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The Commonwealth of Independent States: A Symbolic Union or Another USSR?

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The Commonwealth of Independent States:
A Symbolic Union or Another USSR?

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The Division of Social Studies
Of Bard College

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Introduction

The fall of the Soviet Union was a massive event that drastically changed all of the lands and people once dominated by the mighty Soviet Union. It was the superpower that won the Second World War with the Allies and went head-to-head with the United States for decades in the Cold War. But it did not last forever.

The events of the late 1980's up to 1991 splintered the Soviet Union and the various republics that made up the enormous USSR were given a choice to remain in the union or reject it and choose their own respective paths. Some agreed to remain with a new USSR treaty and reforms, while others refused. Georgia, Ukraine, and the Baltic States were among those who rejected the New Union Treaty and looked towards independence. While the New Union Treaty of the USSR was planned, it did not come to pass and the Soviet Union ultimately collapsed in late 1991. A separate economic, political, and military union called the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), was created by the new leaders of Belarus, Russia, and Ukraine as a way forward after the Soviet Union. Some who rejected the New Union Treaty of the USSR joined the CIS, like Georgia and Ukraine. Others like the Baltic States rejected it, as they did with the New Union Treaty. The CIS was ultimately led by the Russian Federation, the legally recognized successor of the Soviet Union.

This thesis will explore the New Union Treaty of 1991, the new laws and reforms it proposed and why it ultimately failed. This thesis will also study the countries that did not join the New Union Treaty, but did join the CIS. What were their reasons for refusing the USSR, but joining with the new Russian Federation in a separate union? What was the purpose of the Commonwealth of Independent States? The CIS is largely considered as a symbolic union and one that has no real meaning or effect. However, there is more to the CIS than one may suspect.

The initial creation of the union, its original purpose and its evolution are important factors as to why it is an important part of Russia's foreign policy.

The aim of this thesis is to highlight the importance of the CIS for Russia and how it helped Russia regain control and power throughout the former territories of the USSR.

CHAPTER 1: The USSR - Foundations and the Collapse

History: The Soviet Union

Throughout the course of history, Eastern Europe has seen and endured several phases of the Russian Empire. In one form or another, a Russian power has been present with borders stretching from the Asian continent and the Pacific Ocean to Europe's front door. Imperial Russia (1721-1917) also once held control of a huge part of North America, by way of Alaska. To say it was large is an understatement. Russia has always enjoyed influence and power in the world and has always been hugely relevant in both positive and negative ways in the history of its existence. It can be argued still that Russia in the modern day is also an empire.

The last formal empire that Russia controlled was the Soviet Union, which lived for sixty-nine years from 1922 to 1991. It was an empire made up of fifteen member republics - Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Georgia, Azerbaijan, Lithuania, Moldova, Latvia, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Armenia, Turkmenistan, and Estonia. Russia was the head state of the union and made all decisions for the Soviet Union as a whole. Quite a few of the republics were forced to join the Soviet Union, either by invasion or some other manner that gave the states no other choice. Georgia was invaded by forces of the Soviet Union under the order of Vladimir Lenin in 1922. The Baltic States (Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia) were also invaded and annexed into the Soviet Union in 1940 by Joseph Stalin following the agreement between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union to do so. In the early 1920's, Azerbaijan had pro-Soviet political figures installed by the Soviet Union and therefore "voluntarily" joined the new Russian Empire.

The October Revolution of 1917 was a fight led by Vladimir Lenin against the tyranny of the Russian Empire and its Czar, Nikolas II. People in this massive land were tired of Russian rule and oppression, living and eating like kings while the common people endlessly worked and

grew hateful of their rulers. Lenin's momentum for support in the revolution and his eventual success was fueled by a noble cause to destroy a tyrannical empire in Russia and make things better, or at least unlike what they were under the Czar. But did those things really come to be? How was Lenin going to create something that good without the corruption of his newfound power getting in the way?

After the revolution, Russia continued to be under the rule of a line of ruthless leaders, the only thing that was changed were names and appearances. Lenin utilized communism in a way that swayed people into thinking that he was a righteous and moral leader who sought to destroy unjust rule and the rich trampling the poor to gain more wealth. It was merely to disguise a new Russian monster, one where Lenin ruled with crushing totalitarianism. In his Soviet Union, mentions of Russia or a Russian dominant government were sparse in official documents, labels, and other symbols of the USSR; although all leaders, all decisions, and all power was concentrated in Moscow. Even Lenin's right hand man, Joseph Stalin - who was a Georgian, Russified himself. Stalin was born Ioseb Besiarionisdze Jughashvili and changed his name to Joseph Vissarionovich Stalin. Anyone who did not know his past would have assumed he was the most Russian of them all.

Lenin took his dedication to communism to a new extreme when he gained power after a successful revolution in his home country of Russia. Despite it being a different type of government compared with Czarist Russia, there was no real change as to the role of the leaders and the role of the population. Lenin's moderate presentation of himself and attempts to appear as one of the people did not hide his ruthless manners of ruling the USSR. Lenin spearheaded a new type of dictatorship that looked to appear "necessary" and in service of the people. Lenin believed in a "dictatorship of the proletariat" and enforced it with orders to use any means

necessary, including extreme violence.¹ Lenin's new type of dictatorship was taken to another level with his successor Stalin. Even the title of Stalin's role as the leader of the USSR suggested that he was not a totalitarian dictator whose word was law. Stalin was known as the General Secretary of the Communist Party and he wore a simple military style tunic although he never did more in a conflict than give orders from the safety of a bunker. And despite his down-to-earth appearance, Stalin enjoyed a mountain of luxuries at the cost of any price it took. For example, Stalin once displaced an entire village while on holiday near the Black Sea because they dared to speak against something he did to acquire a special holiday dish, which also happened to deplete the village's fish supply; those who protested were all sent to labor camps in Kazakhstan.

The dictatorship employed by Lenin and Stalin ruled over the massive union that was the USSR, which was officially formed on December 30th, 1922. A new treaty was drafted under seemingly good natured and legally just approval from a congress of the future Soviet republics. They all came together and signed a declaration to join the union, as if they had a choice otherwise.² The Bolsheviks were by all means in charge of everyone else, and they merely made it appear that the Soviet Union was a fair and equal union where republics joined voluntarily and had more power on paper than they had in reality. Member republics who joined "voluntarily" had leaders or representatives, who were controlled by the Bolsheviks in Russia well before they officially joined the USSR, even if the majority of the people in their respective countries did not want a union with the Soviets.

Some member republics, such as Georgia and the Baltics, were either invaded or forced to comply with the Bolsheviks because they had no alternative. Stalin attempted to conquer Finland as well in 1940, but the invasion was not the success he wanted. It was not a choice that

¹ Stalin's Secret War, Tolstoy, Pgs. 4, 38.

² <https://soviethistory.msu.edu/1924-2/union-treaty/union-treaty-texts/first-union-constitution/> - Drafted by the Second Congress of Soviets, Jan. 13th, 1924

came from the people of countries absorbed into the USSR, but rather the desire of the ruling party of the union in Moscow and more times than not, they got what they wanted.

One of the things that was done to mask this Russian domination was the name of the union itself, which did not reference Russia or an empire of any kind, although the territory that made up the Soviet Union was largely based on the territory held by Czarist Russia. And the main camouflage mechanism to disguise the clear Russian domination was the inclusion of “representatives”, from each of the republics that were to join the union and the actual language of the new Union Treaty itself. This can be compared to a parliamentary system or even Congress in the United States, where each state has some representation of their own and there are specific mechanisms that give people a voice, to make sure that fairness or democracy exists. The federal government may not have had absolute power over their Soviet republics, but equality in the USSR did not work as designed.

The USSR seemed to offer a great union that was on the noble path of combating the tyranny of capitalism. Article One of the treaty stated that all republics would work together in the drafting and implementation of laws, economies, and justice throughout the USSR, with a big emphasis on equality and respect for all republics to have their say.³ This article was completely contradicted by the fact that any and all government officials in Soviet republics were appointed and controlled by the Russian Communist Party in Moscow, nobody would have disagreed with any “suggestions” made by the ruling party in Moscow because they were more like orders, and opposition was met with the harshest of punishments. For example, Stalin ordered the mass resettlement and deportations of more than 1.5 million “non-Russian” people during and after the

³ [https://soviethistory.msu.edu/1924-2/union-treaty/union-treaty-texts/first-union-constitution/Drafted by the Second Congress of Soviets, Jan. 13th, 1924](https://soviethistory.msu.edu/1924-2/union-treaty/union-treaty-texts/first-union-constitution/Drafted%20by%20the%20Second%20Congress%20of%20Soviets,%20Jan.%2013th,%201924)

Second World War. Some of the official reasons for this were opposition to Soviet rule, separatism from the USSR, and collaboration with occupying German forces during WWII.⁴

One article included in the treaty was solely on the matter that each member republic that was a part of the Soviet Union had the right to leave the union if they desired to do so, “Article 4 - each Republic retains the right to freely withdraw from the union.”⁵ According to the Union Treaty, any USSR member republic had the right to make decisions for themselves as long as those decisions were reasonable and insignificant enough for the ruling Communist Party leaders not to care. While no USSR republic officially attempted to secede from the USSR using the power of Article 4, no one can know how the federal government would have reacted. But judging by the punishments given to separatists and opposition, one can imagine the reaction of the federal USSR government if a member republic attempted to use Article 4. Equality and freedom of sovereignty was an illusion that none of the Soviet republics actually had access to.

The Nations within the Union

Many member republics in the USSR had strong independent national identities and were included in this Russia dominant union, in a repetition of a very recent past. The Bolsheviks were wary of the threat that nationalism posed to their union. Why would nations who were recently freed from a Russian empire willingly be part of another one? Love for one’s nation would give good reason to resist a foreign and historically negative empirical force. The Bolsheviks thought ahead and constructed a specific government department solely to handle nationalities within the union. Lenin appointed Stalin as the Commissar of Nationality Affairs to study the matter and solve any potential problems the various nationalities in the USSR may have introduced; Stalin held the position from 1918 to 1923.

⁴ <https://www.loc.gov/exhibits/archives/intn.html#depo>

⁵ [https://soviethistory.msu.edu/1924-2/union-treaty/union-treaty-texts/first-union-constitution/Drafted by the Second Congress of Soviets, Jan. 13th, 1924](https://soviethistory.msu.edu/1924-2/union-treaty/union-treaty-texts/first-union-constitution/Drafted%20by%20the%20Second%20Congress%20of%20Soviets,%20Jan.%2013th,%201924)

According to Terry Martin in his book, *The Soviet Affirmative Action Empire*, the Bolsheviks employed clever ideas to suppress nationalism without force or antagonism. Martin writes that Lenin and Stalin proposed that by granting each member republic of the Soviet Union a form of nationhood, Soviet leaders would counter nationalism in those states and reduce or decapitate resistance to the USSR. Illusion was the preferred method to keeping all Soviet republics under control, while the masters in Moscow held on tightly, “By granting the forms of nationhood, Martin argues the Soviet state could split the above-class national alliance.”⁶ There are distinctions between a nation and a state, being that nations are a people in an area who have shared history, cultures, and values, but they do not necessarily have power to rule themselves. States on the other hand have this power which is why the Bolsheviks only gave what they thought was the lesser of the two. This created a camouflage effect for the head government of the Soviet Union; giving the member republics a seeming recognition of equality and nationality separate from Russia while retaining the powers of statehood for themselves. While the various nations and cultures were again absorbed into yet another empire that controlled them, these nations received something that was not offered by the previous Russian Empire during the Czar’s days; a form of recognition and status within the union. For this “gift”, the people and cultures that received recognition and cultural power formed a loyalty to Moscow. After all, why would these peoples have an animosity towards a government that seemed to offer them some sort of respect?

Martin then writes that a nationalities policy was created and approved in the Soviet Union in April of 1923, that further camouflaged the reality that the Soviet Union was just another Russian empire. The policy gave respect and recognition to nations and different ethnicities within the Soviet Union, and promised to support them as long as they stayed

⁶ Martin; *The Soviet Affirmative Action Empire*, Pg. 5

obedient to the USSR and did not cause conflict against the union.⁷ Language, culture, and all other unique parts of nations were granted and supported by the federal government. In reality, USSR member republics got what they thought they wanted without getting what they really wanted. It was all a carefully crafted blindfold to mask the domination of the Russian Communist Party in the USSR, but it also helped the USSR form a sort of bond to many of the indigenous communities in the union. Articles and resolutions were used as a means to keep everyone in line and not appear as an outright empire, and possibly to appear better than other states and unions.

