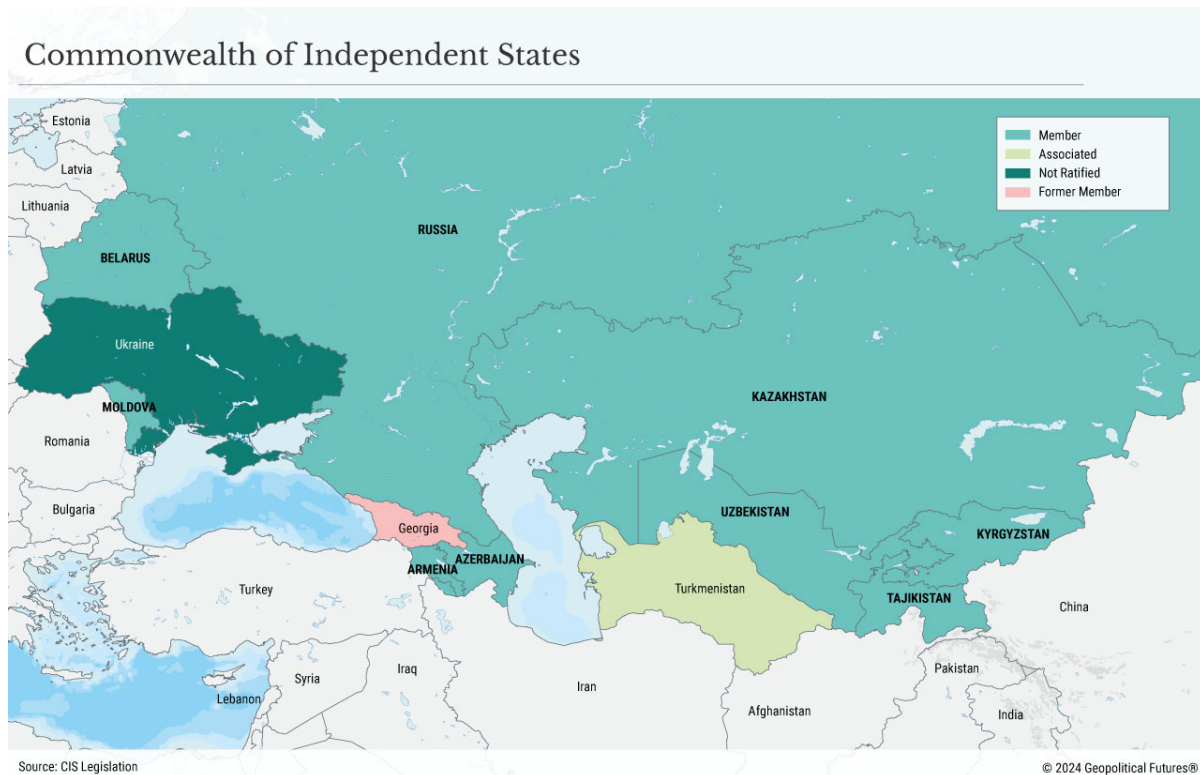


# Russia's Strategy to Revitalize the CIS

by Ekaterina Zolotova - October 16, 2024

Last week, Russian President Vladimir Putin hosted in Moscow the leaders of the other countries in the Commonwealth of Independent States. According to his press secretary, Putin also had the opportunity to meet informally with his counterparts for more substantive talks, including on ways to revitalize the CIS. Amid Western efforts to isolate the Russian government, these types of exchanges with foreign leaders have become vital for Moscow, which is desperate to preserve the existing order and retain its preeminence in Central Asia. In pursuit of those ends, the Kremlin is focused on strengthening the CIS.



