

What are Russia's relations with its former 'sister republics'?

In the years following the break-up of the Soviet Union, its former members faced different forces directing them towards different policy objectives. In the international sphere they faced the problem of how to align themselves in the new world: should they look to Russia and each other, or outwards, to the West? Russia itself had to decide if it wanted to resume the role of regional hegemon, or retreat inwards. After twenty years, clear patterns of the relations between Russia and the former Soviet republics, termed by the Russians as 'the near abroad', have emerged. In examining these relations, I shall first examine the Commonwealth of Independent States, then look at the other two Slavic nations, Belarus and Ukraine, followed by the Baltic States, the South Caucasus, Central Asia and finally Moldova.

The Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) was set up immediately after the fall of the USSR. It was intended as a post-Soviet version of the EU, but has been severely hampered in that there is no sense of a unifying purpose. The three Baltic States; Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, wanted no part in it and declined their invitations to join, instead seeking complete integration with the West. The remaining eleven states were divided over the purpose of the body. Ukraine led efforts to block any attempt at creating a strong body with legal representation and shared citizenship, and the other states have been wary of supra-national proposals due to Russia's dominance within the group, and fear that any loss of sovereignty would be a return to Russian imperialism. The group has divided into an inner and outer ring. The inner ring comprises pro-Russian states who seek greater integration amongst themselves. These are Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Armenia is also a member of this group to an extent, it also pursues pro-European policies. The outer ring at its peak included Georgia, Ukraine, Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan and Moldova. Georgia has left the CIS after the 2008 South-Ossetian war, and Uzbekistan has withdrawn from the group. Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan and Moldova also constitute the GUAM organisation outside of the CIS to further their collective interests

Ukraine was the second largest and wealthiest of the Soviet Republics after Russia itself. It had long been an integral part of Russia, and one of the major reasons behind Moscow's support for the CIS was to preserve some form of union with Ukraine (Smith, 1999, p168). Ukraine, along with Russia and Belarus, voted for the dissolution of the Soviet Union, and became independent. This was problematic as Ukraine had a major shortfall in the "vague but vital matter of national identity" (Reid, 1998, 218), with no modern experience of statehood. Independence was not accompanied by political reform for some time, as former Communist party officials retained control of the country, first under Kravchuk, and then the former factory director Kuchma. The situation changed dramatically with the 2004 Orange Revolution, initially sparked by allegations of vote-fixing in favour of the pro-Russian presidential candidate, Viktor Yanukovich. The revolution swept Viktor Yuschenko to power, who pursued a Westward oriented policy. Under his pro-Western rule, relations with Russia suffered, though they have improved since Yanukovich was elected President in 2010. The first area in which Ukraine and Russia had to reach an agreement was over the Soviet Black Sea Fleet, which was partitioned between the two, with Russia gaining the majority. Russia also gained a lease on the Crimean naval base at Sevastopol, regarded as vital to Russian defence, but the future of which is uncertain, with the lease set to expire in 2017, and Ukrainian protest against the base's use in the 2008 South-Ossetian War.

Under Yuschenko, Ukraine has been considered as a possible member of the EU and of NATO, with Ukraine involved in the EU's Eastern Partnership and European Neighbourhood programmes. For Russia, this is deeply concerning, as almost its entire Western border would be with the EU, barring Belarus, and has led to Russian involvement in Ukrainian domestic politics, endorsing candidates in presidential elections. There has also been the issue of energy, with Russia cutting Ukraine's supply of gas in 2009 over unpaid debts, but also with allegations that this action was intended to undermine Ukraine, and highlight to the West that it was an unreliable ally, with much of Europe's gas supply cut off during the crisis.

(www.nytimes.com/2009/01/14/world/europe/14iht-gazprom.2.19349065.html).

The final factor in Ukrainian-Russian relations is that of the ethnic Russian population in Ukraine, with some eleven million Russians, located primarily in the East of the country. They remain Russophone and favour strong ties to Russia. The Western half of the country is more nationalistic, and supports relations with Europe.

Belarus is the other of the Slavic nations, and has changed least since the fall of the Soviet Union. It is still governed by the Communist party, and since 1994 has been ruled by Alexander Lukashenko. The president has no limits on his terms in office, and the country has been described as "Europe's last communist dictatorship" (<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/116265.stm>) Elections in 2004 and 2006 were hailed as fair by Russia and the CIS, but regarded as unfair by the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). Belarus is currently barred from the Council of Europe for its undemocratic practices.

Belarus has the closest relations with Russia of any of the former Soviet republics. It is regarded as of high importance to Russian security, being Russia's only European neighbour without a pro-EU movement. Since 1996, Belarus has been committed to seeking closer ties with Russia, with a customs union which has been sporadically applied since 2001, although since 2010 it is once more in place. (<http://www.fco.gov.uk/en/travel-and-living-abroad/travel-advice-by-country/country-profile/europe/belarus?profile=intRelations>) Plans for Belarus to adopt the Russian Rouble have been mooted, but not taken forward, and since 2008 the Belarusian Rouble has been tied to the US dollar. There has been intermittent talk of a full union between the two states, but the proposed Union State has not yet come into being, and enthusiasm for it fluctuates.

Belarus is entirely dependant on Russia, relying on it for diplomatic and military protection, and on subsidies for its economy. Russia in turn views Belarus as an outpost against Western encroachment. Belarus remains Russia's closest ally in its near abroad.

The Baltic States; Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, have a troubled history with Russia. After Russia's collapse in the First World War, they achieved independence, only to be occupied by the Soviets after the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact. During this period, these states regard themselves as having been under military occupation. As a result, upon independence for the Soviet Union, they decisively turned their back on Russia, declining to join the CIS and pursuing European integration. These states have been democracies since independence, and have adopted Western market economies. They have eagerly pursued EU and NATO integration, and all three have been full members of both organisations since 2004, which presents a direct security threat to European Russia. Despite this, the settled nature of the region makes this the least-likely area for violent confrontation in the near abroad by a considerable margin. Russia has been able to reduce its military presence to the point of the "demilitarisation of the regional security agenda" (Baev, 2003, p99, eds. Menon et al.). They are also the most economically developed of Russia's neighbours, having achieved staggering growth, and Estonia in particular is now described by the World Bank as a high-income economy, and since January 2011 has been a member of the Euro.

Russian relations with these states are complicated by the large ethnic Russian population amongst all three states, and the discriminatory practices used against them. Relations are also complicated by the Kaliningrad enclave, which is separated from Russia by these states. Whilst relations with the Baltic States are civil, they have no interest in pursuing ties with Russia, and have amongst the lowest levels of interaction with Russia of the post-Soviet states.

The Caucasus has had the most troubled recent history of the post-Soviet space. The region has been marred by ethnic-religious conflict since independence, and which continues into the present. Three former Soviet republics occupy this region; Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia.

Georgia has historically had strong ties with Russia, both are Orthodox Christian, and Georgia was historically absorbed by Russia to protect it from the Turks. In the 1990s, Georgia tore

itself apart in a brutal civil war, in which Russia intervened against the Georgian government, achieving the de facto independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, and led to the deployment of Russian peacekeepers to those territories. The country remained under the control of its Soviet-era leader, Eduard Shevardnadze, until 2003 when he was ousted by Mikheil Saakashvili in the Rose Revolution. Saakashvili has pursued integration with the West, desiring membership of NATO and the EU, and is currently involved in programmes including the European Neighbourhood Programme, as well as having completed the US Train and Equip programme. Saakashvili views an American alliance as vital to his country's interests, which has caused alarm in Moscow. Georgia took part in the Iraq War, with a peak deployment of two thousand soldiers, at the time the third largest contributor after the United States and Britain.

In August 2008, Georgia launched a military offensive against South Ossetia claiming that there had been shelling of Georgian villages, and that Russia was amassing military forces. The EU would later launch an investigation into the cause of the war and concluded that whilst Georgia did launch a large-scale attack, it was "after an extended period of ever-mounting tensions and incidents" (http://www.ceiig.ch/pdf/IIFMCG_Volume_I.pdf, p5). Russian forces, together with Ossetian militias, repulsed the attack and then launched a full-scale invasion of Georgia during which the Georgian military was badly bloodied. A ceasefire was negotiated by the French presidency of the EU, but the result was that Russia recognised the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Georgia continues to regard these regions as integral to its territory. Since the South-Ossetian War, Georgia has left the CIS and has no formal diplomatic contacts with Russia. Georgia continues to pursue European and Atlantic relations, and is regarded as a US ally, despite the fact that its actions "have often caught Washington unprepared and left it exposed diplomatically" (http://online.wsj.com/article/SB122006041734285393.html?mod=hpp_us_whats_news).

Georgia has by far the worst relations with Russia of any post-Soviet state, though the perception of it having been reckless in provoking Russia has harmed its chances of EU and NATO membership.

Armenia remains Russia's only real ally in the Caucasus, linked by their shared Orthodox Christianity. Armenia faced violence from the moment it achieved independence, with ethnic conflict in the disputed Nagorno-Karabakh region turning violent during Gorbachev's reign. Upon independence, this overwhelmingly Armenian region was part of Azerbaijan. The violence was the worst of that experienced during the break-up of the USSR, with long-standing antagonisms between the Armenians and the Turkic, Muslim Azeris. The Armenian state intervened in an undeclared war, and although a ceasefire was agreed, Nagorno-Karabakh has become de facto independent, and Armenian troops occupy part of Azerbaijan linking the two Armenian states. The result of the ethnic conflict has been to deepen Armenia's ties with Russia, on whom it is dependant economically and militarily. Since the Armenian-Azerbaijani war, Turkey and Azerbaijan have closed their borders to Armenia, creating an economic stranglehold on the country, forcing it to rely on Russia as a trade partner. Armenian concern at the hostility of Turkey and Azerbaijan has led them to request the the deployment of Russian forces on their soil, with a Russian military base and Russian guarantees of protection against attack by a third party. However, the Armenians also hope for potential EU membership in the future, and also have strong ties to the US through their half-million strong diaspora in that country.

Azerbaijan has steered itself away from Russian influence since independence, viewing its most important bilateral relationship as being with Turkey. Azerbaijan has a rapidly growing economy thanks to its access to oil from the Caspian Sea, which worries Russia due to Armenia's inability to keep pace. Azerbaijan also seeks the building of a new oil pipeline through its territory, which would bypass Russia, which is viewed as having the potential to undermine Russia's energy policy. Azeri-Russian relations are further hampered by Russia's championing of Armenia, and the revelation through Wikileaks that Russia "admitted to having transferred weapons to Armenia" (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/us-embassy-cables-documents/197735>) during the Nagorno-Karabakh War.

Despite these issues, Russia maintains friendly relations with Azerbaijan, and maintains the

strategically important Gabala radar site under lease from Azerbaijan. However, Russia and Azerbaijan are steadily drifting apart as Azerbaijan aligns itself with Iran and Turkey.

The Central Asian region consists of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. These countries remain under-developed, and with dictatorial governments. These states remain supportive of Russia, and have large ethnic Russian populations.

Of these countries, the most important to Russia is Kazakhstan. By far the largest, Kazakhstan is the ninth largest country in the world, and has large deposits of natural gas and oil. It sits between Russia and the southern CIS states, and is home to a Russian population that comprises nearly 40% of the total population of Kazakhstan. Links are very strong, with much of Kazakhstan's industry and infrastructure being the decaying remnants of the Soviet-era military-industrial complex, and thus dependant on Russia purchasing its heavy industry output. It is also home the Baikonur space facility, from which the Russian space programme is launched. Kazakhstan's relations with Russia have been negatively affected by its increasing ties to Turkey, and its allowing the US to use its airspace for its war in Afghanistan. On the whole, however, Kazakhstan enjoys relations second only to Belarus with Russia, a customs union has been agreed, and there has been interest in the idea of political union. Russia regards it of paramount importance to prevent Kazakhstan's "further dependence on third countries" (Allison, 1999, p30, eds Menon et al.), particularly China.

The other states in the region are of concern to Moscow regarding their very viability. They are still ruled by the old Communist elites, and are increasingly plagued by problems of Islamic fundamentalism. Relations between these majority Muslim states have been harmed by the perception of Russia as anti-Islamic for its treatment of Chechnya, its championing of Armenia, and its post-9/11 rhetoric of equating the Chechen War with the American War on terror. For Russia, it is important to maintain these states against the spread of fundamentalist Islam, and as a buffer zone between the radicalism of Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran.

Tajikistan has been, since that country's civil war, a virtual Russian protectorate, the conflict having devastated the country and left it bitterly divided, the fighting only ended with a UN ceasefire enforced by Russian soldiers. The threat posed by extremist Islam emanating from Tajikistan is Russia's largest security threat in the region. Turkmenistan and Kyrgyzstan increasingly are looking away from Russian leadership and towards Iran and Turkey, with the original plan to entwine Turkmenistan's military with Russia's to establish "some kind of Russian military protectorate" (Allison, 1999, p34, Menon et al) being abandoned, as that state's distance from Russia and links with Iran "suggest that it will come to be positioned beyond any significant Russian strategic influence" (Allison, 1999, p35, Menon et al.)

The final former Soviet republic is Moldova. Moldova was annexed in the 1920s by the Soviet Union, and so was not regarded by the West as an illegal occupation like the Baltics. The vast majority of the population are ethnic Moldavian, an ethno-linguistic group closely related to the Romanians. After independence, the Russophone part of the country East of the Dniester river broke away to form their own republic of Transdnistria, also known as Transnistria. After a military conflict, a truce was signed in 1997. Moldova is unique in that its people elected an unreconstructed Communist party to rule. The opposition parties eventually united to form a democratic bloc aimed at European membership, which would naturally diminish Russian influence there. Russia maintains a military presence in Moldova, despite the Moldovan government requesting its removal.

Russia provoked outrage in Moldova with the Kozak memorandum, a proposal to reintegrate Transnistria into Moldova on an asymmetric basis with a senate "whose representation would be highly disproportionate: 13 senators elected by the federal lower house, 9 by Transnistria and 4 by Gagauzia." (Emerson, 2003, p2). With all parties other than the Communists proposing European integration, it looks likely that Moldova will move away from Russia to join the EU or be merged into Romania

Russia's relation with its former sister republics have been tumultuous. The Baltic states eagerly left, after half a century of illegal military occupation, and voices in Armenia, Ukraine

and Georgia call for following them. Russian relations with Georgia have been destroyed by Russia's intervention in their internal conflict with separatists and open warfare between the two. For the European states that left the Soviet Union, the draw of Western freedoms and the potential of massive European investment makes the EU a more attractive option than Russia. Of these states, only Belarus seeks deeper ties with Russia above European links. For several of the Islamic states, particularly Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan, cultural, ethnic and religious ties, as well as simple geographic proximity make Iran and Turkey more attractive options as regional hegemony, and these countries are likely to depart the Russian orbit. In Central Asia, the survival of some states in any coherent form is not guaranteed, and so Russia must build its ties with Kazakhstan as a shield against the chaos that could be released. Even if these states do not collapse, Russia must compete with China and Iran for their attention. With the exceptions of the Baltic and Georgia, Russia maintains friendly relations with all of its sister republics, but with Russia's decline and the rise of Europe and China, only countries that have no choice build genuinely close ties. Belarus is a pariah in Europe and must look to Russia, Kazakhstan is neighbored by weak states, and Armenia is trapped between enemies. The CIS has failed to deliver any deep ties, and so, with the exception of Belarus and Kazakhstan, the post-Soviet states seem set to drift ever further away from Russia.

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