The strategy from Lenin and Stalin to give nations within the Soviet Union the rights of nationhood and to support them in their growth proved to be effective. Under the previous Russian Empire, nations other than Russia had no support or recognition of any kind. According to Yuri Slezkine in his article *The USSR as a Communal Apartment*, Stalin argued that strengthening that nationalism of minorities within the USSR would create a trust between the ruler and the ruled, and a more cohesive federal state would exist.⁸ Countries like Ukraine and Belarus were given the freedom to speak and teach their unique languages. People and their culture were allowed to open up and be themselves, which was a freedom that was not available previously. While it was true that these countries were still ruled by another, it wasn't as bad as before and it made the new rulers appear better in contrast. This would probably not be nearly as effective without the oppressive rules employed in the Russian Empire.

However, despite the rights and support of nationality for each nation within the Soviet Union, it was still a Russian Empire. Slezkine writes that while there were language freedoms in each nation that desired to have them, Russian was still softly used as the “lingua franca”. While

⁷ Martin; *The Soviet Affirmative Action Empire*, Pg. 5-6

⁸ Slezkine; *The USSR as a Communal Apartment* Pg. 419

“Russification” was not as forced as under the Russian Empire, the Russian language was still the default language used in the union among all republics. Cyrillic was the alphabet used, and every school had to teach Russian as a mandatory language. This use of the Russian language in countries outside of Russia is still prominent today. For example, Kazakhstan listed Russian as an official state language in their 1995 constitution and is still in effect today well after the Soviet Union's collapse. And up until recent changes in language law, Ukraine used Russian as an official language, often broadcasting news and making shows in Russian. In simpler terms, during the days of the USSR, Russian was the English of that part of the world; if anyone wanted to do anything, they had to know Russian.

Because of the language and culture domination, the word Soviet became synonymous with Russia, because it was clearly the country that was the head of the entire union. All official documents, broadcasts, inter-union relations, and foreign relations were done so with the Russian language. And the Russian Soviet Republic had the largest population and land area in the USSR. To look at it in a simplified view, the Soviet Union was a massive residential apartment building with many diverse patrons living inside and Moscow was the landlord, only this one didn't kick anyone out.

The Second World War created an interesting patriotism throughout the Soviet realm that further unified the huge USSR. The Nazis became a real threat when they invaded the Soviet Union in 1941 and there was something for all people in the Soviet Union to fear besides their own government - an enemy that sought to destroy the USSR and occupy its lands. Although the USSR was already an oppressive empire, the Nazis were made out to be much worse via Soviet propaganda, (even though the Nazis and the USSR were allied prior as well). WWII era propaganda in the Soviet Union was so powerful and effective that it convinced people even

decades later that the Soviet Union was different, and possibly even better than anything that succeeded it.

An example of this can be seen in modern day Georgia, where many people of the older generation still hold Stalin in high esteem. Despite any truths of his crushing dictatorship, many Georgians still see Stalin as a hero of the Second World War who defeated Hitler's evil armies. In an interview conducted with my grandmother she said, "Stalin was a great man, he saved all of us from annihilation. Whatever bad things anyone says about him, everything he did was necessary." ⁹

Another example is of how people differentiate Soviet and Russian among older generations of former Soviet countries. On a topic of the battle of Stalingrad, a question was asked as to how the Russians repelled the Germans. My uncle said, "No, no, it wasn't the Russians, it was the Soviets who repelled the Germans. It was different back then, we were all one." ¹⁰ War brought something external to focus on for everyone in the union, they were all under threat. Victory in the end only made Soviet patriotism stronger.

Although there are some conflicting views on the Soviet Union among the older generation in Georgia, the thoughts of Russia as a separate entity are very different. Today, a majority of people in Georgia are against Russia and the thought of being under its rule or influence.

The general consensus of older Georgians I have spoken with hold the Soviet Union era in a highly positive light which confirms that the victory in the Second World War inspired an image of greatness and patriotism among the population in the USSR and of Stalin, who in their outlook, saved them from the nightmare of the invading German forces. It was an effective way

⁹ Interview with Grandmother on Stalin, Conducted November 23rd, 2022

¹⁰ Interview with Uncle on Soviet Union, Conducted on November 26th, 2022

to continue the illusion that the USSR was a good place under good moral leadership during that time.

1991: Gorbachev, the New Union Treaty, and the Rise of Yeltsin

After decades of unwavering solidity and head to head competition with the United States, the USSR experienced a change in leadership that eventually led to its undoing. With the leadership of Mikhail Gorbachev, the Soviet Union had been put through the back breaking process of *Perestroika* (1985-1991), which was an attempt from Gorbachev to revitalize the economy of the USSR and give the state an overall refresh. It was a novel and unorthodox approach to leadership of the USSR, and it created fissures within the government and the people which grew worse with every passing year of Gorbachev's glasnost (openness) policy.

Gorbachev's openness policy brought changes to all sides of the USSR and effectively shattered what the USSR had been since its creation. The once strong and harsh totalitarian state of the Soviet Union drastically transformed into something lesser in a few short years under Gorbachev's leadership. Soviet troops were removed from Afghanistan, the Berlin Wall came down, Eastern European "satellite states" (countries not officially in the USSR, but still under its influence) regained control of themselves and shed their communism, and the Cold War had halted. But none of these events happened overnight or out a sudden change of heart.

The years prior to Gorbachev's takeover as leader saw little to no economic growth in the Soviet Union which was a huge problem for the superpower while in the middle of the Cold War with the United States. Ronald Reagan was the president of the United States at the time Gorbachev took over, and was leading the Cold War battle with a heavy advantage over the USSR; technological advancements and a surge in arms buildups from the West was of great concern to the competitive Soviet Union and Gorbachev's first mission as leader of the USSR

was to catch up. Gorbachev implemented the first version of the *Perestroika* policy in 1985, which placed a priority on boosting the economy quickly. Some strategies in this initial version of Perestroika involved a higher pressure placed on the labor industry in the USSR along with the restriction of alcohol sales, namely vodka. These implementations were meant to make the USSR as productive as possible in an attempt to see sudden growth in the economy. This initial version of Perestroika lasted only one year until Gorbachev took the policy in a different direction in mid-1986, one which he thought would be much more effective.¹¹

The second phase of Perestroika from 1986 onwards saw more radical changes in the USSR, such as the introduction of competitive elections and the encouragement of the emergence of opposition parties and groups. In 1987, Gorbachev introduced a “democratization” focused campaign within the USSR government in Moscow in an attempt to isolate his individual power in a battle with older conservatives within the Communist Party who were loyal to older and more strict ideologies of the USSR. This campaign brought opposition to Gorbachev’s rivals in the government, opposition who were propped up by Gorbachev, and therefore were allied with him and supported his intentions with the direction of the USSR. Gorbachev claimed that the only way to refresh the USSR economy was to modernize and do away with old Stalinist strategies and embrace a more left-wing approach to government. Part of Gorbachev’s plan in an attempt to gain more power and support in the whole of the USSR was his *Glasnost* (openness) policy, which granted never before seen freedoms and rights in the USSR such as - freedom of expression, more access to information, and a relaxation of censorship in an attempt to create a more interactive society. Gorbachev hoped that these changes would return greater support for his leadership and for his vision of reforms, but decades of bottled up oppression and harshness caused nationalism and opposition to soar in a handful of

¹¹ Dunlop, John B. “Rise of Russia and the Fall of the Soviet Empire: Gorbachev and Russia” pp. 5-6

USSR republics such as The Baltic States, nations in the Caucasus, and Moldova.¹² Gorbachev's "democratization" produced the opposite effects desired and only added new unexpected problems to his list of many. His plan to bring the USSR together through openness and revitalize the USSR economically and politically backfired because many USSR republics were forced to be part of the union, and Gorbachev's openness allowed them to voice their opinions, which did not include support and love of the USSR.

Strong resistant republics like the Baltic States stood out, and the USSR no longer had the same fear factor and level of control for these republics with Gorbachev's Glasnost changes. Gorbachev had no clue how nations within the USSR truly felt about their inclusion in the union, and he expected support for his leadership and strong Soviet patriotism from everyone. After realizing his mistake, he recognized that something new was necessary for the USSR to survive and to keep everyone happy. In his book, *On My Country and The World*, Gorbachev recalled the new desires from a few specific republics under Soviet rule, "the Baltic region, from Georgia, and from other republics, I see they are all thinking about a new conception of the Union."¹³ In his writings, Gorbachev recalled that he believed that keeping the union together with force would have failed. However, this thinking only came after failure in his use of force. Gorbachev tried to correct his mistake of granting the freedom of speech and opposition by reverting to the old Soviet methods of force and violence to quell resistance. This was his directive under the Brezhnev Doctrine, introduced by Leonid Brezhnev in 1968, allowing the Soviet Union to intervene and force a socialist country to remain socialist if there were signs of a revolution. And while USSR republics were not independent countries, a few republics attempted the actions that called for the Brezhnev Doctrine to be enforced. An example was the crackdown of protests on

¹² <https://www.loc.gov/exhibits/archives/intn.html#pere>

¹³ Gorbachev, Mikhail "On my Country and The World" Pg. 106

April 9th, 1989 in the Georgian capital Tbilisi, well after Gorbachev introduced his openness policy. After thousands of protesters took to the streets of central Tbilisi to protest against the USSR, Soviet troops were ordered by Gorbachev to use force and violence to shut it down. 20 people were killed as a result of this crackdown, and hundreds were left injured.¹⁴ It was too late for Gorbachev to reverse course and get things under control using force and this event only increased Georgian resistance and gave a boost to nationalism and disdain for the Soviet Union and led to the rise of ultra-nationalist Zviad Gamsakhurdia as a leader in Georgia's resistance against the USSR.

Other examples were opposition movements in the Baltic States, who were all allied in their resistance. One particular protest known as The Baltic Way took place on the 50th anniversary of the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact which was key in the Baltic States' inclusion in the USSR. This demonstration took place in August 1989, and involved a human chain made up of 2 millions people that stretched a line between all capital cities of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania.¹⁵ Later in March 1990, Lithuania declared independence from the USSR, and although it took almost a year, the USSR responded with force in January 1991 when Soviet troops attacked the Vilnius TV tower on January 11th, 1991 and the Lithuanian Parliament two days later on January 13th, 1991. The clash between Soviet troops and defending Lithuanian civilians led to the death of fourteen people and hundreds of injuries.

While law from the USSR nationalities policy promoted support and equality among all nations in the entire Soviet Union, there was a lot of wrongdoing against the various nationalities by the Soviet government. In her book *Nationalism, Ethnic Pressures, and the Breakup of the Soviet Union*, author Astrid S. Tuminez writes that the cohesion of the USSR was greatly

¹⁴ <https://www.rferl.org/a/georgia-soviet-demonstrations/25324233.html>

¹⁵ <https://www.thebalticway.eu/en/history/>

compromised by the time Gorbachev took charge. After decades of oppression and complete ignorance from previous Soviet leadership, there was a lot of animosity towards the USSR from countries like the Baltics, Georgia, Moldova, and Armenia. Nationalities policies implemented by Lenin and Stalin were timebombs bound to go off after enough time. Once Gorbachev granted the freedoms that Glasnost (openness) brought, there was no going back and use of force was not nearly as effective under Gorbachev compared with previous USSR administrations. Prior to Gorbachev's leadership and policy changes, there is no evidence of large scale opposition movements or resistance in the Soviet Union due to the effectiveness of control in the state.

Gorbachev also saw a nation rise in his own back yard due to his encouragement of the formation of opposition groups and the new freedoms that Glasnost granted. A Russian politician named Boris Yeltsin was rising in popularity among the Russian people during the years of Perestroika/Glasnost. Yeltsin formed a bond with the Russian population by directly communicating with Russian labor workers and ordinary people on issues with their lives and work. In early 1989, he was quoted as saying, "all peoples of the USSR must have de facto economic, political and cultural independence."¹⁶ which went against the idea of what the USSR was then, and what Gorbachev was trying to continue. Yeltsin focused on highlighting issues that the majority of Russian people were experiencing at the time such as food, housing, crime, labor, and other parts of the lives of everyday people. He formed particularly strong relations with the working-class in Russia after supporting them following the miners strike in July of 1989. Yeltsin appealed to the working-class, and told them they shouldn't have to live and work in such low quality jobs and environments making money for a government that did not offer anything in return. With his support of the working-class and ordinary everyday Russian people, the support was returned and he was elected into the USSR Supreme Soviet in

¹⁶ Dunlop, Rise of Russia and Fall of Soviet Empire: Yeltsin and Russia pp. 44

the summer of 1989, which was the highest legislative body of the Soviet Union and was responsible for passing laws, managing the national budget, and the election/appointment of government officials in the USSR. But instead of getting comfortable with his political gains, Yeltsin's goal was to challenge Gorbachev's leadership. In August 1990, while appealing to the miners in the Kemerovo Oblast (region) of Russia, Yeltsin introduced his intention to declare Russia as a separate sovereign state from the USSR, solidifying his leadership role of the Russian people and increasing his chances of leading the most important USSR Republic down the same path as the Baltics and Georgia. This was yet another problem for Gorbachev that was not going to be resolved easily.

The upkeep of Gorbachev's perestroika and further plans for economic and political reforms of the USSR required a restructuring of spending. Undesirable sacrifices were necessary to keep himself in power and to try and stabilize the USSR after the mess of glasnost and perestroika. One such sacrifice was the decades-long competition for world domination with the United States. Both superpowers were armed to the teeth and ready to destroy each other at a moment's notice. Upkeep of such military and nuclear readiness was extremely costly for both but the USSR paled in comparison to the financial strength of the United States; Gorbachev chose to cut back and prioritize his Perestroika economic reforms. Together with the United States in 1987, the USSR agreed to drastically reduce their nuclear arsenals and 4 years later in 1991, the two would agree to begin the Strategic-Arms Reduction Talks also known as START.¹⁷ In addition to these agreements, Gorbachev ordered a mass exodus of Soviet troops in places of former USSR interest, such as Afghanistan and Angola. He also withdrew USSR support for the

¹⁷ <https://2001-2009.state.gov/r/pa/ho/time/rd/108225.htm>

communist governments in Cuba and Vietnam. The tension that the Cold War held over the entire world had relaxed and greatly deescalated with Gorbachev's changes.

Another USSR asset that Gorbachev chose to sacrifice in light of his Perestroika reforms was the Warsaw Pact and the Soviet hold over Eastern Europe. The Warsaw Pact, officially created in 1955, was the USSR's military alliance and was similar to NATO. The two were natural rivals at the time and were important factors of the Cold War. It defined which superpower each country in Europe stood with. For the Soviet-led Warsaw Pact, it was Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, East Germany, Hungary, Poland and Romania. These countries were defined as "satellite states" of the USSR, meaning that they were heavily influenced and indirectly controlled by Moscow while not being official members of the Soviet Union. The end of the USSR's grip on Eastern Europe started when the Berlin wall came down in November of 1989 and Germany was officially reunified in October of 1990. Then NATO Secretary General Manfred Wörner was quoted as saying, "a vital step has been taken to overcome the division of Europe."¹⁸ The Fall of the Wall and Gorbachev's new policies initiated a chain reaction throughout the satellite states; the Hungarian government introduced the Sinatra Doctrine in 1989 and was adopted as a term for letting states decide their own foreign policy and alignment, like the song "My Way", by Frank Sinatra. Satellite states started to use this term more to push their way out of Moscow's orbit. With that development, Gorbachev renounced the Brezhnev Doctrine and chose not to force the satellite states to stay on the side of the USSR. The acceptance of this hands-off policy towards the satellite states was made official on October 25th, 1989, when Foreign Ministry Spokesman for the USSR, Gennadi Gerasimov said, "We now have the Frank Sinatra doctrine, he has a song, 'I (Did) It My Way' so every country

¹⁸ https://www.nato.int/cps/us/natohq/declassified_136311.htm

decides on its own which road to take”.¹⁹ With no interference from the USSR, the Warsaw Pact officially ended in 1991.

Perestroika and Glasnost caused cracks in the mighty Soviet Union. Opposition groups, nationalism, and economic problems were threatening the collapse of the USSR and to put Gorbachev out of a job. There were too many issues happening at the same time and the more there were, the less options Gorbachev had to control the situation. In August of 1990, Gorbachev suggested and supported a union of sovereign states as the future of a reformed USSR, one where no one was forced to be a member and given the freedom to decide on membership. In his book *On my Country and The World*, Gorbachev is quoted as saying, “I am for a Union of sovereign states, in which everyone would feel comfortable”.²⁰ However, it wasn’t about the comfort of the USSR republics, but the continued existence of the USSR as a whole and his role as its leader. Gorbachev charged a draft committee to begin work on a new constitution for the USSR known as the New Union Treaty or Nine Plus One Treaty in November of 1990. This treaty proposed many drastic changes that looked to alter the reality of what the Soviet Union and what it had been since its creation. In the New Union Treaty, under the category *Basic Principles* included the article, “First Principle: Each republic - party to the treaty - is a sovereign state”²¹ Along with this right to sovereignty, Gorbachev’s treaty offered member republics of his new USSR full power to run their own matters without interference or the blocks of a centralized USSR government like before, “Principle Five: The states forming the Union have the fullness of political power, independently determine their national-state.”²² The treaty also offered states the right to manage their own foreign affairs, travel and leave the

¹⁹ <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1989-10-25-mn-745-story.html>

²⁰ Gorbachev, Mikhail “On my Country and The World” Pg. 111

²¹ <http://museumreforms.ru/node/14039>

²² <http://museumreforms.ru/node/14039>

territories of the union (which was not a freedom in the USSR previously). And one of the most important laws of the treaty, written in Section 2 under Union Structure, read “Membership of the Union is voluntary.”²³ This voluntary membership was also a right included in the original 1922 Soviet Union Constitution, but was never exercised by any USSR republic while it was “in effect”. The New Union Treaty also included an open door policy for republics not affiliated with the USSR to join the union if they so desired. If it was actually ever signed into law, the New Union Treaty offered a decentralized Soviet Union that would have stripped power in Moscow to a minimum and change the lives of citizens within the USSR, but Gorbachev would keep the power of a leader. And while this treaty was never anything that Gorbachev intended, his primary concern was to preserve as much of the USSR as he could or let it crash down naturally without attempted interference.

To keep consistency with his openness and democratization direction, Gorbachev decided to hold a vote on officially implementing the New Union Treaty. A referendum was held on March 17th, 1991 to refresh the Soviet Union and to preserve as much of it as possible. Despite Gorbachev’s offer, the Baltic States, Armenia, Georgia, and Moldova did not even participate in the referendum to vote the treaty or any of its new reforms in. The Baltic State rejected the New Union Treaty and pushed for an exit from the USSR instead of compromises to remain in the union. The Russian Soviet Republic under the direction of Yeltsin supported the renewed USSR, but not without demanding a price. Yeltsin required that Russia have its own president if Gorbachev wanted his signature for the New Union Treaty, and that president would be elected in June of the same year. Yeltsin desired to split Russia away from the USSR and give it an identity of its own, so that when the time came he would ideally be its democratically elected leader, with a genuine popular mandate that would give him leverage with Gorbachev.

²³ <http://museumreforms.ru/node/14039>

After the March 1991 referendum, Georgia also rejected the New Union Treaty and declared itself independent from the USSR in May of 1991. Armenia and Moldova soon followed and rejected the New Union Treaty as well. And while Gorbachev could have forced all these dissenting republics to kneel and accept, he did not do this. After his failures in use of force, this was the only way to continue and save what he could of the USSR and to uphold his position of power.

With the six republics of Armenia, Georgia, Moldova, and the Baltic States refusing to join Gorbachev's new union, the nine republics which agreed to the new treaty and Gorbachev remained as willing participants of the New Union Treaty, which then unofficially became the Nine Plus One Agreement. The members that agreed to be a part of Gorbachev's project to reset the USSR were Ukraine, Belarus, Russia, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. These nine republics plus one (Gorbachev as the leader of the USSR) were in agreement to continue with a new USSR in 1991. The March 1991 referendum determined who signed onto the Nine Plus One Treaty project and who rejected it. The drafting of the treaty and its terms was planned to be signed into law in August of 1991.

In the meantime, Boris Yeltsin's position in the Supreme Soviet, and his growing popularity among the Russian people gave him a solid platform to challenge USSR leadership and take Russia in a new direction. The more time that passed with his new position and popularity, the more Yeltsin openly criticized the USSR government and called for economic and political change. He called for more democratic reforms within the organs of the USSR, including the depoliticization and removal of corruption in the KGB, the police, the army, and the judicial system. Yeltsin called for a government that the public would elect themselves and trust to lead them in the best direction. While he rose in popularity, another two-month long labor

strike happened in the Spring of 1991 that threatened the collapse of the Soviet economy. Those on strike appealed and chanted for Yeltsin to help them and to aid them in their demands for better working conditions and attention from the USSR government. In May of 1991, Yeltsin got the protesting strikers back to work by transferring jurisdiction of the coal-mining industry to Russian control, away from the USSR. This strengthened Yeltsin's bond with the labor community in Russia and helped him win the first Russian presidential election in June of 1991, winning around 58% of the vote against his opposition Nikolai Ryzhkov, an ally of Gorbachev. This development meant that Gorbachev did not have someone he could control in the position of Russia's president.²⁴

Gorbachev's actions and steps towards a new reality in the USSR provoked a coup attempt in August 1991, a few days before the signing of the New Union Treaty. Shortly before the signing of the treaty, scheduled for August 20th, 1991, a coup led by Gennadi Yanaev, USSR Defense Minister Dmitri Yazov, then leader of the KGB Vladimir Kryuchkov and other officials in the USSR government looked to halt any and all changes to the Soviet Union proposed by Gorbachev and instead return to the USSR that everyone knew before. Gorbachev was placed under house-arrest while on a trip to Crimea when the coup started. The members' primary reason to attempt the coup was to remove Gorbachev from power and stop the New Union Treaty from becoming a reality. USSR Prime Minister and coup member Valentin Pavlov said, "They (coup leaders) were afraid a power vacuum would develop in the country."²⁵ Gennadi Yanayev, another coup plotter, explained that the Emergency Leaders were, "forced and dictated by the vital need to save the economy from ruin, and the country from hunger, to prevent the

²⁴ <https://usrussiarelations.org/2/timeline/after-the-fall/3>

²⁵ theguardian.com/world/2021/aug/20/communist-hardliners-stage-coup-against-gorbachev-russia-1991

threat of a large-scale civil conflict with unpredictable consequences.”²⁶ The New Union Treaty was due to be drafted and signed that week and was canceled because of the coup. The coup leaders were trying to skirt labeling their actions as a coup or a deposition of Gorbachev, insisting that he had instead fallen ill on a trip to Crimea. There was an attempt to gain as much support for the coup leaders as possible, which is why then speaker of the Soviet parliament Anatoly Lukyanov announced while the coup was happening, that the Soviet parliament would be called to meet to endorse the need for “emergency powers” to be used. Lukyanov was overheard saying that he did not approve of the text of the New Union Treaty and that it would give too much power to the Soviet republics.²⁷

An instrumental part of the ultimate failure of the coup was that the members of the coup could not arrest Gorbachev’s rival, Boris Yeltsin, a prominent and rising leader of the Russian Soviet Republic. Where the coup leaders failed in gaining support for their cause among Russian people, Yeltsin succeeded. In the three days that the coup lasted, the leaders of the coup attempted to establish power and the right to rule the USSR but were met with a battle for leadership and legitimacy from Boris Yeltsin and the Russia that he represented. And with Gorbachev indisposed during the coup, Yeltsin was the most legitimate leader in Moscow at that time. On August 19th, 1991 the very first day of the coup, Yeltsin made a speech to the Russian people atop a tank about the coup members and their goals to take power by force. In his speech, Yeltsin said, “such methods of force are unacceptable, we proclaim all decisions and instructions of this committee to be unlawful.”²⁸ Yeltsin then appealed to the Russian people to rebuff the efforts of the coup members and not cease until the country returned to normalcy and rightful

²⁶ [theguardian.com/world/2021/aug/20/communist-hardliners-stage-coup-against-gorbachev-russia-1991](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/aug/20/communist-hardliners-stage-coup-against-gorbachev-russia-1991)

²⁷ [theguardian.com/world/2021/aug/20/communist-hardliners-stage-coup-against-gorbachev-russia-1991](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/aug/20/communist-hardliners-stage-coup-against-gorbachev-russia-1991)

²⁸ <https://web.viu.ca/davies/H102/Yelstin.speech.1991.htm>

constitutional rule. Yeltsin came out on top in a battle for leadership against the coup leaders because he was democratically elected and the coup leaders were forcing their power and the continuance of a USSR that people all over the Soviet Republics were resisting and criticizing. The people were what mattered in that moment, and whoever won their loyalty came out on top.

