

The CIS and the legacy of the USSR

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The CIS and the legacy of the USSR

The CIS was originally also intended to settle the problems posed by the unravelling of the Soviet legacy (nationalities, territory, legacy of the Soviet state apparatus, etc.). In practice, the Russian Federation took over the Soviet legacy: the Kremlin, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, single command of strategic nuclear weapons, the seat as a Permanent Member of the United Nations Security Council, gold and diamond reserves, and oil resources. In return, Russia recognised the inviolability of frontiers with its partner states, which was important for countries with large Russian minorities (such as Ukraine and Kazakhstan). When the USSR collapsed, the borders between former SSRs were not officially disputed, but as soon as it started to disintegrate, some Autonomous Republics and Regions started demanding self-government or independence from the former SSRs.

Nationalist movements, unleashed by the break-up of the USSR and exacerbated by religious conflicts, sapped the independence of recently formed States, particularly in the Caucasus. Under the Constitution of the USSR, SSRs could secede from the USSR. But the individual constitutions of the SSRs did not grant similar rights to their Autonomous Republics and Regions. When the Armenian population of Nagorno-Karabakh, an autonomous region that was part of the SSR of Azerbaijan, proclaimed its independence, it dealt a serious blow to Armenia, suspected by the international community of providing the self-proclaimed republic with military logistic support. Sanctions were consequently imposed on Armenia, which, although it did not officially recognise the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic, refused to condemn its incursions into Azerbaijan, prompting the fall of the regime in power. Heydar Aliyev, a former *apparatchik* and the new leader of Azerbaijan, agreed to negotiate with the separatists but to no avail. The conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh has become one of many unresolved conflicts in the Caucasus.

Since the independence of Georgia, the Abkhaz people have refused to accept the authority of the Tbilisi government, invoking the right of peoples to self-determination. In this they enjoy the support of the Chechens, themselves in conflict with Moscow for similar reasons, and also that of the Balkars and Kabards who want to establish a Republic of the Peoples of North Caucasus. The South Ossetians have been disputing their status as part of the Republic of Georgia since 1989. They want independence, to unite with the North Ossetians whose territory is inside Russia. This powder keg exploded again on 8 August 2008 when Georgia invoked the need to protect its territorial integrity and sent in large numbers of troops to restore the central government's authority in South Ossetia. This in turn triggered the intervention of the Russian army, which inflicted heavy losses on the Georgian troops. Georgia consequently left the CIS.

In conclusion, the downfall of the USSR has given rise to political reconstruction that has yet to be completed. Despite the efforts of Gorbachev, the break-up of the USSR was inevitable. Given the right of secession, it was also perfectly legal. The CIS emerged from the ruins of the Union. Though a confederate organisation, its real aim was to manage the cumbersome legacy of the Soviet empire. In practice, the Russian Federation is the successor of the USSR. The CIS, which was supposed to settle post-Soviet conflicts at an intergovernmental level, failed to do so. Nor has it succeeded in preventing the risks of 'Balkanisation' of the Caucasus, particularly as some parties see the CIS as a natural extension of Russia. From this standpoint, the CIS should be seen as a phase in the unfinished process of state-building undertaken by the Tsarist empire and the Soviet Union.