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Putin Faces Protests as He Woos Armenia

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Protesters scuffling with police during an anti-Russia rally in Yerevan. **Karo Sahakyan**

YEREVAN, Armenia — About 500 people marched through the capital of Armenia on Monday to denounce visiting President Vladimir Putin and to protest against plans to join a Moscow-led customs union.

Some of the crowd in central Yerevan held banners declaring "Putin, go home" or "No to the U.S.S.R.," a reference to the Russian leader's efforts to bind former Soviet republics together more closely in economic and security alliances.

Putin flew to the South Caucasus country for talks on its decision in September to join the Customs Union with Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan, but began his visit in another city, Gyumri.

The rally in Yerevan followed much larger protests in Ukraine, which suspended plans to sign a trade deal with the European Union last week and decided to rebuild economic ties with Russia instead.

Kremlin critics in the West accuse Putin of putting pressure on Ukraine, Armenia and other former Soviet republics to reject agreements that would increase their integration with the EU.

Putin has made clear that Moscow wants to increase its influence in the strategic region sandwiched between Russia, Turkey, Iran and the oil and gas deposits of the Caspian Sea basin.

"We are going to strengthen our position in the South Caucasus, drawing on the best of what we have inherited from ancestors and good relations with all countries in the region," Putin told a Russian-Armenian regional forum in Gyumri.

"Participation in the Customs Union ... already is bringing Russia, Kazakhstan and Belarus tangible dividends," he said.

Police blocked a central street as the demonstrators headed closer to the headquarters of President Serzh Sarksyan's administration, and protesters handed over a letter urging the government to renounce its decision to join the Customs Union.

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