

Putin Holds the Key to Peace in Eastern Ukraine

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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President Vladimir Putin leaves the Life-giving Trinity church in Moscow, Sept. 10, 2014.

President Vladimir Putin took a break from his official duties to slip into a Russian Orthodox Church this week and light a candle for fighters killed in eastern Ukraine.

"I left a candle for those who died defending people in Novorossiya," he told reporters after emerging from the Church of the Holy Trinity on a Moscow hilltop.

This act, and his use of the historical title meaning "New Russia" for eastern Ukraine, said more than anything else in recent days about his thinking on the five-month-old conflict between Ukrainian forces and pro-Russian separatists.

His remarks signalled nothing has changed in his fiercely patriotic view of the crisis, despite a cease-fire deal he backed on Sept. 5, and appeared intended to show the Russian public he is not about to abandon the rebels' cause.

Even if Putin may be posturing, his comments do not augur well for prospects of building on the deal reached in the Belarussian capital Minsk and securing a lasting settlement between Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko and the rebels.

"As long as it's useful for both Putin and Poroshenko, the Minsk agreement will be carried out even if there are deaths," said Vadim Karasayev, director of the Institute of Global Politics in the Ukrainian capital, Kiev.

Although both leaders have good reason for a pause in hostilities now, it is not clear how long the truce will suit their needs — particularly Putin's.

Trust between the two nations is low and the leaders have radically opposing long-term goals, meaning few people are betting on the marriage of convenience between Poroshenko and Putin lasting long.

"They can only agree on a cease-fire, the agreement can be partially implemented and they can move down the path of slowly freezing the conflict," said Volodymyr Fesenko of the Penta think tank in Kiev.

Odd couple

The cease-fire, which is frayed but has broadly held, appeared at first to have come out of the blue.

An announcement by Putin on Sept. 3 that he had drawn up seven steps to peace, on which he thought a cease-fire deal could be reached in two days, came as a surprise, against a background of heavy fighting and rebel advances in southeastern Ukraine.

In fact, the agreement followed weeks of telephone diplomacy in which European leaders appear to have had a role in mediating indirectly between the Ukrainian and Russian leaders, and the two presidents became the driving force behind it.

Poroshenko wanted a deal as he was reeling from setbacks on the battlefield after what he said was an injection of Russian troops and weapons to support the separatists in August.

Putin had concerns of his own, not least growing economic problems accelerated by Western sanctions and the danger that his support would fall if his public saw Russian soldiers coming home in coffins in large numbers.

Even so, the alpha-male former KGB agent and softly spoken billionaire chocolate manufacturer make an odd couple, with little to unite them beyond the tactical need of a cease-fire.

They broke the ice with a 15-minute meeting hosted by French President Francois Hollande during a World War II anniversary event in northern France on June 6, less than two weeks after Poroshenko was elected president.

The meeting led to talk of a cease-fire and Putin said Poroshenko had the "right approach" to the conflict. It proved a false start, though, as the cease-fire turned out to be only a truce by Ukrainian forces that lasted just 10 days.

Quiet diplomacy continued without much sign of success as Kiev's forces pushed the rebels back throughout June and July, leaving the separatist fighters controlling little more than the cities of Donetsk and Luhansk and on the brink of defeat.

The tide turned again in late August, after NATO and Kiev said columns of Russian troops had poured across the border to back the rebels. By the end of the month, the rebels had taken the southeastern city of Novoazovsk and were advancing on the port city of Mariupol, a gateway to southern Ukraine.

By then, however, Kremlin statements on Putin's telephone calls with foreign leaders showed the focus of discussions with foreign leaders had shifted from the "humanitarian situation" to "the peaceful regulation of the political crisis in Ukraine," indicating a peace plan was taking shape by mid-August.

Putin spoke to German Chancellor Angela Merkel by phone four times in August, European Commission President Jose Manuel Barroso three times and Hollande twice. Four calls with Belarussian President Alexander Lukashenko in August before the Minsk meetings suggest the talks were in the works for weeks.

Attention shifted increasingly in the calls to the so-called Contact Group bringing together envoys from Kiev, Moscow and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe watchdog as well as the rebels — the group that eventually signed the cease-fire.

A Man to Do Business With

Putin sent a clear signal that a deal could be worked out with Poroshenko on Aug. 31, praising him in an interview as a man with whom he could "do business."

By then, Poroshenko appears to have concluded that he could not defeat the rebels quickly — if at all — and needed a halt to the conflict to allow him time to tackle a growing economic crisis and prepare for a parliamentary election next month.

Putin also had reasons to seek a deal, having achieved the immediate goal of preventing the separatists being crushed, a defeat that would have embarrassed the Kremlin and could have undermined Putin's strongman image in Russia.

The rebel push in late August provided what some analysts said was a "battlefield draw" and a face-saving way out for Putin — a vital ingredient for any deal.

Putin also had reason to worry about Russia's economic slide since the European Union and the U.S. imposed sanctions on Moscow and a possible dent to his stellar popularity ratings if the Russian death toll in Ukraine rose.

Public support for Putin is high because of the seizure in March of Crimea, a Russian territory until Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev gave it to Ukraine 70 years ago. But this could change if the conflict drags on and many Russians are killed.

The independent Levada polling group said in August that public support in Russia for direct military intervention in Ukraine had fallen by nearly half from March, noting that Russians would hardly want to "see their young men's coffins" coming home after the first reports

of Russians being killed in action in Ukraine.

Putin ultimately came to see Poroshenko as better to work with than what he calls the "party of war" in Ukraine, identified by Moscow as led by Prime Minister Arseny Yatseniuk and including his ally, former Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko.

"Putin is now betting on Poroshenko ... as Russia's best [available] partner for securing an acceptable settlement," said long-term Russia analyst Christopher Granville of London-based Trusted Sources research and consulting group.

Western Scepticism

Although Russia says it is not a party to the conflict, Putin and Poroshenko underlined Moscow's central role in peace efforts and their commitment to the truce by speaking by phone three times in the first four days after the Minsk agreement.

Putin's long-term commitment and goals are less clear, and this is why the EU and the U.S. have maintained the threat of sanctions since the cease-fire was agreed.

Western leaders are particularly sceptical of the timing of the announcement of Putin's peace overtures — on the eve of a NATO summit which had Ukraine on the agenda and before an EU decision on whether to tighten sanctions.

Poroshenko's most important goals include restoring Ukraine's economic well-being, keeping the country whole, and restoring lasting peace and independence. He has offered the mostly Russian-speaking rebel regions much more autonomy than before but ruled out letting them break away completely.

Putin's key condition for any outcome in Ukraine is that it does not join NATO, which Russia would regard as a security threat. Kiev has said this is not its goal although it has signed an agreement strengthening ties with the EU.

Putin also wants to maintain influence in Ukraine, a country of about 45 million before Russia annexed Crimea in March, a month after Kiev overthrew a president sympathetic to Russia following months of protests over his pro-Moscow stance.

His best way of doing so could be through "freezing" the conflict in eastern Ukraine without a lasting solution.

Moscow has done this in other territorial conflicts in former Soviet republics such in Moldova's Transdnestr region and the rebellious Georgian regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

"The cease-fire deal was done on Putin's terms. Poroshenko was under the gun and he understood the economic state the country is in and was worried that it all could simply crumble under his feet," a Western diplomat in Moscow said.

"The cease-fire preserves an excellent position for the separatists if and when negotiations on a lasting settlement happen."

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