On the 22nd of August, 1991 three days after the coup had started, one of the key figures and leaders of the coup, Vladimir Kryuchkov, was arrested and things started to fall apart for the coup plotters.²⁹ They had no power, no support to continue their efforts for a coup, and were promoting the preservation of old ways and mechanisms of the union that did not work anymore. They also did not appear to have a plan for longevity of leadership as they were using “emergency powers” to rule and were not guaranteed to win the support of the Soviet parliament when it was called to decide the endorsement of the coup. This did not come to pass, however, because of the very short life of the coup.

On August 22nd, 1991 only three days after the coup started, it came crashing down. There was nothing the coup leaders could do to force their power anymore. Even the Soviet Union’s armed forces did not follow their commands. Yeltsin made a convincing and logical argument to the people on the unlawfulness of the coup and the methods carried out by its members, and there was no rebuttal from anyone within the coup committee to further justify their actions.

Post-Coup Developments

Gorbachev was freed after the coup and resumed his duties as leader of the USSR. It is unclear whether or not Gorbachev was totally imprisoned and cut off from control during the days of the coup or if he was willingly compliant during the coup as he made several phone calls to Moscow and even to outside countries, like the United States. After his release, Gorbachev

²⁹ Dunlop, John “Rise of Russia and the Fall of the Soviet Union” pp. 217

was technically still the leader of the Soviet Union, but many things changed after the August coup attempt. Yeltsin gained a formidable amount of power and was popular among Russians and government officials of Russia. And Gorbachev's standing as a strong leader was severely weakened following the coup. If one coup attempt happened, another could have occurred in the future. And as a result of the attempted coup, the Nine Plus One Agreement lost a key member of the agreement, Ukraine.

Ukrainian leaders had not yet displayed the resistant behaviors from the Baltics, Georgia, Armenia, and Moldova, but the country started to strengthen its independent colors in the late 80's and early 90's. The People's Movement of Ukraine (also known as Rukh), which was founded in September of 1989 was the first opposition party formed in Soviet Ukraine and aimed to revitalize and promote Ukrainian national identity, language, and culture. Rukh organized a large-scale movement in Ukraine known as the Human Chain in January of 1990. The Human Chain stretched 700 kilometers and involved an estimated 450,000 people to celebrate the 71st anniversary of the unification of Ukraine in 1919.³⁰ However, during the March 1991 referendum, 70.5 percent of Ukrainian voters supported Gorbachev's reforms for a refreshed Soviet Union.³¹

After the coup, things changed for Ukraine very quickly. Only two days after the coup had failed, Ukraine moved towards separation from the Soviet Union by declaring independence on August 24th, signaling the Republic's withdrawal from Gorbachev's plans to implement the Nine Plus One Treaty. Interestingly, the Russian government under Boris Yeltsin announced their support for this move. This Yeltsin initiative pushed Gorbachev into a corner of insignificance,

³⁰<https://euromaidanpress.com/2020/01/22/how-ukrainians-created-human-chain-in-late-ussr-to-mark-anniversary-of-ukraines-unification-archival-photographs/>

³¹ Tuminez, Astrid S. "Nationalism, Ethnic Pressures, and the Breakup of the Soviet Union" pp. 114

as negotiations between Ukraine and Yeltsin on behalf of Russia left him out of the discussion. Ukraine later held a vote on December 1st of 1991 to solidify the question for independence from the people and saw an overwhelming response favoring leaving the USSR. The overall percentage to become independent was over 90 percent, even from ethnic Russians living in Ukraine.³²

Ukraine's decision to swing towards independence after the coup was tied to an increase in national identity as a result of the Rukh Movement's activities in the late 80's and early 90's. There was a desire to become more of their own state and have more say in the affairs of their country; the thinking evolved more around what was best for Ukraine and her people. There was also an economic reason to push the USSR away, as the union was clearly unstable and was prone to eventually have more instability, thus Ukraine saw a better economic future away from the USSR. Tuminez writes that Ukrainian politicians pushing independence largely did so, "in the name of potential economic advancement."³³ The dissent from Ukrainian leadership was shown more in action than in words, as Kravchuk did not follow through with his stated commitment to Gorbachev's New Union Treaty and instead stalled with continued negotiations after the coup. But despite their votes of independence and growth of national identity, the USSR was still alive and they were technically still members of it. Something more needed to be done to give legitimacy or reality to their independence and sovereignty.

In addition to Ukraine's declaration of independence, Azerbaijan also declared independence from the Soviet Union on August 30th, 1991, just over a week after the end of the coup attempt on August 22nd. Gorbachev's treaty, which had not even been drafted at that point, lost two more countries, in addition to the six republics that rejected it initially in March of that

³² <https://www.csce.gov/sites/helsinkicommission.house.gov/files/120191UkraineReferendum.pdf> pp. 9-10

³³ Tuminez, Astrid S. "Nationalism, Ethnic Pressures, and the Breakup of the Soviet Union" pp. 114

same year. While neither the treaty, nor the Soviet Union were still not defeated, these developments were massive blows to the integrity of the Nine Plus One Treaty and the future of the USSR as a whole.

Despite major setbacks for Gorbachev, the New Union Treaty, and the entirety of the USSR, Gorbachev was still nominally the Head of State of the USSR and the New Union Treaty was still on the table. Ukraine and Russia were still on board with the project and it was set to continue in the fall, with planned meetings of the republics of the USSR to take place in the October of 1991 to negotiate the New Union Treaty and its updated terms. After the coup, Ukraine and Russia gained an upper hand and it was clear that Gorbachev was going to face major concessions to the two in order to continue the survival of his project.

CHAPTER 2: The Commonwealth of Independent States

Origins

The events of the summer of 1991 changed the game for Gorbachev and the USSR. The coup attempt had greatly damaged his grasp of power and gave Yeltsin a bigger presence in Moscow. The declaration of independence from Ukraine also meant that Gorbachev had to create a new approach to the new Ukrainian leadership to keep the republic from straying away from the USSR. These developments meant that the New Union Treaty that was supposed to be signed right before the August coup had to be replanned and rescheduled for another date. The post-coup version of the New Union Treaty was allegedly the same treaty that was first drafted in November 1990 by a drafting committee made up of representatives from each Soviet republic. However, if there were any changes or additions to the text following the August coup, they were only rumored and made unavailable to the public.

As an independent state after their August 1991 referendum, Ukraine, under the leadership of its first president Leonid Kravchuk, attended several meetings with Gorbachev and other member republics of the USSR, because Ukraine still entertained the idea of a decentralized Soviet Union. One such meeting occurred on October 11th, 1991 between all prior agreed parties of the New Union Treaty and involved discussions on updated post-coup terms of the treaty such as economic coordination. This meeting appeared to be a successful agreement between all attending parties on the signing and implementation of the New Union Treaty on October 15th 1991 to complete the project Mikhail Gorbachev anticipated to have done on August 20th of that same year, but the coup canceled the August signing . Even the biggest and most volatile members, Ukraine and Russia challenged the treaty and Gorbachev extensively but appeared to ultimately agree to sign the treaty. Gorbachev specifically asked Yeltsin for a verbal

agreement on signing, “Gorbachev: You have doubts about October 15? Yeltsin: No. Gorbachev: To the contrary, do you confirm it? Yeltsin: Yes, it is confirmed.”³⁴ Gorbachev then asked Kravchuk for his verbal agreement, to which Kravchuk responded, “ Yes, Mikhail Sergeyevich (Gorbachev), we support the idea, the document (The New Union Treaty) itself, the signing of it.”³⁵ All other attending USSR member states also stated their intent to sign and confirm the implementation of the New Union Treaty on the 15th of October. However, both Russia and Ukraine pulled out of the agreement and did not sign the New Union Treaty then, both asking for continued meetings and revisions on the terms of the treaty. Despite there being several meetings on this supposedly amended New Union Treaty, there is no text available from any source to clarify if the text of the New Union Treaty discussed in these meetings differed at all from the text of the treaty originally planned for implementation in August 1991. Concessions and edits may have been made after the October meetings to ensure continued cooperation of Kravchuk and Yeltsin, but cannot be confirmed.

One source of evidence of what this mysterious version of the New Union Treaty said comes from the accounts of the leader of Belarus at the time of the October meetings, Stanislau Shushkevich. In his autobiography *My Life: The Collapse and Resurrection of the USSR*, Belarusian president Stanislau Shushkevich writes on an interaction between himself and Gorbachev during a meeting of USSR member states on October 20th regarding an issue included in the New Union Treaty. According to Shushkevich, he expressed concern about Gorbachev’s role in a refreshed USSR and the amount of power he awarded himself in the amended New Union Treaty. Shushkevich also expressed concern that the New Union Treaty did not offer a decentralized USSR but instead retained the singularity of the USSR as a state, “The

³⁴ <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/27268-document-5-new-minutes-ussr-state-council> pp. 8

³⁵ <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/27268-document-5-new-minutes-ussr-state-council> pp. 8

draft describes (The USSR) as a confederation something which is essentially a unitary state, this is another Soviet Union, except with a president in the place of the Communist Party Politburo.”

- Shushkevich.³⁶ This can be confirmed in the very first section of the original New Union Treaty from before the coup dated August 15th, 1991, “Basic Principle 1: (USSR) — a sovereign federal democratic state formed as a result of the unification of equal republics and exercising state power.”³⁷ The presidency section of the pre-coup New Union Treaty also confirms the power appointed to the president of the USSR if the New Union Treaty would be implemented.³⁸ According to Shushkevich, this interaction created an awkwardness in the meeting and Gorbachev left the room in silence. More meetings occurred throughout the month of November but without any real progress towards signing the much-talked about New Union Treaty.

After a month of no change, another meeting was held on December 8th of 1991 in the Brest region of Belarus at the Viskuli Hunting Estate which became the Belavezha Accords. This meeting had been requested by Ukraine in mid-November for further conversations on the terms of Gorbachev’s amended October 1991 version of the New Union Treaty. The Author of *Ukraine, Russia, and the CIS*, Roman Solchanyk claims that Yeltsin attended the meeting on Gorbachev’s behalf to have an environment without Gorbachev’s presence and reach agreements on the New Union Treaty.³⁹ Instead of sticking with Gorbachev’s treaty, Yeltsin preferred Russia to be part of a different alliance with Belarus and Ukraine that cut out the USSR and Gorbachev completely. According to Shushkevich in his account of the Belovezha talks, it supposed to be a meeting to discuss Gorbachev’s New Union Treaty and make appropriate adjustments to reach an

³⁶ https://demokratizatsiya.pub/archives/21_3_T43W21215152W574.pdf pp. 4

³⁷ <http://museumreforms.ru/node/14039> Basic Principle 1

³⁸ <http://museumreforms.ru/node/14039> Section 14: President of USSR

³⁹ Solchanyk, Roman “Ukraine, Russia, and the CIS” pp. 28

agreement to sign, but it was quickly driven in a new direction by Yeltsin and his close associate and Russian Secretary of State, Gennady Burbulis. They were both in the presence of their recently independence-minded Belarusian and Ukrainian counterparts. Shushkevich recounts the evening of December 7th in Boris Yeltsin's room in the hunting estate. The meeting was between himself, Kravchuk and Yeltsin as well as Gennady Burbulis, Yegor Gaidar, Andrei Kozyrev, and Sergei Shakhrai from the Russian delegation, Vitold Fokin, and three unnamed deputies of the Ukrainian Rada from the Ukraine delegation, and Vyacheslav Kebich, Mikhail Myasnikov, and Petr Kravchenko from the Belarus delegation. Shushkevich remembers that the meeting was quickly taken into a new direction by Gennady Burbulis when he started talking about a scenario without Gorbachev and the USSR, and asked everyone in the room if they would agree to put their signature on the statement, "The USSR as a geopolitical reality and subject of international law ends its existence." Everyone agreed to support such a statement with an official signature if the opportunity was presented.⁴⁰ Shushkevich then recounts a small speech from Boris Yeltsin following Burbulis' question in which he was quoted as saying, " We've had enough of the USSR, the CPSU and now the SSG, the Commonwealth of Sovereign States. Independent, you understand! It should be the Commonwealth of Independent States!"⁴¹