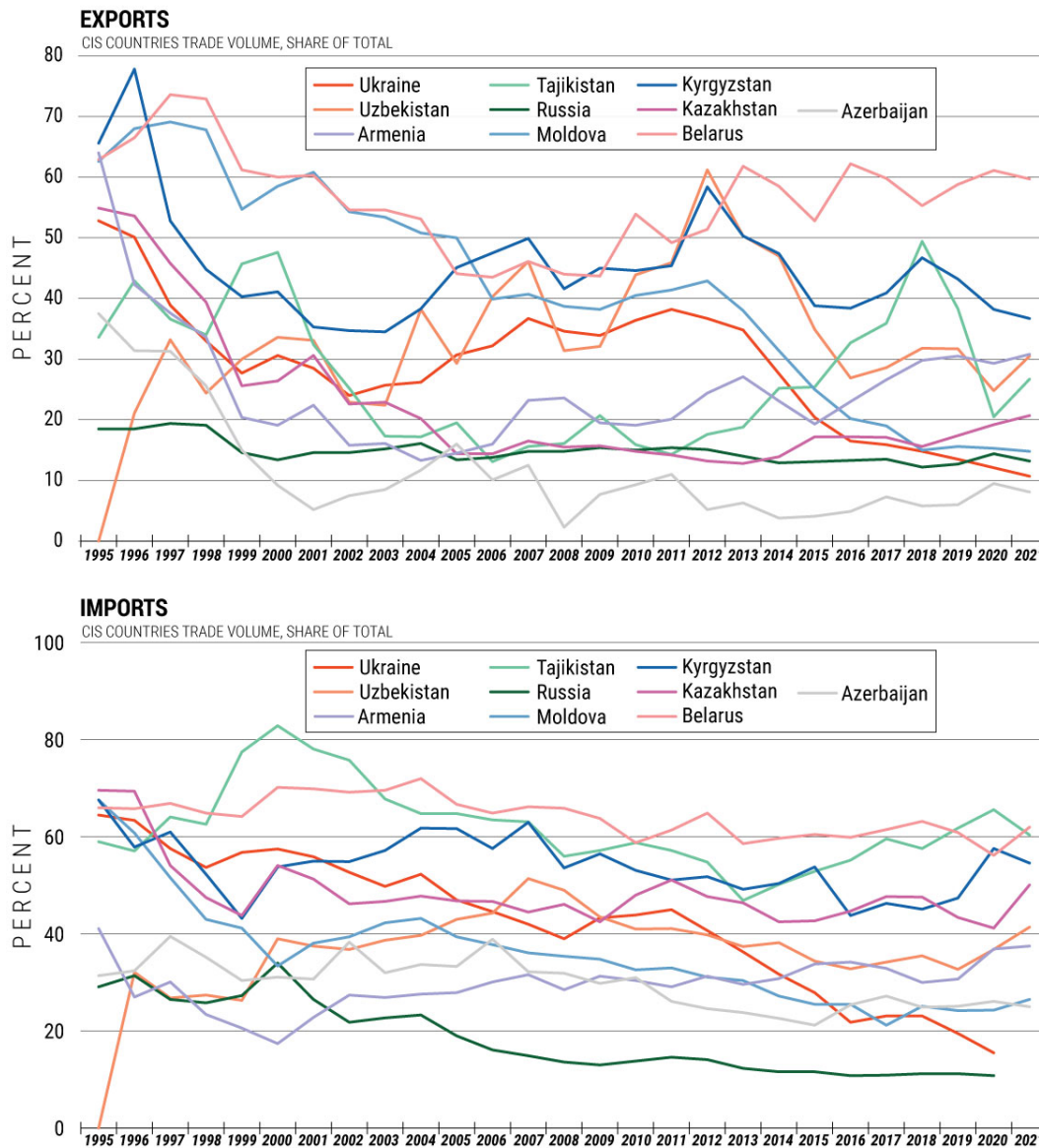
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In late 1991, during the tumultuous final days of the Soviet Union, the leaders of Russia, Belarus and Ukraine came together to form the CIS. (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan would all eventually join.) For Moscow, the organization was meant to facilitate political, military and economic cooperation among the post-Soviet republics. As

the strongest by far of the newly independent countries, Russia could use the CIS to help it recover its lost influence over the former USSR. After its first few years of existence, however, the CIS lost most of its unifying momentum – as well as two of its members, Georgia and Ukraine, while Moldova plans to complete its exit before the end of 2024. (Georgia withdrew following its war with Russia in 2008, while Ukraine, though never a full member, formally ended its participation in 2018.) In 2011, eight member states signed an agreement to form a free trade area, replacing more than 100 bilateral agreements regulating trade among CIS states, but this, too, failed to provide an impetus for integration. More than three decades after its creation, the CIS is not the platform for unified action and conflict resolution that its founders had hoped.

Perhaps it was just ahead of its time. Their sovereignty only just restored, the newly independent republics were eager to build their own relationships and wary of relinquishing control over their economic and trade policies to Moscow. As their independent foreign and trade policies took shape, the CIS members gradually traded with each another less and less and separated into two blocs: one focused on the European Union, the other on China. Even Russia deprioritized the CIS while it boosted trade with Europe and China, which gobbled up Russian hydrocarbons and minerals in exchange for finished goods and newer technologies. Moreover, smaller and more narrowly focused organizations were created, such as the Eurasian Economic Union, which excluded Western-leaning states such as Ukraine and Moldova as well as Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan.

### Share of CIS Trade in Member Countries at an All-Time Low



Source: CIS Stat

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Despite its disappointments, the CIS remains the most inclusive post-Soviet association, and as such, it is still vital to Moscow’s interests. Seeking to revitalize the organization, the Kremlin has deemphasized political and military cooperation – which, because of the war in Ukraine, might expose Russia’s partners to sanctions – and instead pushed for greater economic and cultural exchange, where the third-party risks are lower. Such concerns are particularly salient for the

Caucasus and Central Asia, where the economies are not in a position to withstand isolation from the West.

In fact, almost 33 years removed from the Soviet Union's dissolution, Moscow can now see the CIS not through the lens of nostalgia for the USSR but as an instrument to develop consumer markets and new transport corridors in the areas to its south and southeast. In addition to cushioning the damage of sanctions, a more integrated CIS would support Russia's ability to exert influence along its periphery. For example, conflicts in the South Caucasus between Armenia and Azerbaijan might be more susceptible to Russian mediation, and potential threats from more distant regions, particularly the Middle East, might be easier to contain before they encroach on direct Russian interests. A reinvigorated CIS would also help Russia counter efforts by not only the EU and the U.S. but also China to weaken the Kremlin's grip in the former Soviet states.

Given its financial difficulties and ongoing war, the Kremlin is limited in its ability to hold the CIS states together with offers of credit and security guarantees, but it still has a good bit of leverage. At last week's CIS summit, for instance, Moscow hosted Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan, whose government has condemned Russia and the post-Soviet military alliance it unofficially leads, the Collective Security Treaty Organization, for their failure to defend Armenia against an Azerbaijani invasion in 2020. As a result of the disagreement, Pashinyan shunned last year's CIS summit and froze Yerevan's participation in the CSTO. At this year's summit, however, Moscow accepted Pashinyan's demand that it remove Russian border guards and troops from several Armenian regions. In addition to an apparently more accommodating approach to disputes with its CIS partners, Russia has highlighted their similar cultures and shared past. For example, during the CIS summit, Putin called attention to the fact that 2025 will mark the 80th anniversary of the Allied victory in the Great Patriotic War, Russia's name for World War II.

There is some evidence that Moscow's renewed focus on CIS cooperation is bearing fruit. In the past seven months, for example, Russia's trade turnover with the other CIS countries has grown by 7.7 percent – data that Moscow will use to support its push for more integration. In addition, the use of national currencies in mutual settlements among CIS states currently exceeds 85 percent and continues to rise. Furthermore, development of alternate transport routes, such as the International North-South Transport Corridor, will support the movement of freight between Russia, Iran, Saudi Arabia and India, along the way traversing CIS states Armenia, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.

Nevertheless, the CIS is still creaking with the strain of multiple participants each pursuing its own interests, even when it comes at the expense of other members. New frictions and even conflicts between participants cannot be excluded. Most notably, Armenia and Azerbaijan still have not reached a peace agreement. Meanwhile, Central Asian officials are beginning to voice dissatisfaction with Russia's increasingly nativist migration policy.

The next informal meeting of CIS leaders is planned for late December in St. Petersburg. The Kremlin will likely use the occasion to continue to try to revive the organization as a Russia-centric platform for post-Soviet countries to cooperate, settle disputes and exert influence on a wider stage. This time, Moscow is focusing on economic cooperation to draw member countries in, while scaling back political and military involvement and showing openness to concessions. However, internal constraints make this a difficult task.

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