

## The CIS Factor in Russia-West Relations: Origins of Conflict

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*Abstract.* This article is devoted to the role of the CIS factor in the relations between Russia and the West (USA/NATO and the EU). The causes of the current crisis are rooted in the evolution of these relations in the previous two decades, which were marked by differences in two interconnected spheres. These are diametrically opposite views of the two sides on the post-bipolar system of European security and on the place of the CIS countries in this system. As the Caucasus crisis of 2008 and the conflict around Ukraine in 2014 showed, the post-Soviet space has become an apple of discord and an arena of rivalry between Russia and the West. The analysis of the causes of this phenomenon, primarily the mistakes of Russia and its CIS partner countries, as well as of the West after the collapse of the USSR, is the main objective of this article. Looking into the sources of the current crisis has intransient significance for the future of Europe. The Ukrainian conflict has demonstrated the danger of new dividing lines appearing in Europe. Russia's policy in the post-Soviet space has been and remains the main factor that will influence the development of Russia's relations with the West. Conversely, Western policy on the territory of the CIS will determine its relations with Russia.

*Keywords:* CIS, Russia, GUAM, European Union, European Neighborhood Policy, Eastern Partnership, Caucasian crisis, Ukrainian conflict, NATO expansion, the USA, models, scenarios, security strategy, defense, foreign policy.

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The Soviet Union ceased to exist in December 1991 in Belovezhskaya Pushcha. Its dissolution was followed by the creation of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). This decision was taken by the leaders of the Republic of Belarus, the Russian Federation and Ukraine.<sup>1</sup>

Both events took place simultaneously at the stroke of a pen, so to speak, without serious negotiations on the problems the new independent states had inherited from the Soviet past. This circumstance went a long way to determine Russia's relations with its closest neighbors and the differences with the West and ultimately the nostalgia of a large part of Russian society for the lost empire and the status of a great power equal to the United States.

### **CIS: Structure for Divorce or Integration?**

Unlike the majority of other empires, including tsarist Russia, the USSR was not defeated or mortally damaged in a major war. Its dissolution did not involve debilitating low-intensity colonial conflicts in spite of the quagmire of the war in Afghanistan (1979-1989) and unrest in the Soviet national republics (1989-1991) [3, pp. 21-22]. It was a free choice of the union republics in which the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR) played the decisive role.

Initially, the creation of the CIS met with approval on the part of the world community, which was concerned about the fate of the Soviet nuclear weapons deployed outside Russia. Thus, the West saw the newly formed Commonwealth mainly as a structure called upon to solve the problems connected with the Soviet military legacy. Besides, the CIS came to play an extremely important role as a structure that ensured a more or less civilized "divorce" of the former Soviet republics because it offered the necessary mechanisms for achieving compromises and easing tensions. In that respect the post-Soviet republics were luckier than the states formed in place of the former Yugoslavia. Arguably, if a similar structure had been set up in Yugoslavia the conflict there might have been prevented.

Nevertheless, the CIS was created as an institution called upon to contribute to the economic and political integration of the former Soviet Union states with the exception of the three Baltic republics—Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania, which embarked on the path of integration into the Euro-Atlantic structures. It has to be admitted that this was a situation the Russian leadership had not been accustomed to. On the one hand, the New Independent States (NIS), the former Soviet republics were recognized by the UN thus gaining the same rights as Russia. On the other hand, they shared a common past with Russia when all the post-Soviet republics were part of the USSR, which was then a unitary state with a highly integrated economy and a inflexible one-party political regime, a single defense system and border, communication infrastructure and energy system, and clear-cut administrative and symbolic internal borders. They shared decades of common history, common achievements and mutual grievances although more than 60 million citizens lived outside their native republics (including 26 million Russians) [2, pp. 131-132]. All this lent the relations between the post-Soviet NIS and

Russia a very special character compared to other foreign states, and from that point of view, the recognition of the special links between Russia and these states had nothing in common with the “Russian imperial syndrome.” Obviously, regardless of various assessments of the breakup of the Soviet empire, the disintegration of the Soviet Union was a personal tragedy for millions of people who saw their kinship and professional ties severed by the new reality. These people had to live not only through economic difficulties of the transition period, but also bloody conflicts, which flared up in the post-Soviet space. Unfortunately, “the human aspect” of the dissolution of the USSR was (and remains) unknown to the West.

Speaking about the integration processes on the territory of the former USSR, one has to agree with American political scientist Leon Aron, who said that “the correct sequencing involves economic integration first and ‘political military’ integration much later” [5, p. 36]. This thesis is confirmed by the history of European integration where integration in the sphere of common policy, security and defense policy remains the biggest challenge to the EU to this day.

Attempts to integrate into the CIS started with the military-political sphere. Undoubtedly, the undeveloped borders of the former Soviet republics, the task of protecting them and the existence of conflicts in the post-Soviet space demanded coordination of the efforts of the former Soviet republics in this field. However, there is a huge difference between integration and simple cooperation. The Kremlin should probably have started with assessing the situation, identifying the prevalent trends within the CIS, which was marked by rapid regionalization and fragmentation. With the elimination of the former power center, which controlled the union republics what were once a single space split up into sub-regions, which found new centers of attraction in the adjacent regions. Moscow, however, continued to regard the post-Soviet space as a single whole where all the connections could be restored by organizing a new coordinating center. Besides, after the collapse of the USSR, the leaders of all the republics were preoccupied with dividing up the Soviet legacy, a process which by definition could not have contributed to unification trends. Yegor Gaidar remembers that at a meeting of the Inter-Republican Economic Council held in late 1991 (before the formal dissolution of the USSR) nobody wanted to discuss coordination of budgetary and monetary policies and everyone was concerned with just one thing, the sharing of the union gold reserves [7, pp. 144-145].

Agreements on joint armed forces and border troops were signed in Minsk in late 1991. One of the first working bodies of the Commonwealth was the Defense Ministers’ Council with a secretariat and military cooperation coordination headquarters. However, the plan was never put into practice and on May 15, 1992 in Tashkent Russia, Armenia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan signed a Collective Security Treaty, which came into force after its ratification by all the participants on April 20, 1994. In 1993, it was joined by Azerbaijan, which was at the time in a virtual state of war with Armenia, by Georgia and Belorussia.<sup>2</sup>

The building of the collective security union took place against the background of national privatization of the former Soviet defense infrastructure. “The bulk of

the armaments that became part of the national armed forces,” wrote Yury Bondarev, Deputy Russian Airforce Commander-in-Chief, “were soon disbanded and were therefore decommissioned. By the early 1991, the air defense potential on the borders of the Central Asian region (Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenia) was non-existent. And the potential in Trans-Caucasus (Georgia, Armenia) had been significantly weakened” [4, p. 41]. Simultaneously the Russian leadership sought to strengthen economic ties. The idea of economic integration in the CIS framework took shape in the Treaty on creating the economic union signed in Moscow in September 1993 by 11 states with only Turkmenistan abstaining. Many spoke of the model of the European Union for the CIS overlooking the main prerequisite: integration is only possible among countries with similar levels of economic and socio-political development. Besides, the collapse of the command-and-administer system and introduction of market reforms put into question the rationale of the links between the former republics of the USSR and raised the question of competitiveness of the national industry. The markets of Russia and the other CIS countries were flooded by the vastly superior goods from the far abroad. “The danger arose,” noted Shishkov, “of the loss of entire sectors of the processing industry with all the negative geo-economic, social and internal political consequences that entailed” [13, p. 93].

The most radical solution of this problem in which all the Commonwealth states were interested was the creation of a single Customs Union with a common customs barrier in the way of exports from the far abroad on the perimeter of the CIS while preserving free trade within the CIS. In March 1992, heads of governments of all the CIS countries with the exception of Ukraine, signed in Moscow the Agreement on the Principles of Customs Policy, which envisaged the creation of the Customs Union. In the same year, in Tashkent the Agreement on Cooperation in the foreign economic activity sphere was signed and, in September 1993, the Framework Agreement on Economic Union for a term of 10 years which envisaged step-by-step creation in the CIS of a free-trade zone, the Customs Union, a common market of goods, capital, labor and the currency union. Ukraine acceded as an associated member. In 1994, further attempts were made to step up integration processes within the CIS: an agreement on a free trade zone was signed in April and an agreement on a Payments Union was signed in October.

However, in spite of all these efforts, it became clear that even a free-trade zone could not be created in the 12-state format. It failed also in 1995, when a smaller format was attempted, initially the “troika” (Russia, Kazakhstan and Belorussia) and then the “five” format (the same three countries plus Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan) later renamed EAEC (Eurasian Economic Community 2001-2014). In 2015, a new integration group, the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) was formed.

The setbacks in the area of economic integration within the CIS were due to the Russian leadership, which was the driving force behind this process but ignored the actual economic situation in the proposed member states. By 1995, the share of the non-state sector in Russia was 65%, in Kazakhstan 25%, and in

Belorussia 15%. "It was patently unrealistic to try to squeeze the legislation of such different economic organisms into a single pattern," Shishkov wrote [13, p. 102].

In the late 1990s, it became abundantly clear that the Russian leadership attempts to attach the other commonwealth states to Russia economically had failed. The CIS states or groups of states were drifting away not only from Russia, but also from each other. The volume of trade between them dropped by 2.3 times within nine years. The share of mutual exports within the CIS in the total volume of their export dropped by 3.5 times and the share of mutual export in the total GDP dropped by 4.7 times.

The development of economic ties within the CIS failed to solve also one of the key tasks facing the Russian economy in the post-Soviet period, i.e., integration in the processes of economic globalization. Yury Borko, a noted Russian scholar, observed: "Integration within the CIS, in principle, does not solve the problem of Russia's integration in the world economy because its Commonwealth partners are much less involved in world economic ties than Russia." Moreover, the success of economic reforms in Russia, which is a precondition for its inclusion in the world economy, paradoxically, would have become a serious obstacle for integration within the CIS because it would have widened the gap between Russia and the other Commonwealth countries [6, p. 21].

Meanwhile, in addition to objective economic difficulties between Russia and the Commonwealth countries, there were problems of a different kind. Throughout the 1990s, Russia's policy vis-à-vis the CIS was marked by the divide within the Russian leadership which could not resolve the overarching problem in the "near abroad." How to find an optimum balance and work out a reasonable compromise in the relations with the other Commonwealth states? Should they be treated as independent foreign states by setting prices at the world level for the supply of energy, servicing of infrastructure, military assistance, etc.?

Or should "special relationships" with them be preserved by granting economic benefits in exchange for recognizing a certain status of Russian military and civilians abroad, the use of industrial and military facilities, the preservation of a single defense system, interference in the event of internal conflicts on the territories of these states, protection of the former Soviet borders, etc.?

Compounding the Russian dilemma was the fact that, on the one hand, it could not ignore the problems in the CIS space and, on the other hand, its potential and resources for addressing them had shrunk dramatically. The euphoria over the dissolution of the USSR in 1992 gave way to a sense of loss and defeat in 1993, defeat not on the far approaches but in the immediate surroundings. An awareness of the interests and conditions required to ensure them caused the elite to pay more attention to the real position of the RF in the CIS. "To assume an isolationist attitude," stressed Aleksey Arbatov, "would have meant leaving these republics at the mercy of the spontaneous process of economic decline, territorial and ethnic conflicts, civil wars and social chaos" [2, p. 134].

"Gathering" the CIS under its aegis and tackling of concrete problems (borders, drug trafficking, organized crime, pipeline transit, etc.) prompted the Russian

leadership to establish “special relationships” with CIS states. Furthermore, the post-imperial syndrome—the loss of superpower status—nudged the Russian leadership toward reviving at least some kind of coalition of satellite countries to boost Russia’s prestige in the world. Instead of differentiated relations within the CIS and identifying priority partners, Russia in fact took on board a model of “hanger-on” relations with its closest neighbors who put all the responsibility for the arbitrary rule of the Soviet government at Russia’s door arguing that the real mechanisms of governing the USSR and the RSFSR had been merged into one. Russia became a natural target of various kinds of complexes, suspicions, negative assessments and emotions (whether or not they were grounded is beside the point), on the one hand, and ambitions, expectations, claims—often selfish and exorbitant—on the other [8, p. 22]. Apparently, the Russian leadership considered this the inevitable price of preserving Russia’s political influence in the CIS. However, there again the real situation differed from the Kremlin’s calculus.

After the collapse of the USSR, nationalism in the NIS became the driving force in the formation of national identity and statehood. The rejection of the Soviet past had a marked anti-Russian thrust because Russia was the biggest union republic that allegedly suppressed the national aspirations of the other Soviet republics and because Moscow was the capital not only of the RSFSR, but also of the USSR. At the same time, the new countries, faced with massive economic problems on the way toward independence, could not renounce the benefits Russia could offer in exchange for political loyalty. Clearly, this model of “special relationships” which Russia’s CIS partners reluctantly adopted was the worst model in terms of integration. Russia’s attempts to guarantee a favorable environment in the “near abroad” by asserting its dominant position in the CIS inevitably met with resistance on the part of Russia’s closest partners. This was highlighted by the creation in 1997 of the GUAM (Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, Moldavia) group as a counterweight to Russia’s dominance in the CIS space. The Commonwealth was practically split into the anti-Russian GUAM and the pro-Russian CSTO.

The key role in the former group was obviously played by Ukraine, the most important CIS country for Russia. The relations between Russia and Ukraine in the first decade of their independence evolved through the same stages as the entire Russian policy in the CIS: disintegration and aggravation of contradictions over the sharing of the Soviet assets (1991-1993); Russia’s emphasis on multilateral mechanisms in the CIS and the establishment of a donor model of economic relations with Ukraine (1994-1996); gradual transition from stagnation to pragmatism (1996-1999).

It is important to note that the CIS had split not on ethnic, religious or geographical grounds. The former coalition included all the countries that saw Russia as an existing or potential threat to their territorial integrity and all of them (except Moldavia) had applied to join NATO. The latter group included the states which sought Russia’s help in the face of external threat and (or) internal opposition and relied on Russia’s economic support. An exception in the second group is Kazakhstan, which shares with Russia important economic interests and has

a large Russian diaspora while pursuing a fairly independent line for cooperation with the USA and China [1, p. 17].

The political loyalty of Russia's CIS allies was probably superficial constituting the pay for economic injections on Russia's part. It was only when the internal political situation in some Commonwealth states threatened the ruling elites they turned for help to the Russian leadership and demonstrated pro-Russian sentiments. At other times, CIS countries often used tensions in the relations with Russia, sometimes artificially fomented, to solicit assistance from the West, which feared the neo-imperial ambitions of the Russian leadership.

The absence of a clear-cut Kremlin position on the issue of territorial integrity of the multinational NIS in the 1990s was due to the underlying wish to keep them within Russia's orbit. This was achieved by encouraging separatism in these states through support of loyal regimes and by imposing the military presence remaining from the times of the USSR and using economic levers, notably energy supply.

In retrospect, one has to admit that Moscow's policy in Ukraine and Moldavia as well as in the Trans-Caucasus region in the early half of the 1990s when the foundations of the relations among the new independent states were laid was shortsighted and counter-productive. The miscalculations of the Yeltsin-Kozyrev course were most manifest in the relations with Georgia, which was by definition Russia's priority partner in the Caucasus region. Moscow's policy there was even more misguided than in Ukraine and the other Commonwealth states. Owing to Russia's support of the Abkhaz separatists and the civil war that flared up, Georgia found itself on the brink of collapse and disintegration of the nation state. Georgia's President Eduard Shevardnadze had to back the idea of Georgia joining the CIS and asked Russia to introduce its troops as a result of which his main rival within the country, Zviad Gamsahurdia, suffered a defeat and a status quo was achieved on the Abkhaz front. President Shevardnadze sincerely counted on Moscow's help in the peaceful solution of the problems of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. However, the personal hostility of the Russian military-political leadership toward the Georgian leader and the wish to maintain Georgia's dependence on Russia through unresolved territorial problems resulted in the negotiating process stagnating for years.

The Kremlin's wish to use the problems of national minorities in the CIS neighbors to further its own ends boomeranged against Russia during the war in Chechnya causing a new spike of tensions between these states and Russia. For its part, Russia's military actions in Chechnya (although they took place on Russian territory) had a negative impact on its relations with the "southern near abroad," mainly Azerbaijan and Georgia. Looking back, we can say today that Russia's support of separatists in Abkhazia, Transnistria and the Crimea in the 1990s was counter-productive. The anti-Russian GUAM coalition consisted precisely of those states (Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan and Moldavia) where serious conflicts of this kind arose and in which Russia interfered directly or indirectly during the course of these conflicts.

The setbacks of Russia's integration policy which became obvious in the second half of the 1990s made the Kremlin revise its former CIS policy which acquired a more pragmatic and realistic character. "[Moscow] abandoned ephemeral imperial projects in relations with its neighbors," writes Arbatov, "and turned its attention instead to the transit of energy exports, the acquisition of promising business assets and infrastructure, investment in natural resources exploration and production, maintaining genuinely important military bases and facilities" [1, p. 18]. While publicly pledging allegiance to the goals of integration in the CIS space, Russia laid emphasis on bilateral relations with the Commonwealth countries. Russia introduced market prices for energy not only for some GUAM member countries, but also for its traditional allies, Armenia and Belorussia. This was a correct, albeit belated, turn in Russia's foreign policy, but it failed to bring qualitative changes to Russia's relations with its closest partners.

The political elites in the CIS were not prepared for a radical revision of privileged relations with the Russian Federation in the energy and other spheres. On the one hand, the dilemma of these political elites—the wish to be independent from Russia and still enjoy the benefits of cooperating with it—consolidated the former model of relations with Moscow and on the other hand, introduced an element of polemics, if not actually conflict, in these relations. The Russian scholar Andrey Suzdaltsev noted that "numerous declarations and treaties on partnership and friendship concluded with Moscow made no difference to the diversified foreign policy of young states and did not slow down the trend of 'distancing' of the post-Soviet countries from Russia" [14].

### **The West's Attitude to the CIS Project**

Like the Kremlin's policy in the CIS space, which is the main factor influencing the development of Russia's relations with the West, the latter's policy towards the former Soviet Union countries has been, and remains, a kind of litmus test for the Russian political elite to understand the true goals of the post-communist strategies of both the EU and NATO/USA. As noted above, the creation of the CIS initially met with approval in the world community, which was concerned about the spread of Soviet nuclear weapons deployed outside Russia on the territory of the former Soviet republics. Thus, the young Commonwealth was seen by the West mainly as a structure for solving the problems of the Soviet nuclear inheritance. However, after the issue was settled, it saw the centrifugal trends in the CIS as a key condition of democratization of these countries and a guarantee that the USSR would never be revived in the post-Soviet state in whatever form. The approach was just as erroneous as "the gathering" of the CIS by Russia for the sake of "gathering" without clearly formulated interests and goals in the region. Initially the European Commonwealth countries were not included in the post-communist strategies of the EU and NATO whose leadership was preoccupied with the conflict in the former Yugoslavia and integration of the more prepared countries of Central and Eastern Europe into Western structures.

Practically from the moment the CIS was created, Russia's integration efforts were closely watched by the West which soon began to fear that a new Russian empire would be restored, all the more so because Moscow started claiming that it had special interests in the post-Soviet space. By putting the stake in the relations with the West on the disintegration of the USSR, the Russian leadership in the early 1990s believed that the formal break with the Soviet past was sufficient to harmonize Russia-West relations. Analyzing the Western attitude to Russia's policy on the territory of the CIS, some Russian scholars noted that whatever that policy was the European countries and the USA would still react negatively to it. Russian political scientist Nikolay Kosolapov stressed that "any attempts by Moscow to pursue an integration policy invariably provoke accusations of neo-imperialism" [8, p. 22]. We believe this statement to be excessively categorical and subjective.

It is undeniable that Russia's claims to have special interests in the CIS region were accompanied by serious setbacks of the Russian leadership in introducing democracy in Russia—the October 1993 crisis, which caused a wave of nationalist sentiments and the first war in Chechnya. Growing Western fears concerning Russia's role in the CIS were fueled by the massive invasion of neo-imperialists in the sphere of developing Russian policy in the former USSR space. They took advantage of the mistakes of the Yeltsin team, especially the fact that it thought a strategy for Russia in relation to the near abroad unnecessary and confined itself to the sharing of Soviet property. As American scholar Leon Aron wrote, "from 1992, the Near Abroad has been an attractive platform for ambitious domestic players such as Sergey Stankevich, who sparred with Andrey Kozyrev over the Dniester Republic and ethnic Russians in the Baltic states; Aleksandr Lebed, who was launched into national politics as the commander of 14th Army, which 'defended' the Dniester Republic; and, of course, Vladimir Zhirinovskiy in the 1993 parliamentary campaign" [5, p. 35]. The wish of various politicians and even some military commanders to take advantage of the problem of Russian-speaking communities in the near abroad and use it as a bargaining chip in the political games, in the absence of a coherent policy of the leadership, merely increased the West's mistrust of integration processes in the CIS. It has been argued for some time that the CSTO and the EAEC are a new version of the Warsaw Treaty and the COMECON, symptoms of a new Russian mini-empire. However, as Dmitry Trenin rightly pointed out, the new alliances<sup>3</sup> have no shared ideology, no sense of a common threat and in most cases no sense of a common destiny [15].

Russia's peacekeeping functions in the CIS states gave rise to particular suspicions concerning Moscow's intentions. The West's attitude to the Russian peacekeeping operations was influenced by the past actions of the Soviet leadership in Afghanistan, Tbilisi, Baku and Vilnius and by the presence of former Soviet military units, which were concerned primarily about their own survival because the central authorities had lost control over some military commanders. The most vivid example were the actions of the 14th Army in the Transdnister region of

Moldova. The West was also confused about the participation of the warring sides in joint peacekeeping operations.

The diplomatic mechanisms of peacemaking operations were determined by the Kiev Agreement of CIS states signed in March of 1992. And yet not a single such operation observed all the terms of the agreement. Each time Russia took part in conflict resolution, special terms were developed. Moscow wanted the CIS to be regarded as an international organization with observer status at the UN General Assembly seeking to enlist Western support of the peacekeeping operations conducted by Russia and other CIS states in the post-Soviet space. Another attempt was made at a meeting of the OSCE leaders in Budapest. It prompted suspicions in the Western countries that Russia sought to regain its historical role of the “big brother.”

At the same time, neither the leading European countries nor the USA had evinced the slightest desire to take part in solving the numerous problems on the territory of the former USSR whereas Russia could not afford to stand aside and watch the goings-on in Tajikistan and other hot spots. On the whole, it has to be noted that the West, which had concerns about CIS integration projects and structures, did not turn it into a stumbling block in the relations with Russia because in all other ways Moscow’s external and internal policy suited it [1, p. 17].

The fears of the EU and NATO concerning the revival of the Russian empire on the CIS territory became obsessive. Any miscalculations or hiccups in Russia’s policy with regard to the CIS countries—and there have, unfortunately, been many—were interpreted by the Euro-Atlantic partners of Russia as attempts to recreate a new version of the USSR. If more attention had been paid to the problems of the Commonwealth it could have acted as a regional partner of the UN and above all the OSCE. In 1994, attempts were made to organize cooperation of Russian and NATO servicemen in units deployed in peacekeeping operations on the territory of the former USSR and joint Russian-American military exercises on the Totskoye test range. Such interaction could have yielded tangible fruit and pioneered a new model of peacemaking applicable throughout the post-communist Europe. However, instead of becoming the kingpin of the European order in the new post-bipolar Europe, OSCE began to be sidelined on key security issues yielding its functions to other institutions. In effect, in the 1990s the OSCE functions began to be taken away or duplicated by other institutions, in the first place, NATO as well as the EU and the Council of Europe.

The post-communist space was swiftly divided between the two institutions. NATO was responsible for the countries of Central, Eastern and South-Eastern Europe and the OSCE for the post-Soviet states, with emphasis on humanitarian issues, which later provoked an ideological confrontation between Russia and the West. These novelties led the Russian leadership to suspect that the OSCE was an organization for “second-rate” states and its main aim was to limit Moscow’s reach on the territory of the former USSR. Apparently, the West’s thinking went like this: the OSCE is a child of the Cold War created for dialogue between East and West, but while the East fell apart, the West did not. This means

that NATO's policy was right and should therefore become the basis of European security while the OSCE should be left to its own devices.

The main distinctive feature of Russian peacemaking operations, compared to the "classical" UN practice, was that the Russian peacemakers were prepared to separate the warring sides before the ceasefire agreement came into force. At the same time, the experience of some states—members of the EU and NATO—in peacekeeping and humanitarian relief (for example, Britain's experience in Northern Ireland) would have been very valuable for Russia, which is facing similar problems. However, these initiatives failed to translate themselves into practical cooperation. The plans of eastward expansion of NATO and the European Union traditionally presented by Brussels as mutually complementary processes,<sup>4</sup> were not conducive to the development of such relations.

The main principle of the regional strategy of NATO and the EU was to push the Commonwealth countries as far away from Russia as possible. This proved to be an erroneous and counter-productive policy, which confirmed Moscow's worst fears concerning the West's goals and fueled nationalist and revenge-seeking sentiments in Russia. The regional strategies of NATO and the EU consistently sidelined the Russian Federation and made it suspicious of the West's intentions in the "near abroad." If Russia had initially been included in the NATO enlargement policy as a key partner, the Caucasus crisis might never have happened. It is probable that the conflict around Ukraine would not have happened if it had been invited from the beginning in 2008 to take part in the Eastern Neighborhood, which sprang up as a regional dimension of the European Neighborhood policy.

American political scientist Michael Mandelbaum wrote in 1998: "Russian military intervention to the west (CIS—*N. A.*) would trigger a new Cold War, or worse" [9, p. 9]. The Ukrainian conflict in 2014 and the events that followed, above all, Russia's takeover of Crimea, although bloodless, provoked an unprecedented sharpening of contradictions between the Russian Federation and the European Union/NATO. Thus, Mandelbaum's prediction came true. However, he could not have predicted the whole chain of prerequisites that led to a new Cold War—neither NATO's military operation against former Yugoslavia in 1999 launched without the UN Security Council mandate which was a turning point in the relations between Russia and the West, nor the recognition of Kosovo independence, nor the support of "orange revolutions" in the CIS space.

NATO's military intervention against Yugoslavia greatly devalued the NATO-Russia Founding Act of 1997 which, in spite of all Russian grievances, still offered certain guarantees that additional conventional and nuclear forces and weapons would not be deployed on the territory of new NATO member states. From Russia's point of view, the NATO expansion strategy strengthened control over sea and air space in the Black Sea region and ran counter to its security interests aimed at preventing the appearance of new dividing lines in the region and expansion of military coalitions of which Russia was not a permanent member.

The West's support of "orange revolutions" in Georgia and Ukraine to promote democracy were rejected in Russia because that support quickly acquired an anti-Russian character. The pro-Western leaders of GUAM states, notably in Ukraine and Georgia, proceeded from the assumption that their anti-Russian rhetoric would buy them early admission to Western institutions. American journalist Eric Margolis in an article titled "Ukraine: The Orange Revolution Devours Its Young" noted that the Western media presented "orange revolutions" in black-and-white colors, as the struggle between good and evil, which Western-oriented democrats waged against vile pro-Moscow communists. However, it was in fact a very complicated struggle for power and for control of economic resources among various conflicting factions [10].

In recognizing the independence of Kosovo, Western politicians repeatedly stressed that this was a one-off case because the conflict leading up to the emergence of the Kosovo problem was different from other post-communist conflicts. In other words, Kosovo was to become an exception. Meanwhile what has already happened is a precedent by definition. Besides, in spite of the regional and local differences, all the conflicts on the territory of the former Yugoslavia and the former USSR had three common dimensions—internal, post-imperial and international. The latter two were inseparably bound up: the West's attempts to fill the vacuum in "no man's land" inevitably turned the post-imperial dimension in the policy of the former "mother countries" into a neo-imperial one, breeding new conflicts and problems. Properly speaking, this is nothing new. Ethno-religious and territorial conflicts have always occurred on the ruins of fallen empires, with external forces seeking to grab the imperial legacy readily pitching in.

Russia's interference in the conflict around South Ossetia in August of 2008 to protect Russian peacemakers and civilians and all the following events in the region, which culminated in Russia recognizing the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, were perceived by many in the West as Moscow's renunciation of the status quo policy in favor of expansion in the region. From Russia's point of view, it was the policy of NATO toward the post-Soviet space, which sought to fill the security vacuum formed after the collapse of the USSR, was an instance of expansionism and, what is more, expansionism of a military alliance. The Western countries were the first to violate the status quo established after the end of bipolarity.

Setting forth Russia's position on the recognition of the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, President Dmitry Medvedev said it was a difficult decision: "Ignoring Russia's warnings, the Western countries hastened to recognize the unlawful declaration of Kosovo's independence from Serbia. We have constantly argued that after that it would be impossible to tell the Abkhaz and Ossetians (and dozens of other peoples across the world) that what suited Kosovo Albanians did not suit them. In international relations you cannot have one rule for some and another rule for others" [12]. In other words, the Kosovo precedent got an adequate response from Russia and this probably accounts for the fact that Russia-West relations were not unduly impaired by the Caucasus crisis.

The August 2008 crisis revealed two polar positions in the West with regard to the post-Soviet space, which have a direct bearing on Georgia and Ukraine. One of them was that NATO expansion to the CIS, contrary to the Russian position, engenders dangerous conflicts and must be put off. The other is that such expansion should be speeded up to prevent Moscow from using force to subdue neighboring countries and revive the traditional strategy of Russian imperialism. In Russia too there were two approaches concerning the CIS. One approach was that it had already drawn “the red line” in the South Ossetia conflict clearly warning NATO of all the risks of expansion to the CIS countries. Therefore, the events in South Ossetia and Abkhazia should be seen as an exceptional episode, like the Kosovo one. The other line was based on the conviction that the prospect of NATO expansion to the post-Soviet space gave Russia and the CIS a free hand.

In other words, the Caucasus crisis of 2008 and the Ukrainian conflict of 2014 were the logical consequence of rivalry and mutual suspicions between Russia and the West in the post-Soviet space, suspicions whose roots go back to the 1990s. In both cases, Russia had drawn a “red line” for the West’s advance to the zone of its special interests.

### **In Lieu of a Conclusion: Russia’s Tasks in the CIS**

For the first time since the end of bipolarity, the conflict in and around Ukraine brought the Russia-West relationship to the brink of a direct clash due to unpredictable escalation of tensions. At the end of the day, the conflict became the quintessence of mistakes and miscalculations both for Russia and for the West. Obviously, in the near term Russia’s key task is to stop the slide toward a showdown with the USA and NATO. Contributing actively to the establishment of peace in Ukraine is the immediate task of the Russian leadership, and this calls for initiative and consistency. Peace in Ukraine is not only a prerequisite for normalizing Russia-West relations, for working out new rules of behavior in international relations that would rule out dangerous rivalries within the CIS, but a precondition for a rethink of Russia’s strategy with regard to its closest neighbors.

The dissolution of empires is a painful process in principle. It involves getting rid of political and psychological stereotypes, hindering the establishment of new relations between independent states, which have left the bosom of the empire. If Russia fails to shed its neo-imperial syndrome and abandon attempts to recreate the Soviet empire, this would further alienate its CSTO and EAEC partners. The Kremlin’s concept of “the Russian world” and especially the Crimea precedent has put Russia’s allies on their guard. There is no question that the decision to take over Crimea has the broadest support of the Russian public opinion. The fact has gained legitimacy in public consciousness and there is hardly a more popular slogan than “Crimea is ours.” Addressing the Munich Security Conference, the Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev said: “For Russia, the question of the status of Crimea is closed forever. The question does not exist for Russia. Crimea is part of Russian territory” [11].

However, in taking the decision on Crimea the Russian leadership proceeded from its own interests and notions about the legitimacy of that decision. It probably gave no thought to the fact that the Crimea precedent would be very attractive for Transdnistria, Nagorny Karabakh, Northern Kazakhstan, Republika Srpska, the Croatian part of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kaliningrad (whose population gravitates toward the Baltic region) and many countries. While Turkey's claims to Crimea which, under the 1774 Treaty of Kuchuk-Kainarji, had no right to independence or to being handed over to a third party can hardly be taken seriously, pro-Turkish sentiments in Tatarstan and other Russian regions is a very real challenge. China, having recognized the demarcation of borders with Russia, has not given up its claims to the territories in the Far East which it considers to be historically its own. China is not raising this question today because it has other preoccupations in the south and east, but the situation may change over time. In other words, the danger of setting precedents is that the state sets it up for itself without thinking that others may take advantage of such precedents. It is a grave delusion for a state to believe that history ends with the setting of a precedent. That is why Russia should foresee probable dangerous repeats of the precedent and proactively take measures to prevent them in the field of its security and relations with the neighboring countries.

A revision of Russia's former policy toward the Commonwealth states should be based on a more diversified approach. Russian national interests should be formulated clearly and specifically with regard to each CIS and Baltic country taking into account the regional aspects of security on the entire perimeter of the external borders of the former USSR [3, pp. 103-104].

In spite of previous setbacks, Russia's integration with its CIS and EAEC partners has great potential. In principle, regional integration projects based on common interests, good will and equality of participants can only be welcomed. For all the criticism of the shortcomings of the EAEC, this project has become an institutional, normative and economic reality. In the future, given normalization of Russia-West relations after the Ukrainian conflict is settled, joint functional projects of the EAEC and the EU in the CIS space are possible.

Possessing as it does a huge scientific-technical and resource potential, Russia should project its influence in the post-Soviet space not by force of arms, but by offering an attractive model of socio-economic and political development, achievements in science and culture, in other words, everything that makes a state truly great in the 21st century.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> The RSFSR, the Ukraine and the Republic of Belarus were the co-founders of the USSR in 1922.

<sup>2</sup> Azerbaijan, Georgia and Uzbekistan later left the organization. At the time the Treaty came into force in 1994, the CSTO had nine members, today it has six. The supreme governing body is the Collective Security Council (CSC), which appoints the organization’s General Secretary.

- <sup>3</sup> This fully applies to the Eurasian Economic Union whose members have no shared ideology like that which existed in the USSR. Moreover, Russia and its EAEC partners pursue different goals through integration in this union.
- <sup>4</sup> Although NATO membership is not written down in the Copenhagen Criteria as a mandatory condition of EU membership, the latest waves of European Union expansion to the post-communist countries of Central and Eastern Europe attest that it has become a *de facto* mandatory condition. This circumstance prompted Russia to change its initially positive attitude to European Union expansion and its Neighborhood Policy and Eastern Partnership.

*Translated by Yevgeny Filippov*