This was the first verbally expressed use of the words "Commonwealth of Independent States" during the Belovezha stay. It may have appeared like a random on the spot creation for Shushkevich, but it seemed to all be very coordinated and thought out by Yeltsin and his people. The Belavezha meetings excluded Gorbachev, were held away from Moscow, and the members of the meeting were all leaders that hesitated to side with Gorbachev and his project. According to Shushkevich, a group of drafters consisting of Yegor Gaidar, Andrei Kozyrev, Sergei Shakhrai

⁴⁰ https://demokratizatsiya.pub/archives/21_3_T43W21215152W574.pdf pp. 10

⁴¹ https://demokratizatsiya.pub/archives/21_3_T43W21215152W574.pdf pp. 11

from the Russian team, Mikhail Myasnikovich, and Petr Kravchenko from the Belarus team and the three unnamed Ukrainian Rada members, immediately went off to work on the text of the draft of the first charter of the Commonwealth of Independent States. By the next day on December 8th, the group of drafters presented the articles of the Agreement on the Creation of the CIS to Yeltsin, Burbulis, Kravchuk, Fokin, Shushkevich, and Kebich, who all reviewed and edited the articles until they were all satisfied and agreed on what the draft contained.⁴²

On December 8th, 1991, all three presidents signed the agreement on the creation of the Commonwealth of Independent States in the city of Minsk, Belarus. According to Shushkevich, the Commonwealth of Independent States was definitely a project driven by Yeltsin and his people, but Shushkevich did not discuss it with Yeltsin before the Belavezha meeting, and neither had Kravchuk, but both leaders backed the idea which was introduced by the Russian team of politicians. Burbulis asked the initial question and appeared to lead the discussion, Yeltsin made the inspiring speech, and the rest of the Russian delegation were quick to begin work on the draft for the articles of the CIS, almost as if they expected agreement and already knew what to write.⁴³

The CIS, so far as we can glean from the fragmentary evidence we have, was apparently envisaged by Yeltsin and his Russian delegation as a union between the initial three countries of Belarus, Russia, and Ukraine, with an open door policy to allow all Soviet republics to join if they desired. However, the confidence in the idea of a Commonwealth of Independent States and the speed to which the drafters took to construct a CIS agreement document implies that the CIS was a plan created by Yel'tin's people well in advance to the days of the Belavezha Accords in Viskuli. There are no specific details or concrete plans from Yel'tin or his team of fellow Russian

⁴² https://demokratizatsiya.pub/archives/21_3_T43W21215152W574.pdf pp. 13-14

⁴³ https://demokratizatsiya.pub/archives/21_3_T43W21215152W574.pdf pp. 11-12

politicians regarding the construction of the CIS concept. However, Yeltsin's reported disrespect and uninterested behavior to Gorbachev's New Union Treaty meeting on November 4th, 1991 – he showed up late and appeared to disregard it – hints that Yeltsin already knew what he was going to do by early November 1991.⁴⁴ The Belavezha Accords were originally intended to further negotiate Gorbachev's amended New Union Treaty, and while there is no available text to clarify exactly what was amended, it can be assumed from the memoirs of Stanislav Shushkevich that the New Union Treaty contained articles that would have kept the USSR as a singular unitary state or “confederacy”, in the words of Shushkevich.⁴⁵ Shushkevich also claimed that there was an article that granted Gorbachev the power of presidency over the unitary state of the renewed USSR. These particular clauses appear to be what made Shushkevich, Kravchuk, and Yeltsin hesitant on signing the New Union Treaty into law. The CIS on the other hand, offered a union of separate independent states, each with their own leaders desiring to “build democratic states”, and having no president like Gorbachev to be subordinates to.⁴⁶ But, it certainly appeared to be a specific desire of Yeltsin and the Russians to get rid of Gorbachev and the USSR, as the CIS was their idea.

There were 14 articles in this initial agreement document for the CIS written up by the mix of Belarusian, Russian, and Ukrainian delegation members. Some important articles included, “Article 5: respect each other's territorial integrity and the inviolability of existing borders within the framework of the Commonwealth.”⁴⁷ - This article is important because the borders of all post-Soviet member states were finalized if they joined the CIS, and could not be modified or violated while being a member of the CIS. Another section entailed military

⁴⁴ <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/27271-document-8-new-minutes-ussr-state-council> pp. 1-2

⁴⁵ https://demokratizatsiya.pub/archives/21_3_T43W21215152W574.pdf pp. 4

⁴⁶ Agreement on the Creation of the Commonwealth of Independent State, Appendix B

⁴⁷ Agreement on the Creation of the Commonwealth of Independent States, Article 5

cooperation, “Article 6: members of the CIS shall collaborate in safeguarding international peace and security, they shall respect each other’s aspirations to attain the status of nuclear-free zone and a neutral state”. However, this nuclear-free statement appears to be counteracted in the same article (Article 6) which states, “The states members of the Commonwealth shall preserve and support a common military-strategy under joint command, including single control of nuclear arms.”⁴⁸ But the article does not mention specifically which member country would possess said single control of nuclear arms, instead referring to external agreements. The wording “single control” of nuclear arms, appears to imply that only one CIS member would control all nuclear arms; Russia or any other one state in particular is not mentioned or directed to be the controlling member. Article 7 includes agreements on “ - the coordination of foreign-policy activity - cooperation in the formation and development of a common economic space - migration policy.”⁴⁹ - while this article doesn’t contain specifics yet on the operation of coordinations in foreign policy, economic, and migration, it hints that CIS states might not be making decisions for themselves, but rather having decisions made for them based on the level of coordination. Another important article entailed quitting the CIS, “Article 10: Each member reserves the right to terminate the effect of this agreement, notifying the parties to the Agreement one year in advance”⁵⁰ - This article serves as a minor block to quitting the CIS. Of all these articles, Article 11 was probably the most important at the time, “application of the norms of third-party states, including the former Union of Soviet Republics, is prohibited on the territories of the states that have signed it.”⁵¹ - With Russia as part of this agreement, all Soviet entities were no longer allowed to operate within its territories. The leading departments and operating organs of

⁴⁸ Agreement on the Creation of the Commonwealth of Independent States, Article 6

⁴⁹ Agreement on the Creation of the Commonwealth of Independent States, Article 7

⁵⁰ Agreement on the Creation of the Commonwealth of Independent States, Article 10

⁵¹ Agreement on the Creation of the Commonwealth of Independent States, Article 11

the USSR government were all housed in Moscow, Russia and this agreement made their presence illegal in not only Russia, but in Belarus and Ukraine as well. And finally, while the agreement on the creation of the CIS was initially between Belarus, Russia, and Ukraine, Article 13 of the agreement offered an open door to the CIS to all former USSR republics.⁵² This was the initial agreement to form the CIS, while the actual charter of the CIS and its more specific and detailed laws was to be drafted and signed two years later in 1993.

With this Agreement on the Creation of the Commonwealth of Independent States, Yeltsin with his Ukrainian and Belarusian counterparts essentially pulled a sort of coup against Gorbachev and the Soviet Union. The Belavezha Accords was meant to be a meeting to continue talks of Gorbachev's New Union Treaty and a continuation of the Soviet Union. But with the work of Yeltsin's team, the meeting quickly became the destruction of the Soviet Union. Gorbachev along with everyone outside of the meeting did not find out until it was all already done.

A few weeks later on December 21st, 1991, the three founding members of the CIS were joined by Azerbaijan, Armenia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan in Alma-Mata, Kazakhstan where all 11 states declared the legal establishment of the CIS.⁵³ All post-Soviet states with the exception of the Baltics and Georgia signed onto the CIS as willing members. With everyone out of Gorbachev's reach, there was no more New Union Treaty and no feasible way to continue the Soviet Union, it all fell apart. There was nothing he could have done at that point to save the USSR, his power was completely broken. And just over two weeks after the Commonwealth of Independent States was agreed upon and created,

⁵² Agreement on the Creation of the Commonwealth of Independent States, Article 13

⁵³ <https://www.prlib.ru/en/history/619792>

Gorbachev accepted reality and announced his resignation and the end of the Soviet Union on December 25th, 1991.

Different Purposes of the CIS

Following Ukraine's official referendum for independence on December 1st, 1991, it was very clear that the country and her people wanted to be independent, no longer under the rule of another empire. Kravchuk fought against remaining with Gorbachev and the Soviet Union, and he thought that joining forces with other independence seeking countries was the answer to Ukraine's success in their mission to become sovereign and free. But why did they agree to form an alliance with Russia and Belarus?

Ukraine's motives in CIS membership were purely a strategic and temporary move that was supposed to pave the way to a better path for the country after some time had passed. Two of Ukraine's highest government officials confirmed their views of the purpose of Ukraine's membership in the CIS, first being the Head of the Parliament, Ivan Pliushch who said that the CIS for Ukraine was a "necessary mechanism for an orderly 'divorce process'." The CIS certainly worked as a tool for Ukraine to destroy the USSR, but did it mean to divorce Ukraine from more than the USSR? Kravchuk called the CIS a way to "liquidate the old structures." While it was a vaguely general statement from the Ukrainian president, "old structures" could reference Ukraine's forced membership of the Russian Empires of the past, including the USSR. Overall, Ukrainian leadership envisioned a future for the country where they had a choice in who they were aligned with and whatever path was best for Ukraine and its people.⁵⁴

While Ukraine's vision of membership in the CIS was temporary and limited to Ukraine's best interests, Yeltsin and Russia had other plans for the new union. Solchanyk claims in his

⁵⁴ Solchanyk, Roman "Ukraine, Russia, and the CIS" pp. 28

book that Yeltsin did not necessarily want the CIS, but he felt there was no other choice with the surge of surrounding nations wanting to go their own way; the CIS in the very least kept these countries tied to Russia in some way.⁵⁵ Yeltsin may have also signed the agreement of the CIS to get Gorbachev out of the picture and consolidate his power as the sole leader in Moscow.

Despite the speeches for independence from Yeltsin and his support of the sovereignty of other CIS members, the CIS was still something that the Russians managed to make beneficial mostly for themselves. Russia pushed to expand the CIS and make it much more than what it was initially supposed to be. By late 1992, Russia was active in efforts to expand the CIS' organs of operations, mainly further details and coordination of military and political issues. Russia's desire to take over was confirmed when private meetings were held among Russian leadership regarding Russian foreign policy in mid 1992. A private document unofficially known as the "Russian Monroe Doctrine", was allegedly prepared by the head of the Russian parliamentary committee on foreign affairs Yevgeniy Ambartsumov which defined their ambitions to lead and expand the CIS. According to Roman Solchanyk in his book *Ukraine, Russia, and the CIS*, the meeting was to specify the unique historical claim that Russia had over the entire territory of the former USSR and their mission to be the dominant force of that territory.⁵⁶ This document or any evidence of a Russian historical claim or domination mission either does not physically exist or is not publicly available, as there is no trace of it in any Russian government sources or archives. However, the creation of the CIS was driven by Yeltsin and his group of close associates. Why create another union instead of simply declaring independence and dissolving the USSR? Perhaps it was Yeltsin's way of keeping former Soviet republics close and gaining their trust by making them think he was on their side.

⁵⁵ Solchanyk, Roman "Ukraine, Russia, and the CIS" pp. 28

⁵⁶ Solchanyk, Roman "Ukraine, Russia, and the CIS" pp. 30

Russia's ambitions for the CIS went against what Ukraine wanted for themselves, which resulted in Ukraine going from founding member of the CIS to a rather inactive member that stayed away from Russia's ambitions. Under the leadership of Kravchuk, Ukraine employed low activity and interaction in the CIS, and refrained from signing onto military pacts with Russia or anyone beyond the general alliances formed on the initial CIS Agreement Charter. One example of expansion of the CIS was the Russia-led creation of the Collective Security Treaty Organization or CSTO in May of 1992, which was a branch of the CIS composed of a military and security alliance between Russia, Belarus, Armenia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. According to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Belarus, one of the key objectives of the CSTO was to have "intensive politico-military cooperation" among all members of the alliance.⁵⁷ This alliance allowed Russia to plant its military personnel in all member countries and get a grip on their political and security matters. The CSTO alliance was not directly a subordinate organization of the CIS, but rather an external military agreement. Article 6 of the Agreement on the Creation of the CIS of 1991 specifically points to any military alliances and details to be decided by "special agreement" - the CSTO was a result of one of those special agreements.⁵⁸ Membership of this alliance was offered to Ukraine but was refused by Ukrainian leadership in early 1992. The CIS was supposed to be a separation from old structures for Ukraine, for the organization not to become another USSR. However, with Russia's leadership of the CIS and pressure to expand the union and give it more functions, Ukraine's vision of themselves as a member of the CIS seemed to have given them the opposite. Russia was determined to regain power and influence over what they saw as theirs, and if not through the USSR, then it would be the CIS.

⁵⁷ <https://mfa.gov.by/en/multilateral/organization/list/>

⁵⁸ Agreement on the Creation of the Commonwealth of Independent States, Article 6

1993 Official CIS Charter: An Update on Articles and Laws

On January 22nd, 1993 the official charter of the CIS was updated in Minsk at the request of Russia and Boris Yeltsin. The original agreement to form the CIS that was signed on the 8th of December 1991 appeared to not be solid enough for Yelting, who pushed for the 1993 update of the Charter to strengthen the alliance. Moldova, Turkmenistan, and Ukraine, who were all original members of the 1991 Agreement to create the CIS, did not endorse the updating of the CIS charter in 1993 and refused to sign. In addition, Azerbaijan - another original member kept their distance as well and only sent observers to the signing and also did not sign at that time. Kravchuk was opposed to a binding charter that brought CIS republics closer together with barriers to leave, and anything that resembled the USSR. When he refused to sign the charter, Kravchuk was quoted as saying, "The links that existed cannot be preserved" - referring to the USSR. But he assured that this move did not mean that Ukraine would quit membership of the CIS. Moldova, Turkmenistan, and Azerbaijan did not comment on their refusals to sign the 1993 charter. Changes and additions focused on detailed updates of military and political coordination within the CIS, which can explain some of Kravchuk's concerns of a USSR-like union.⁵⁹

One such change was an added clause in leaving the CIS. Article 9 of the 1993 charter stated that any member had the right to terminate its membership at any time, but was obliged to notify the Commonwealth of their intent to do so 12 months in advance, a law also included in the original 1991 CIS document. The extra added requirement was, "Shall any commitments arise during the period of participation in the present Charter, they shall be of binding nature for the respective states till their complete fulfillment."⁶⁰ This a block that could be quite difficult to overcome and give states the inability to leave the CIS until they fulfilled any obligations. For

⁵⁹ <https://www.upi.com/Archives/1993/01/22/Three-republics-oppose-CIS-charter/1171727678800/>

⁶⁰ CIS 1993 Official Charter, Article 9

security and nuclear weapons, Article 11 stated, “member states shall pursue the coordinated policy in the field of international security, disarmament and arms control, formation of armed forces and shall maintain security in the Commonwealth.”⁶¹ This article touched on “disarmament and arms control”, but there was no other mention of nuclear arms in the security and military cooperation section of the 1993 Charter. One addition was the matter of border control in Article 13 which stated, “Each member state shall undertake the necessary measures to ensure the stable situation in the external frontiers of the Commonwealth member states.”⁶² Article 13 required a heavy monitoring of external borders of the CIS and was to involve “joint coordination” of border control, which resembled a continuation of Soviet patrols of the USSR’s borders. The whole military section lacks in specifics, but delegates further details to Article 15 which states, “Concrete problems of military and political cooperation among member states shall be governed by specific agreements.”⁶³ Article 15 is similar to the 1991 CIS treaty’s Article 6 which also delegates specific military matters to external agreements.

Despite the lack of details involving nuclear arms and disarmament, verbal statements came from Belarus and Kazakhstan at the time of the signing of the 1993 charter on the control of nuclear arms housed in their countries after the collapse of the USSR. Shushkevich was quoted as saying, “the nuclear forces in Belarus are to be the nuclear forces of the Russian Federation.”⁶⁴ This decision was followed by Kazakhstan’s President Nursultsan Nazarbayev. Both men were strongly supportive of Yeltsin. Only Kravchuk of Ukraine remained and he did not make a similar statement. Shushkevich then confirmed that Ukraine differed from the

⁶¹ CIS 1993 Official Charter, Article 11

⁶² CIS 1993 Official Charter, Article 13

⁶³ CIS 1993 Official Charter, Article 15

⁶⁴ <https://www.upi.com/Archives/1993/01/22/Three-republics-oppose-CIS-charter/1171727678800/>

decisions of Belarus and Kazakhstan when he stated “There exist other views on this matter.”⁶⁵

It is interesting to note that Kravchuk originally agreed to articles regarding nuclear arms and control on the original 1991 Agreement to Create the CIS Charter at the Belavezha Accords.

A major addition to the 1993 CIS Charter was the introduction of coordinating councils of the CIS which greatly concerned Kravchuk, who feared they would develop into a CIS central government and eventually create a unitary state.⁶⁶ The Council of Heads of States was formed as the highest body of the CIS, which was a council made up of the leaders of CIS member countries and was to have bi-annual meetings and any additional meetings upon any members’ request. Other councils were created to direct economic, political, and military branches of the CIS and were all to be housed in Minsk. Every decision of any one CIS member was to be approved and “coordinated” by the unique council for any given situation in order to ensure, as the document stated, “mutual interest” of the union as a whole. For example, Article 27 assigned decisions on foreign policy matters to be coordinated by a Council of Foreign Ministers, made up by representatives from each CIS member state. Such matters included, “foreign political activity of member states, including their activities in the international organizations, and shall organize consultations on the issues of world policy.”⁶⁷ Coordinating councils made the CIS appear like states could not make decisions for themselves without permissions. The most important aspects of a state’s operation - foreign policy, military, economics - were to be coordinated and planned for them, all in the name of the mutual interest of the CIS as a whole.

Towards the end of the 1993 charter, Article 35 included the official language of the Commonwealth, which was to be Russian.⁶⁸ The official language was not included in the

⁶⁵ <https://www.upi.com/Archives/1993/01/22/Three-republics-oppose-CIS-charter/1171727678800/>

⁶⁶ <https://www.upi.com/Archives/1993/01/22/Three-republics-oppose-CIS-charter/1171727678800/>

⁶⁷ CIS 1993 Official Charter, Article 27

⁶⁸ CIS 1993 Official Charter, Article 35

original agreement to form the CIS in December 1991, but gave an equal force to the languages of the three founding members of Belarus, Russia, and Ukraine by creating three official copies of the agreement in each language. The 1993 charter not only added an article for the official language of the CIS, but also only made one official copy in the Russian language. This appears to have disrespected the status of the two other founding members of the CIS, Belarus and Ukraine.

This 1993 version of the CIS Charter brought deeper integration of the Commonwealth member states and created a system of control over what each state was required to do militarily, what decisions they were allowed to make regarding foreign policy and political affairs, and created a significant block to leaving the CIS. The states that refused to sign the 1993 charter (Ukraine, Moldova, and Turkmenistan) appear to have been overruled and listed as member states under this updated charter, but without their signatures.⁶⁹ The states did not protest or even object to the move, as none of them expressed any intentions on leaving the CIS then or in the future. Ukraine's Kravchuk even insisted that his refusal to sign the 1993 Charter did not mean Ukraine would quit the CIS. Boris Yeltsin echoed this overruling factor of the CIS when he said, "We realize we can't live without each other" on the day of the 93' Charter signing, as if it was a unanimous sentiment among all CIS member states. Clearly, some states did not agree with this statement. Even with no objections or protests, the charter was passed and put into force without the approval and signatures of three member states, one of them being a founding state of the CIS (Ukraine), hinting that maybe their voices didn't matter in the union, despite the basic laws of the CIS saying otherwise. If the CIS was the union where every member was respected and treated as an equal, the signing of such a major document might have been postponed if some

⁶⁹ CIS 1993 Official Charter, Resolution

members disagreed on the contents of said document. Moldova, Ukraine, and Tajikistan were all sent copies of the 1993 charter and were encouraged to review it and sign at a later date.⁷⁰

Ukraine and Nuclear Arms

After the introduction and implementation of the updated Charter of the Commonwealth of Independent States in January of 1993, it was clear that Ukraine had issues with the direction the CIS appeared to be heading. President Kravchuk did not endorse or sign the 1993 Charter, citing concerns of a reversal to “old structures” and a change in thinking in regards to nuclear arms and control in the CIS. Kravchuk did sign the original Agreement to Create the CIS in 1991 and agreed to denuclearize and have single control of all nuclear arms in the territories of the Commonwealth. That single control was never clarified in either the 1991 CIS Agreement Charter or the 1993 updated CIS Charter. No one CIS member was named in the document as the one that would have single control over nuclear arms.

By the time the USSR collapsed, it had amassed over 30,000 nuclear weapons located all throughout the territory of the USSR; these warheads were specifically located in Belarus, Kazakhstan, Russia, and Ukraine. When the USSR collapsed, these four countries gained full independence and also inherited all Soviet nuclear weapons left on their territories. However, all of these countries signed onto the CIS Charter in 1991 which included “Article 6: they (CIS members) shall respect each other’s aspirations to attain the status of nuclear-free zone and a neutral state” which was then followed by the agreement of all CIS members to implement “single control” of all nuclear arms.⁷¹ Neither the 1991 or 1993 CIS charters clarified if denuclearization was a requirement for everyone, and clearly it was not for *all* countries, since

⁷⁰ <https://www.upi.com/Archives/1993/01/22/Three-republics-oppose-CIS-charter/1171727678800/>

⁷¹ Agreement on the Creation of the Commonwealth of Independent States, Article 6

Russia fully intended on keeping nuclear arms for themselves. But were the other nuclear states of the former USSR expected to denuclearize?

After the fall of the USSR, Russia established a legal claim to everything that belonged to the USSR, including Soviet nuclear weapons, when the Russian Federation took the Soviet Union's seat in the United Nations and the permanent seat on the UN Security Council as soon as January 1992. Russia's role as USSR successor was also supported by the United States when Bush Sr. established diplomatic relations with Yeltsin and the U.S State Department made a statement that read, "With the dissolution of the USSR in 1991, the United States considered the Russian Federation as the successor state of the USSR."⁷² The United States hoped to continue the reduction of nuclear arms known as START, previously agreed by Reagan and Gorbachev before the USSR collapsed in the late 1980s, and signed into force in July of 1991. But with the collapse of the USSR, the legal successor of the USSR no longer had possession of all nuclear arms that were previously under Soviet control and were previously bound to the START treaty of 1991. Belarus inherited 81 nukes when the USSR collapsed, and Kazakhstan inherited 1,400. The two countries endorsed and signed both the 1991 and 1993 CIS Charters. Verbal statements from President Shushkevich of Belarus and President Nursultsan Nazarbayev of Kazakhstan showed their intent to denuclearize, and forfeit all nuclear weapons to Russia. Both men were big supporters of Yeltsin, and were loyal to the CIS, and the agreement to sign over their nuclear weapons went smoothly and without problems.

The only non-Russian nuclear party left was Ukraine. With the fall of the Soviet Union, Ukraine became the third largest nuclear power on earth after the United States and Russia, inheriting around 1,900 nuclear warheads and nearly 4,000 tactical nuclear weapons - a huge amount of destructive power. Kravchuk did not sign the 1993 CIS Charter, and therefore did not

⁷² <https://history.state.gov/countries/soviet-union#text=With/the/dissolution/of/the/country/entry/for/Russia>.

agree to the terms regarding nuclear weapons. He also did not make any comments about nuclear arms or if he would sign the updated 1993 Charter. However, signature or not, Ukraine was included as a member of 1993 CIS Charter, with hopes the country's leadership would willingly agree at a later date. In February of 1993, Ukrainian leadership weighed keeping the nuclear arms or giving them up. There were positives and negatives to both choices, as keeping the nukes would require a large amount of money and maintenance that could be utilized in other parts of Ukraine's poor economy at the time, but Ukraine would gain the respect of a great nuclear power and have leverage in negotiations with foreign countries because of that status. On the other hand, giving up the nukes would have stripped Ukraine of their best means of defense, but would increase trust and friendly relations with foreign countries, especially those in the West. The thought of friendly relations with Russia in the case of denuclearization was undermined by Yeltsin when he made statements in the summer of 1993 like this: "Sevastopol was a Russian city," and that decisions of the Supreme Soviet to hand over Crimea to Ukraine were "not serious".⁷³ So there was a fear in Ukraine that Russia would become hostile towards Ukraine and its sovereignty at some point. Keeping nuclear weapons would then instead be very beneficial to Ukraine to defend itself.

However, Ukraine retaining its nuclear weapons was not supported by the United States. The U.S president at the time was Bill Clinton, and his administration made it clear to Ukraine that their status as a nuclear power in the region would be unacceptable, as it would only lead to instability. Clinton advised Kravchuk to think carefully about the issue and consider the implications for Ukraine if the country kept their nuclear arms. The outcome of giving up the nukes were - friendly relations with the United States and their assistance in development and highly beneficial agreements for the entirety of Ukraine and its people, but their biggest security

⁷³ Sarotte, M.E "Not One Inch: America, Russia, and the Making of the Post-Cold War Stalemate. Pp. 159

capabilities would be the cost. The consequences of keeping the nukes was - both the United States and Russia becoming unfriendly with Ukraine, which was not something a freshly independent Ukraine could handle both economically and politically. Kravchuk would have agreed to give up Ukraine's nukes, but only if their security concerns were addressed and given a solution. NATO membership for Ukraine and any former Warsaw Pact country was a line the United States did not want to cross at that time. But at the time, the most important country's confidence to win was Ukraine's, because Ukraine was in possession of nuclear weapons and needed to be convinced to give them up and feel a level of safety.

To balance Ukraine's security desires while not angering the Russians at the same time, the Partnership for Peace (PfP) was established in 1994 to have individual non-NATO countries establish a relationship with the military alliance. According to the NATO website, the PfP's purpose is "to increase stability, diminish threats to peace and build strengthened security relationships between NATO and non-member countries in the Euro-Atlantic area"⁷⁴. At the time of its establishment, President Clinton publicly stated on January 12th, 1994 that while the PfP was not NATO, it was a foundation for cooperating countries to potentially ascend into full NATO membership in the future. Ukraine was allowed to join the PfP in 1994 and perhaps viewed it as the first step towards eventual NATO membership. And while the PfP was intended for all former Warsaw Pact countries and other non-NATO individual countries, it appeared to be created mostly for Ukraine's situation and to give Kravchuk something NATO related in return for denuclearization.⁷⁵

For Ukraine's economy, the cost of keeping the nuclear arms would have placed economic pressure via U.S retaliation on an already struggling new country trying to survive the

⁷⁴ https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_50349.htm

⁷⁵ Sarotte, M.E "Not One Inch: America, Russia, and the Making of the Post-Cold War Stalemate. Pp. 187

mess of the fall of the USSR. Kravchuk could have made any decision he wanted regarding the nukes - Ukraine could have kept the nuclear weapons under their possession and control, but the United States would have then denied financial assistance to Ukraine, which was highly necessary to help support Ukraine's weak economy at the time. Beyond the denial of much needed financial support, the United States may have even ordered economic sanctions on Ukraine because of their decision to keep nuclear weapons, which would have made the Ukrainian economy even worse. But it never came to this, because Kravchuk did not want to lose the financial support for his country or to be on unfriendly terms with the U.S. Kravchuk did have a choice and each choice had its risks and consequences, but at the time he was a bit more worried about economic survival for Ukraine, so he decided to surrender the nuclear weapons.⁷⁶

On January 14th, 1994, Bill Clinton, Leonid Kravchuk, and Boris Yeltsin met in Moscow to sign a trilateral agreement between the three countries agreeing for, "the transfer of all nuclear weapons on the territory of Ukraine to Russia for dismantlement, security assurances by the US, Russia and United Kingdom to Ukraine."⁷⁷ The wording on this document was very careful, choosing "assurances" for Ukraine's security instead of guarantees, a word which carried a stronger legal meaning. When defining the two words, a Guarantee is a "formal promise that certain conditions *will* be fulfilled", whereas an Assurance is "a positive declaration that serves to instill confidence" - perhaps in this case, assurances by the U.S and Russia meant that they were confident at that time that Ukraine would not be threatened with force or any potential threats could have been confidently resolved diplomatically. A guarantee on the other hand, might have entailed a promise of real military action to defend Ukraine if faced with threats or attacks. This agreement was then made official on December 5th, 1994 between the UK, Russia,

⁷⁶ Sarotte, M.E "Not One Inch: America, Russia, and the Making of the Post-Cold War Stalemate. Pp. 188

⁷⁷ <https://www.atomicarchive.com/resources/documents/deterrence/trilateral.html>

Ukraine, and the United States in a meeting known as the Budapest Memorandum. All attending countries supported Ukraine becoming a non-nuclear state and signed onto the following statements in exchange: “(all parties) respect the Independence and Sovereignty and the existing borders of Ukraine, reaffirm their obligation to refrain from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of Ukraine”⁷⁸ But there was no wording included in this document to ensure obligations were kept, nor did it include any repercussions for breaking the agreement. This agreement did not offer anything beyond promises to Ukraine without any mechanism to make sure those promises were kept. Transferring all the nukes to Russia took a long time, but by 2001 all nuclear weaponry in Ukraine was transferred to Russia and all launch sites and nuclear silos were decommissioned.

Ukrainian leadership had legitimate concerns about Russian aggression and the danger of the CIS becoming another Soviet Union. Keeping the country’s nuclear arms would have offered Ukraine a solid defense that would deter anyone from troubling them. But the cost of maintaining the nuclear arms, and the threats from the United States to withhold aid and officially make Ukraine unfriendly with the US was not something that Ukraine could survive economically and politically. Ukraine was strong-armed into giving up its biggest protection, and offered mere assurances from Russia in regards to their security in return. NATO membership was not granted at the time, and the PfP did not guarantee future NATO membership, it only offered a chance to do so without a timeline for when that would happen and how. Ukraine did not receive any real solutions or offers in regards to their security concerns.

Russia had effectively neutralized her neighbors and became the only nuclear power out of all the post-Soviet states. And while they did adhere to the reduction of their nuclear arms according to the START agreement with the US, Russia still kept a significant amount of nuclear

⁷⁸ policymemos.hks.harvard.edu/files/policymemos/files/2-23-22_ukraine-the_budapest_memo.pdf pp. 1-2

arms while ensuring that none of their post-Soviet counterparts were on the same level of power, making control a lot easier. And when it comes to the CIS, the union that touted equality among all members became an even more one-sided union that greatly favored Russia and granted them a total monopoly of military-nuclear power after Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Ukraine all gave up their nuclear weapons.

Georgia, Civil Wars, and the CIS

Ukraine, Belarus, and Russia - the countries that formed the Commonwealth of Independent States, all had their reasons to form and to join the CIS. Belarus was loyal in their partnership with the Russian Federation, and Ukraine also joined the CIS on their own choice. In the initial agreement for the creation of the Commonwealth in December of 1991, nobody was forced or aggressively coerced to join.

There were a few countries that had desired independence from the USSR since the late 1980's. Georgia, Moldova, the Baltic States, and Armenia were together in the rejection of Gorbachev's renewed USSR and did not take any part in the New Union Treaty. Their determination appeared strong to get what they wanted. However, besides the Baltic States, all other countries that desired independence from the USSR eventually joined the CIS. Armenia and Moldova joined willingly in 1991, and were not coerced or threatened. Outside of the Baltic States, Georgia was the last resistor that also eventually joined the CIS, but what was the reason?

Georgia was one of the stronger independence minded countries in the late 80's and early 90's right before the collapse of the Soviet Union. Georgians followed the Baltic States in their acts of resistance, and faced the use of force from Gorbachev once in the 1989 April protests in Tbilisi. They refused to take part in Gorbachev's New Union Treaty efforts in March of 1991, and kept that level of resistance through the fall of the Soviet Union. Nationalism was rising fast

in Georgia, and the country strived for full independence and was determined to stay away from any alliances in the near future. But things didn't go as planned for Georgia.

Before the collapse of the Soviet Union, Georgia had already experienced domestic trouble with two regions in the country, Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Georgia was pushing for independence, and had entered into a new stage of nationalism after the 1989 protests and Moscow's handling of the event. In May of 1991, Georgia passed a referendum for independence from the USSR and elected their first president, Zviad Gamsakhurdia, a nationalist leader who had always advocated Georgian resistance against the Soviets. The regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia were included inside the Georgian territory, and many residents in these non-Georgian majority areas were concerned by Georgia's surge in nationalism, and wished to remain part of the USSR.

Even before Georgia declared independence in May of 1991, the tension between Georgia and South Ossetia had already soured in the late 80's, eventually leading to a conflict that took place between November 1989 and January 1990. Gamsakhurdia encouraged a march of up to 30,000 Georgian nationalists on the city of Tskhinvali in South Ossetia to protect the city's Georgian population.⁷⁹ In response, South Ossetia omitted themselves from Georgia's drive for independence from the USSR, and announced their own independence. These moves were then nullified after Georgia's defiant referendum for independence. This referendum declared the entire Georgian territory independent from the USSR, and both South Ossetia and Abkhazia were parts of that territory at that time.

After Georgia was no longer under the direct control of the USSR, Gamsakhurdia took more direct action with South Ossetia. After a softer approach with economic punishments,

⁷⁹ <https://pesd.princeton.edu/node/706>

Gamsakhurdia decided to take a more physical direction with the region and attempted a Georgian occupation of South Ossetia's capital city, Tskhinvali. And while Georgia made efforts to control South Ossetia, the breakaway region was aided with Russian equipment and training, with even some sightings of Russian troops.⁸⁰ And with the newly independent Georgia at her weakest point in 1991, economically, politically, and militarily – civil wars were no easy task to manage.

In addition to troubles with South Ossetia, a separate civil war transpired in the very streets of Georgia's capital, Tbilisi. A fight for power took hold in Georgia between the first elected President Gamsakhurdia, and the former Foreign Minister of the USSR, Eduard Shevardnadze. The struggle for power saw people on both sides actively fighting in the streets of Tbilisi in late December of 1991. A majority of the action took place in front of the parliament building in central Tbilisi, where Gamsakhurdia spent most of his time. After a few weeks of fighting, Gamsakhurdia was defeated and fled from the capital, and Shevardnadze claimed the presidency of Georgia in early 1992. Gamsakhurdia took refuge in Chechnya and maintained a large following of supporters, especially in the Western regions of Georgia, where he would return in 1993 to attempt a rebellion against Shevardnadze.

Well after Shevardnadze's takeover as Georgia's president in early 1992, a conflict broke out in Abkhazia in August of 1992. Abkhazia was similar to South Ossetia; the region was part of Georgia's territory when Georgia declared independence in 1991. Since Georgia's independence, Abkhazia had kept a separate identity along with a desire to secede from Georgia. The region was ethnically unique to the Abkhaz people, like the Ossetians in South Ossetia, but Abkhazia had a significant Georgian population, which was nearly half of the population of the region at 46%. In the wake of political instability and already two civil conflicts in Georgia,

⁸⁰ <https://pesd.princeton.edu/node/706>

Abkhazian leadership saw the opportunity to push for autonomy and independence from Georgia in 1992. The Abkhazians' attempt to break away from Georgia prompted Shevardnadze to order Georgian troops to the region. This was the start of the Abkhazian War.

The fighting lasted for nearly an entire year from August 1992 to mid-1993, when Russia stepped in and attempted to negotiate a ceasefire agreement between the two fighting forces, while the UN acknowledged Georgia's grievances by agreeing to set up a small UN observer group in Abkhazia in the summer of 1993. This ceasefire did not last, however. While Moscow employed neutrality in the conflict, Abkhazia "accidentally" came into possession of Russian arms (weapons, planes, and ships) and then broke the ceasefire agreement in late September 1993 and was reportedly aided by Russian-trained fighters in the battle of Tkvarcheli.⁸¹ The fighting continued until Abkhazia regained control of Sukhumi in September of 1993. In addition to expelling Georgia's military from the region, the Abkhaz also exiled their entire Georgian population into Georgia proper, some 250,000 people (46% of Abkhazia's population), most of whom fled to the Georgian capital Tbilisi and surrounding areas.

