

Brexit to Breentrance: Why Britain Should Switch Membership from the EU for the EEU

by James Buckham (June 2016)



2018: The world's press gather in London to watch Prime Minister Boris Johnson ratify the United Kingdom's membership of the Eurasian Economic Union. Addressing Tigran Sargsyan, the Chairman of the Eurasian Commission, in Russian, Mr Johnson hailed this "promising, forward-looking new era" in British economic and diplomatic relations as the sixth and newest member of a trade bloc stretching from Vladivostok to Belfast.

If this sounds like a madman's dream, it is not a particularly insane one. With little less than a month before voters go to the polls to decide whether their decades-long EU affair is worth the effort anymore, Britain could soon be looking for a new circle of friends. Meanwhile, the EEU *ménage à cinq* – comprising Russia, Kazakhstan, Belarus, Armenia and Kyrgyzstan – could be forgiven for feeling a member short since two-thirds of Ukraine started leaning westwards back in 2014.

Switching membership of the EU for the EEU could have more to it than just serendipitous timing. Once you start to look past the seemingly innate absurdity of such an arrangement, the potential benefits seem so obvious you feel slightly silly about not seeing them earlier.

Firstly, the EEU rests on a very British notion: that of being in a trade bloc, not a political super-state. This was laid down in no uncertain terms by Kazakhstan's officials who have opposed erosion of national sovereignty and the concept of a Eurasian parliament from the outset^[1]. It is the antithesis of the "ever closer union" which sits so uncomfortably with the British public and from which Cameron was so keen to negotiate an opt-out.

Secondly there is an attractive balance between the economic strengths and weakness offered by each side. Greater access to British services, world leading education and hi-tech industry would be highly prized by EEU members. In particular, British know-how and investment through companies such as BP could prove a massive boon in unlocking Russian and Kazakh shale gas and deep water reserves[21]. In return the existing EEU states contain vast amounts of natural resources and agricultural potential which could help reinvigorate British industry and provide food security to an island which long ago lost the capacity to feed its relentlessly expanding population.

This latter point ties in with the wider theme of long term geo-political security. As the Middle East and North Africa continue to destabilize amid jihadism, Sunni/Shia schisms, climate change and piracy, long established trade routes through the Suez and round West Africa look increasingly precarious in the long term. A flow of shipping from the UK to Archangelsk and St Petersburg exporting high end manufactured goods and importing necessities would provide secure trade routes as well as having the potential to boost the port towns of Britain's North and East that have so often borne the brunt of economic decline.

With food and fuel supplies guaranteed, the stage would be set for a broader reorientation from the Med and the Middle East to the North Sea, Baltic and Eurasia. After all, is there any sane, intelligent person who would like to see us wade deeper into Libya, Syria, Yemen and Iraq? The interventions have been horrendously costly, both in economic and political terms; the alliances with Gulf and other Arab states, not to mention Erdogan's Islamist Turkey, morally shameful and counterproductive. An EEU alignment would be refreshingly stand-offish and, should military action become unavoidable, Britain would likely find itself actually defeating jihadists instead of funneling money and equipment to them.

Switching from a European/Middle Eastern political and economic orbit into a Eurasian one admittedly runs the risk of swapping one set of imperfect allies for another; however, it is worth reiterating the primarily economic rather than political character of the EEU. In any case, the political landscapes of Russia et al hardly seem worse than that of the Germany and Co. given the last two years of policies.

The debt bondage of Greece, the meddling in Ukraine, the financial pressure put

on Eastern European states to take refugees they clearly do not want and who clearly do not wish to go there; a Merkel dominated EU can no longer be considered the yardstick for democracy it pretends to be. Perhaps most importantly, a UK in the EEU would reap the benefits of trade bloc membership while avoiding the hated TTIP, quite possibly putting it out of its misery for good, surely a plus that even the most skeptical opponent of the Kremlin would accept.

Besides the doom and gloom issues of world conflict and the dry arguments for trade and political character, EEU membership would offer the tantalizing possibility for millions of Britons to travel to places they might never have dreamt of exploring. Entrepreneurs would find vast populations and resources of Siberia, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan waiting to be tapped for economic potential; back-packers and gap year explorers could forgo the well-worn paths of South East Asia and Australia to discover skiing in Sochi, the winter wonderland of Karelia and the steppes of Central Asia; and those looking to retire in the sun might find that their existing pension funds go a lot further by the Black Sea than in the Dordogne or Costa Del Sol.

Of course it will never happen. But that owes more to our own prejudices and lack of imagination than to any inherent illogic in such a move. The greatest challenge would not lie in the legal adaptations, but the psychological rift of freeing ourselves from our European past. With its debt, its economic decline, and exasperated centre vs periphery politics, Europe feels suffocated by its history. But turn your eyes towards Eurasia; there you'll see the great big meadow of the future, the wide open spaces ripe for the bold to go running through.

[1] <http://tass.ru/en/world/746905>

[2] <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-30217070>,
<http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2014-06-16/russia-s-8-2-billion-oil-trove-locked-without-u-s-tech-energy>

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