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## WITH LOSS OF RUSSIAN INVESTMENT, KYRGYZSTAN SEEKS EU ACCORD

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Kyrgyzstan wants to sign a partnership agreement with the European Union, President Almazbek Atambayev told German Chancellor Angela Merkel on Thursday, a sign that Russia's ally seeks closer ties with the West.

The move followed a decision by Moscow late last year to cancel planned investments of billions of dollars in Kyrgyz hydroelectric power projects as Russia's economy took a hit from the plunge in oil prices.

Speaking alongside Merkel, who visited Bishkek on Thursday, Atambayev said Kyrgyzstan wanted a deal similar to one neighboring Kazakhstan signed with the EU this year to boost mutual trade and investment.

"I have a lot of hope," he said.

In another sign Kyrgyzstan may be trying to mend its ties with the West, especially the United States, it began a review this week of a criminal case against human rights activist Azimzhan Askarov, who had been given a life sentence on charges including incitement to ethnic hatred and calls to mass disorder.

The U.S. State Department last year gave its annual Human Rights Defenders Award to Askarov, sparking a row with Bishkek that led to the termination of a long-standing cooperation agreement between the two.

Draft NGO law rejected

The parliament of the former Soviet republic of 6 million also voted in May against a Russian-style draft law aimed at tightening state control over nongovernmental organizations financed from abroad.

Kyrgyzstan, which hosts a Russian military airbase, had moved closer into Russia's orbit under Atambayev, who became president in 2011.

But last December, Atambayev said Moscow would be unable to finance previously agreed upon plans for two Kyrgyz hydroelectric power projects with a combined value of more than \$3 billion.

The volume of transfers from Kyrgyz migrant laborers in Russia fell by a third last year in dollar terms as the rouble weakened.

Merkel, speaking at the same briefing with Atambayev, warned that negotiating a comprehensive agreement with Brussels would be a complex task.

"But, in any case, I will support you in getting closer to the European Union," she said.

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Kaynak/Source: