

# Minsk Meeting Proves EEU Another Putin Flop

By [Casey Michel](#)

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All eyes will be on Minsk on Tuesday for a meeting between President Vladimir Putin and Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko. The fact that the event in Minsk was originally meant to be a meeting of the members of the Russian-led Customs Union has barely been noticed, a reflection of the union's increasing irrelevance — which will soon be transferred to the grouping's successor, the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU).

Just over six months after former Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovych fled Kiev in disgrace, it can be tough to remember where this all began. Between the slow-churn pressures on the Crimean Tatars and the continued campaign of destruction led by the Russian-led separatists, it can be difficult to recall just what, those many months ago, sparked this outrage — why this catastrophe came and continues.

While there are a wealth of reasons to fall back on — from purported NATO encroachment to the Kremlin's need to boost its popularity — the role of President Vladimir Putin's EEU is an important one.

Pegged as a counter-balance to the European Union, Putin had hoped to craft the EEU as a new "geopolitical pole," balanced between Brussels and Beijing.

Russia, naturally, would helm the post-Soviet grouping, whose core would consist of Belarus, Kazakhstan and, most importantly, Ukraine. Former U.S. Ambassador Michael McFaul, in a recent op-ed, termed the EEU as Putin's "most important foreign policy project."

But where the president originally envisioned a gathering of post-Soviet lands into something approaching past hegemony — Putin imagined a Moscow-led bastion holding geopolitical sway — the EEU has emerged as a shell. Although Belarus and Kazakhstan came aboard, the union is empty weight without Ukraine.

Indeed, it was when Yanukovych first began signaling that he was moving away from the EU's Association Agreement and toward potential membership in the EEU that the conflagration on Maidan began. And here we are, some nine months later, still picking up the pieces.

To be sure, the Eurasian Union will soon come into final formation, sans Ukraine. Set for enactment on Jan. 1, 2015, the EEU will bring a new "epoch," as Putin has said, to the fore. But without Ukrainian participation, the EEU can't stand as anything approaching the pole Putin wished.

And even the remaining members seem to be pulling away from Russia. Kazakhstan's continued post-Crimea concerns on sovereignty gutted political and mutual defense provisions. Likewise, Astana's surprise opposition to the accession of Armenia in late May sucked the wind out of the summit's sails.

It's been nearly three months since the EEU's founding documents were signed, and the momentum has, if anything, only faltered that much more. Kazakhstan's refusal of Armenian accession — Astana demanded that the disputed territory of Nagorno-Karabakh stay outside the union — remains an issue.

Kyrgyzstan has managed to wean loan after loan from Moscow, while simultaneously pushing its timetable for meeting all membership requirements back from this year to 2020. Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan — the three post-Soviet states with the most substantive economies remaining outside the Baltics — have shown little interest in signing on. And any hopes Putin may have had of recruiting Ukraine died with Kiev's decision to finally sign the EU's Association Agreement in June.

But that's not all. As Russia continues to disassociate itself from the West, Moscow is promptly handing that much more leverage to the few states that remain in its potential camp. It's a relatively simple formulation: As Moscow hacks its options for external policy, those remaining states — in the Caucasus and Central Asia — become that much more vital to Russia's resource and security interests.

We've already seen the fruits of this newfound leverage, especially through the prism of the EEU. Both Kazakhstan and Belarus have publicly announced that they would not be joining Russia in its self-sanction of foodstuffs from many Western countries. Belarussian President Alexander Lukashenko cited specific examples, noting his country's need for Polish apples and German specialties.

Kazakhstan, however, was more blunt. In the Aug. 7 readout from a phone call between Putin and Kazakhstan President Nursultan Nazarbayev, Russia said the two discussed increased cooperation on the sanctions — while Kazakhstan's readout flatly declared that the sanctions were Moscow's unilateral move.

Meanwhile, Russia will be turning to former Soviet republics to replace the items that it has cut its citizens off from. The necessity of acquiring produce from Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Armenia will allow those three that much more pull when they request exemptions in the EEU accession process.

Plus, as it pertains to those sanctions, those items — that Australian Angus beef, French chocolate or German sausage — could very well be exported to Kazakhstan and Belarus, and simply re-exported across the border to Russian citizens.

One report noted a "euphoric" atmosphere out of Minsk. Not only is the sanction regime thus muted, but Russia's bargaining power within the Eurasian Union also sags — all while its citizens' quality of life drops.

You can see Russia's declining bargaining power in other arenas — say, with the recent Chinese deal or the new Iran oil-for-goods arrangement.

But it is within the Eurasian Union formulation that this decline is most stark. Azeris and Tajiks will be eating better than their Russian counterparts. Kyrgyzstan and Armenia will gain that much more leverage for demanding exemptions.

Kazakhstan will keep diluting the Eurasian Union's non-economic provisions where it can, and Belarus will continue ignoring the sanctions. And the Eurasian Union — the most important foreign policy project that Putin has spearheaded — will continue staggering forward, without Ukraine and without any real chance of gaining any geopolitical weight for the foreseeable future.

Casey Michel is a Bishkek-based journalist and a graduate student at Columbia University's Harriman Institute.

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