade and economic ties with Europe as a way of mitigating the funk back home.

In a conveniently timed development, Nazarbayev also talked human rights in Europe just as two activists jailed in Kazakhstan earlier this year were allowed to walk free by a court in Almaty. Many observers interpreted their release under suspended sentences on March 30 as being designed to send a positive message to Brussels.

Meeting Jean-Claude Juncker, president of the European Commission, and Donald Tusk, president of the European Council, Nazarbayev stressed the importance to Kazakhstan of the Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement with the EU, which was signed in 2014 and will take full effect in May following ratification by Kazakhstan's Senate earlier this month. (The agreement is one notch below the Association Agreement signed between the EU and hopeful candidates such as Ukraine and Georgia.)

Astana is counting on the deal to boost trade with and investment from the European Union, its largest overall trading partner. Wooing investors has become a major priority for Kazakhstan as it battles its worst economic crisis in years — brought on largely as a result of low oil prices — and it is seeking to lure them with a package of investment perks and visa-free travel.

Nazarbayev urged the EU to allow visa-free travel for citizens of Kazakhstan, which operates a visa-free regime for most — but not all — EU states.

The 2014 deal with the EU was also designed to shore up Astana's relations with Europe and demonstrate that Kazakhstan is a willing partner even as the West's relations with Astana's ally

Moscow turned icy over Ukraine.

Ukraine was on the agenda during Nazarbayevs Brussels visit, as were European sanctions against Russia. The sanctions are, Nazarbayev said, also having a great impact on the economy of Kazakhstan, for which neighboring Russia is a major trading partner. We agreed to work for this to be resolved with mutual advantage for Europe and for Russia, he said in remarks quoted by Russias TASS news agency.

Nazarbayev offered a bullish defense of Kazakhstans recent parliamentary election, which he said had been deemed by international observers to have been conducted on the basis of the principles of democracy, freedom and competition. He evidently did not have in mind observers from the Organization for Security and Cooperation which found the election to be lacking in genuine political choice.

Human rights were on the agenda during the visit, Nazarbayevs office said. It appeared no coincidence that the presidents visit to Brussels took place on the same day as the release of two Kazakhstani activists sentenced to jail in January following a trial over their social media postings.

Yermek Narymbayev and Serikzhan Mambetalin, whose case was raised in a European Parliament resolution in December, were released from house arrest after an appeal upheld their conviction but suspended their prison sentences. A ban on them conducting political activity for five years was upheld.

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Kaynak/Source: