RUSSIA

and the Post-Soviet Space

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Moldovans wave a European Union flag from atop the entranceway to their Parliament building in April 2009. Moldovans are trying to move closer to Europe while Russia is trying to keep the country within its sphere of influence.

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Though firmly established in the latest political lexicon, the phrase "post-Soviet space" nonetheless remains somewhat undefined. Difficulties arise when one attempts to establish the boundaries of that "space" on factual and, specifically, historical and geographical levels.

To begin with, the circumstance that prompted researchers in post-Soviet issues to unanimously refrain from including the Baltic states in that nebulous space seems incomprehensible, even though, with the exception of the period of 1918 to 1940, they were part of the Russian Tsarist and Soviet empires for approximately 300 years. Given that, it bears special mention that, strangely enough, it was Russian authors who established and continue to maintain this "tradition." Thus the "post-Soviet space" is narrowed to within the borders of the Commonwealth of Independent States, or CIS, and this approach is unassailable. It would be logical to explain it as an adherence to realpolitik — an acknowledgment that the CIS has certain functionality consistent with the geopolitical, economic, defense and cultural interests of the countries that make up that entity.

The paradox, however, is that the CIS does not possess that functionality today and indeed was not endowed with it from the outset.[1] The very functional aspects of interstate integration in the CIS structure (from time to time it has declared itself a supranational body), which once served to attract 11 former Soviet republics (not counting Russia), and were accordingly rejected by the three Baltic republics in light of certain vital national interests, do not stand up to criticism.

The CIS was and remains a strictly declarative, amorphous and nonfunctioning body. This conclusion is directly supported by Vladimir Putin's recent acknowledgement that the CIS was created as an instrument of civilized divorce. However, we might note that Russia initiated the "divorce." From the start, Russia probably had an interest in the CIS being nonfunctional and, by extension, nonindependent and largely dependent on Russia, particularly in light of the fact that Russia was the most self-sufficient in economic, military and political terms.

What reasons might Russia have for championing the creation of such a nonfunctional entity? The CIS allowed Russia to fully realize its geopolitical ambitions within the borders of the collapsed Soviet Union (we reiterate: except for the Baltic states) and at the same time avoiding the prospect of imposing upon itself the burden of responsibility for the economy, defense, social welfare, medical care, culture and

Georgia launched an offensive in 2008 to retake control of breakaway South Ossetia. Russia, which has close ties to the province, responded by sending in armed convoys, above, and combat aircraft.

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education of the former national outskirts of the Soviet empire. At the same time, the voluntary nature of post-Soviet states' membership in the CIS has allowed Russia to deny accusations — current and quite unpleasant from the standpoint of its international image — that Russia seeks to pursue a post-imperialist (and moreover, neo-imperialist) policy with respect to the other members of the CIS.

In fact, such a policy was being pursued in the early 1990s, although Russia used political, economic, military and energy leverage that allowed it to keep CIS members within its sphere of influence on a strictly bilateral basis and very selectively. It employed the façade of the CIS solely as a cover for its strategic aspirations.

Thus, the CIS was indeed created as an instrument, although not for a civilized divorce, but rather to realize Russia's geopolitical designs. It was the immediate perception of this fact that scared the Baltic countries away from joining the CIS. However, the non-Baltic former Soviet republics found this deal completely palatable. Almost all of them (with the exception of Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan) were in dire need of Russian energy resources, particularly when delivered at prices far below world market. Additionally, Russia provided all of them (except perhaps Belarus) an immense labor market, and all of them, without exception, were extremely interested in the political support that Russia offered the regimes ruling the young republics on an international level. Some countries, especially Armenia and Tajikistan, relied solely on Russia to defend them from outside aggression. In Central Asia, Russia's active assistance provided the vital means to counter Islamic radicalism for two decades.

However, Russia's policies in the post-Soviet space were predominantly on the basis of bilateral agreements and not within the CIS structure. Since the late 1990s, CIS members have found a desire to create within the post-Soviet space more local and, as expected, more robust defense structures, such as the Collective Security Treaty Organization, or CSTO, and the Customs Union. These organizations would not necessarily have to include Russia (such as the GUAM Organization for Democracy and Economic Development). However, with the possible exception of the CSTO, these organizations thus far exist only on paper.

As the CIS has shown, Russia has occasionally demanded its members show political loyalty and refrain from strategic partnerships with other power centers, most notably the West. Moreover, according to some researchers (Aleksandrov, Olcott, Naumkin, Skakov), the United States and European powers in fact acknowledged Russia's geopolitical priorities in the post-Soviet space until the beginning of the 21st century.[2] The "rules of the game" were allegedly[3] violated unilaterally by the West in 2003 to 2004

when the "color revolutions" occurred with direct Western support — first in Georgia and then in Ukraine — resulting in anti-Russian leaders coming to power in those countries.

This approach would appear more propaganda than science, since it explains precisely nothing. As a matter of fact, the policy of confrontation with Russia pursued for some time by Ukraine and Georgia, and before them by Azerbaijan and, to a certain extent, Moldova, is driven by important internal and external factors. For Georgia, Azerbaijan and Moldova, these factors have been and continue to be the unresolved interethnic conflicts in which Russia openly calls to maintain the status quo. This is dictated by Russia's interests, and no re-evaluation of its position is in sight.

The situation with Ukraine is entirely different and more complex. It has no direct territorial conflict with Russia. But there is potential for such conflict, not only over Crimea but a number of other southern and eastern regions where most of the population has historically identified with Russians and openly sympathizes with Russia. This commonly known fact is a source of serious concern for the nationally oriented political elite of Ukraine. On the one hand, these elite are searching for a common Ukrainian identity aimed at preventing the probable division of the society and, quite possibly, the country. On the other hand, they seek to secure independence from Moscow for Ukraine — if not in global affairs, then at least in European politics — and to make it into an independent geopolitical player.[4]

This explains Kiev's language policy, its aspirations to join NATO, the ongoing conflicts over gas with Russia, the demarches over the Russian Black Sea Fleet, attempts to cause a schism in the Orthodox Church and other things that Russia finds so irritating.

However, other young states whose economic and political interests conflict with Russia's regularly create problems for Russia in the post-Soviet space. In the late 1990s, former Turkmenistan President for Life Saparmurat Niyazov (Turkmenbashi) refused a demand to sell Russia all the gas produced in his country and began to independently allocate this national wealth. His successor, Gurbanguly Berdymukhammedov, followed suit and in the spring of 2008 refused to receive the head of Gazprom, Aleksey Miller, who had come to Ashkhabad with the explicit purpose of returning Turkmenistan gas to Russian pipelines. Moreover, relations between Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan are currently warming, which may be evidence of Turkmenistan's intent to transport its gas to Turkey and onward to Europe via Azerbaijan and Georgia.

Russia's position is weakening in other Central Asian countries as well. The reason is its inability,

In Armenia, a new gas pipeline near the border with Iran reduces Armenia's dependence on Russian energy sources.

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An activist of a pro-Russian movement shouts slogans during a march in Simferopol, Ukraine, in February 2010. Ethnic Russians in Crimea and other parts of Ukraine counterbalance the country's pro-Western aspirations.

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as in past years, to settle border disputes and water distribution problems by bringing harsh pressure to bear against the ruling regimes in Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. Even the effective help that Russian special services allegedly gave President Islam Karimov's regime in 2006 in Andijan did not stop the cooling of Russia's relations with Uzbekistan, which began in the early 1990s.

Even President Emomali Rakhmonov of Tajikistan, whom Moscow had brought to power in 1993 and had supported economically and politically ever since, undertook an anti-Russian demarche in early 2009, declaring his willingness to create a staging area within Tajikistan for NATO forces deployed to Afghanistan.

The loyalty of Kyrgyzstan, which threatened to close the American air base near Bishkek in the spring of 2009, may be considered Russia's sole political success in Central Asia in recent years. However, it came at a high price: The total value of free economic aid, preferential loans, and investments that Russia provided to Kyrgyzstan in February 2009 exceeds $2 billion.[5]

Russia seems to be losing favor with one of its closest allies as well. Under the guise of providing economic aid during the world financial crisis, Russia also provided Belarus with additional credits in the amount of $3.3 billion,[6] but the political motivation behind this move was obvious. From late 2008 to early 2009, a trend toward reconciliation between the European Union and Belarus began to take shape. The former realized it would not be able to bring down President Alexander Lukashenko's regime and decided to resort to cooperation with it.[7] The latter realized that it was losing out economically due to its single-vector foreign policy — despite the fact that according to Russian sources, the value of Russia's infusion of finances and resources into the Belarusian economy between 1995 and 2008 totaled $52 billion.[8] The prospect of losing its only geopolitical ally in the post-Soviet space (except for Armenia) could not but alarm the Russian political elite, who operate to this day under such Cold-War era constructs as "us or the West."[9]

Russia has also had increasing problems in recent years in its relations with Armenia. Just two years ago, Russian political leaders (in particular Speaker of the State Duma Boris Gryzlov) were unwaveringly calling Armenia a Russian "outpost" and a strategic partner. And for good reason: Armenia has a high degree of dependence in its economic and defense sectors (mostly related to the Karabakh problem) on Russia, as well as a large Russian military base on its territory.

On top of this, Armenian leaders have more frequently resisted Russia's "recommendations." Instead, Armenia is focusing on its geopolitical interests. Since 2006 Armenia has regularly sent peacekeepers to Iraq; refused, in the summer of 2008, to condemn Tbilisi's so-called aggression against South Ossetia; and delayed as long as possible a withdrawal from NATO exercises in Georgia in May 2009. Armenia is also deepening cooperation with Iran in the energy sphere and has declared a willingness to normalize relations with Turkey. All this is evidence of Yerevan's wish to go forward with a more balanced foreign policy that is consistent with its own economic and political interests.

Serious geopolitical and economic variance between Russia and other CIS members has emerged in the post-Soviet space since 2002. The result has been a clear weakening of Russia's influence on its neighbors to the west, east and south. In addition, the largest members of the CIS, such as Kazakhstan, Ukraine and, to some extent, Belarus, have increasingly challenged Russia's geopolitical dictates, striving to achieve full independence of actions in their relations with Europe and the United States.

Others — Georgia, Azerbaijan, Moldova — openly endeavor to refuse Russia's peacekeeping "services" (or have already refused them, as in the case of Georgia). In doing so they are consistently shaping a new strategy on interethnic conflicts to replace the old one based on the principle of maintaining the status quo of the mid-90s, which was advantageous to Russia. In the case of Azerbaijan, its lack of trust in Russia has been aggravated by economic differences over routes for transporting Caspian oil and gas to the West.

However, this problem is most daunting for Turkmenistan, which has not hidden a desire to become the sole supplier of natural gas for Europe under the Nabucco gas pipeline project. Russia has attempted to counteract Turkmenistan's efforts, but in this case, Russia again "seems to be suffering a strategic defeat" as it did with the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline.[10] In the words of European Commission President José Manuel Barroso, Europe firmly intends to "connect Turkmenistan with the European Union market via the South Caucasus."[11]

Another serious cause for dissatisfaction with Russia's actions in the post-Soviet space is its aspiration to control domestic politics in CIS countries. On the one hand, Moscow has shown no hesitation in supporting ruling regimes in Armenia, Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, Moldova, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, while turning a blind eye to flagrant violations of democracy and human rights that are alleged by the West of occurring in those countries. And by operating under the slogan "we don't need any new color revolutions," Russia absolutely ignores the local opposition. This cannot fail to rouse public indignation in those countries. Even in Armenia, whose populace has traditionally been loyal to Russia, 62 percent of respondents in a 2008 Gallup Organization poll gave Russian foreign policy a negative rating.[12]

On the other hand, Russia is trying to exert significant political, economic and ideological pressure on those former Soviet states where power is held by political forces and leaders who seek to pursue independent domestic and foreign policy — often equated as being "anti-Russian" in Moscow.

Meanwhile, as analyst Aleksandr Skakov rightly commented, what made the color revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine so unexpected for Russia was Moscow's inability to follow political developments in either country and foresee their consequences, as well as Russia's unwillingness to have contact with the opposition. As a result, these events led to considerable weakening in Russia's position in those countries and, in the case of Georgia, to a complete failure of its policy.[13]

Many analysts believe Russia's loss of influence is attributable to its attitude toward the post-Soviet space as a playing field for a geopolitical struggle between it and the West. Such an approach naturally goes beyond the realpolitik that has supplanted nostalgia and paternalism in the post-Soviet space. Russia will be able to realize its claims to leadership in the post-Soviet space only if it agrees that its partners' interests do not always coincide with its own geopolitical interests, and that these differences cannot be allowed to develop into deep clashes.[14] In other words, "Russia can effectively assert its national interests if it takes others' interests into account."[15] □

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