The fighting in Abkhazia was a huge indicator of instability and weakness in Georgia's government and military at the time. It was the third civil conflict in two years since Georgia's independence in May of 1991. The former Georgian President Gamsakhurdia must have realized Shevardnadze's vulnerability at that moment, and started his own rebellion in the western Georgian region of Samegrelo in the autumn of 1993 to reclaim leadership of Georgia. In reality, it would have most likely split Georgia in half, with Gamsakhurdia taking the West and Shevardnadze keeping the East. Gamsakhurdia's rebellion raged throughout Western Georgia, and Shevardnadze could not control the situation with so many supporters aiding Gamsakhurdia.

⁸¹ <https://www.hrw.org/reports/1995/Georgia2.htm> (Abkhazia, Russia Role Section)

In his weakness and desperate desire to preserve Georgia, Shevardnadze traveled to Moscow and decided that Georgia would join the CIS immediately in October of 1993 in order to be eligible for CIS assistance in managing the crisis in Samegrelo. According to Human Rights Watch in their report on Civil Conflicts in Georgia, Shevardnadze met with Yeltsin in Moscow in early October, 1993 and reached an agreement for Georgia to join the CIS, which was officialized on October 22nd, 1993.⁸² This agreement allowed Russian and other CIS troops to legally enter Georgia's territory at Shevardnadze's request. Russian troops regained control in western Georgia and shut down Gamsakhurdia's rampant rebellion by December of 1993.

Unfortunately, official documentation of Georgia's agreement to join the CIS cannot be found on either the official CIS website's archive of documents or Georgia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs archive and therefore the exact language used and agreements included are unavailable. But sources like Human Rights Watch and other Georgian Newspapers like civil.ge both report that in addition to joining the CIS, Shevardnadze agreed to allow Russian military bases set up in Georgia along with a permanent deployment of CIS peacekeepers to Georgian territories that bordered Abkhazia and South Ossetia.⁸³

These military bases were present all throughout Georgian provinces in the 90's and my family members were stopped a few times for routine security checks by Russian troops when traveling throughout the countryside. The bases were not isolated to the borders of Georgia, but also in inner parts of the country such as Western Georgia in the region of Samegrelo and Svaneti.

Under the nationalistic leadership of Gamsakhurdia, the Georgian government antagonized South Ossetia, which raised tensions and led to conflict that Georgia lost.

⁸² <https://www.hrw.org/reports/1995/Georgia2.htm> (Aftermath - December 1993 Section)

⁸³ <https://old.civil.ge/geo/article.php?id=9902>

Shevardnadze made the same decision in starting a major conflict with Abkhazia in a time when Georgia had just gained independence, endured and lost a conflict with South Ossetia and underwent a regime change in Tbilisi all in 1991. The chaos in Georgia was brought by its first two presidents, the division that led to multiple civil conflicts over only a couple of years, and the quiet stoking of the flames by the Russians, who got exactly what they wanted when Shevardnadze applied to the CIS out of desperation.

While Russia officially kept a stance of neutrality in Georgia's civil conflicts, both South Ossetia and Abkhazia somehow received Russian military equipment and personnel that helped them to overcome Georgian forces. Russia officially involved themselves in the Abkhaz War by trying to negotiate a cease-fire between Georgia and Abkhazia. And when Shevardnadze did come to the doors of the CIS, Russia was quick to accept the country and intervene in the Gamsakhurdia's rebellion using their Russian dominant CIS forces. Russia involved themselves in Georgia's civil problems in just the right ways for Georgian leadership to eventually come to the point where joining the CIS was the only option for the country to stay whole. If Russia went through all this trouble to have Georgia in the CIS, the union as a whole must have been held in high importance for Russian leadership.

Russian Dominance: Security

One of the ways that Russia organized their vision of the CIS was their classification of foreign countries and their respective foreign policies. This classification originated from the former borders of the USSR, and countries were split into the "near abroad" and the "far abroad". To specify, the "near abroad" defined all former USSR republics, whereas the "far abroad" was the category created for all other countries. While the USSR had dissolved and her former republics were independent, the Russian government still saw the "near abroad" as their

responsibility and took it upon themselves to be the leader of the entire post-Soviet territory. As the legal successor of the USSR, the Russian Federation inherited the role of preeminent power in the post-Soviet space, as it was the most economically powerful former Soviet space and dwarfed others in military capabilities which was increased with the stripping of nuclear arms of “near abroad” neighbors Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Ukraine. As a qualification to be a world power, Russia concluded that they must have influence and involvement among their neighboring countries. 1993 saw an increase in Russian involvement in the matters of the near abroad as Russia involved themselves in civil conflicts in Georgia, Moldova, and Tajikistan.

The earliest examples of Russia’s involvement were seen in the Caucasus in 1993. Georgia and Azerbaijan looked to Russia and the CIS out of desperation to solve their civil conflicts. Neither, it seems, looked to join the Commonwealth for other reasons besides assistance in their civil conflicts. Georgia joined the CIS as a last resort effort to receive CIS military aid and stabilize the country after failing to control a civil conflict driven by former Georgian president Gamsakhurdia. At the same time, Azerbaijan was struggling with the Nagorno-Karabakh territory and joined the CIS to have Russia help control their issue as well. As a condition of their joining the CIS, Azerbaijan also signed the treaty on collective security (CSTO) in 1993 and agreed to have Russian military presence near the conflict zone. Armenia was already included in the Russian CIS security umbrella when they signed the joined the CIS in 1991 and agreed to the collective security treaty in Tashkent in 1992. With the inclusion of Georgia and Azerbaijan, Russia’s goals in the Caucasus were complete.

Russia also intervened in a civil conflict in Moldova with its breakaway region of Transnistria in 1992, and established a ceasefire between the two fighting forces and established peacekeepers there which are present today, which is perhaps the reason Moldova then refused to

sign the updated 1993 CIS Charter, although that was never specified from the Moldovan side. And in 1994, Russia along with other CIS forces got involved in a civil conflict in Tajikistan instigated by Islamic radicals near the Tajik-Afghan border; peacekeepers were deployed to Tajikistan and extensive border security was established on Tajikistan's border with Afghanistan.

For Russia, the near abroad was of utmost importance for their national security. With a goal to form closer ties and have deeper involvement in the political, economic, and military affairs of their neighboring countries, it was clear that the CIS was the best way to accomplish their objectives. The addition of a CIS member was like adding insurance to Russia's security, and once a country was a part of the union, they were expected to stay. This was never produced in any documentation or CIS legislature but the actions by CIS leadership and Russian pressure during the signing of the 1993 CIS Charter prove that even though Ukraine, Moldova, and Tajikistan disagreed with the charter and did not sign it, their signatures were overruled and remained as full members of the CIS from that point forward. It resembled the Brezhnev Doctrine of the USSR in a way; the CIS took it upon itself to decide the future of its members whether those members wanted to remain in the union or not. The closest written law of the CIS that acts as a barrier to leave is in Article 9 of the CIS Charter states that every member state of the Commonwealth has the right to terminate their membership with 12 months of advance written notice, but any state that agreed to fulfillments to the CIS are bound to the union until those fulfillments are complete.⁸⁴ Essentially, if a CIS member wanted to leave the union, they would not be able to do so if they had any unfulfilled economic, political, or military obligations to the Commonwealth. There were obstacles to getting out of the CIS once a country was a part of it. The importance of Russian security was put into practice as soon as possible in the early

⁸⁴ Commonwealth of Independent States Official Charter, Article 9

years of the CIS. And as part of deals with CIS members, Russian forces participated in border regulations of countries such as Armenia, Georgia, Belarus, and Tajikistan. A heavier focus was placed on Armenia and Tajikistan to fight risks of Islamic fundamentalism on the borders of those countries. For Russia, the external borders of the CIS appeared to be as important as their own borders. This can be supported by the military section from Article 13 of the 1993 CIS Charter which tasked all states to heavily monitor and enforce the external borders of the CIS, placing utmost importance on those borders.⁸⁵ It almost seemed as if Russian forces were protecting Russia away from the post-Soviet borders of Russia.

Another Russian worry was the spread of NATO near its borders and especially into the CIS. To keep this from happening, Russia did not want the UN or NATO involved in any peacekeeping missions in the states classified in the “near abroad”. Russia wanted the sole responsibility of countries in their “sphere of influence” and even requested international recognition of their right to do so.⁸⁶ This request was refused by the UN and immediately followed up by Russia which then proposed the CIS to perform this responsibility which was approved with the condition of UN and OSCE monitoring and involvement of peacekeeping missions. When their own efforts at direct involvement were met with rejection from the UN, Russia utilized the CIS as a front to be involved in peacekeeping and territorial control. Some concessions were required to acquire international recognition of their involvement, but Russia essentially got what they wanted, directly involved or with the CIS it made no difference. As the 90’s progressed, the CIS came together as a truly important factor for Russia’s dominance in the post-Soviet area, and for bolstering the security of the new post-USSR borders of the Russian

⁸⁵ Commonwealth of Independent States Official Charter, Article 13

⁸⁶ McCauley, Martin “Bandits, Gangsters, and the Mafia: Russia, The Baltic States, and the CIS” pp. 353

Federation. The CIS countries that surrounded Russia served like shields for the borders of the Russian Federation.

Real Life Encounters with CIS Checkpoints

In an interview with my father Carl Linich, conducted on January 18th, 2023, he spoke on his experiences with security checks in Georgia in the 90's. He described two occasions of dealings with Russian soldiers performing security checks on people. "In the Shevardnadze days, there was a border check at the Georgian-Turkish border in the town of Sarpi which is shared between the two countries. Someone coming into Georgia from Turkey via Sarpi had to pass two separate security checks - the first was operated by Russian soldiers, and the second by Georgian border control." My father said that it appeared that between the two, the Russian soldiers appeared to hold a bigger presence at the Georgian border. This was away from areas that featured civil conflicts in Georgia, and appeared to be a product of additional CIS agreements made by Shevardnadze to allow Russian forces in the country.

Another experience that my father recounted in our interview occurred in 1995 in the Georgian province of Svaneti, a mountainous region in northern Georgia. He said that while he and a group of people were on a bus ride to the town of Mestia in Svaneti, the bus was stopped by soldiers and all passengers were inspected, "The soldiers inspected our documents and also did security checks. The soldiers were actually Russian soldiers who had a small base there in Svaneti." For my father, it was bizarre that well after the collapse of the USSR, there were Russian soldiers controlling the border and inner travel routes in Georgia in 1995.⁸⁷

The border between Belarus and non-CIS countries like Lithuania and Poland is similarly highly controlled and monitored by troops. In an interview with a friend from Belarus who has

⁸⁷ Interview with my Father, Carl Linich on Russian bases in Svaneti and the Sarpi Border (Georgia, Turkey), Conducted May 2022

fled the country and will remain unnamed for safety reasons, she detailed her experiences crossing the border between Belarus and Poland. She said that each time she crossed the border into Poland or back into Belarus, mandatory security inspections were always conducted by Belarusian soldiers before progressing to a customs officer. She has said that crossing the border between Russia and Belarus or Ukraine and Belarus before the war was not nearly as controlled as the border between non-CIS countries.⁸⁸

The external borders of the CIS and the way they are regarded resemble a continuation of the border operations of the Soviet Union, with heavy control of who's coming into the CIS zone and who's leaving it.

⁸⁸ Interview with Belarusian friend on Poland-Belarus Border, Conducted April 2023

CHAPTER 3: Quitting the CIS - Are members Free to Leave?

Since the creation of the Commonwealth of Independent States, only two members are no longer a part of it in the present day - Georgia and Ukraine. The rules of the CIS always stated that any member had the right to leave if they wanted, and that decision would be respected. It also stated that the territory and sovereignty of all CIS member states was final and not to be modified or threatened in any way. But when member states put these rights to use, these rules were put to the test and Russia's actions to keep the CIS together showed how serious they were about the union.

Georgia: Saakashvili, Russia, and the CIS

After Georgia joined the CIS in 1993, Georgian President Eduard Shevardnadze enjoyed a little over a decade of authoritarian rule in Georgia. Corruption defined his regime - rigging elections, controlling opposition media, stealing money from the pension accounts of civil servants, and more.⁸⁹ Shevardnadze attempted to have an image as a democratic leader by allowing civil society to be established in Georgia and other freedoms like free speech, but he kept control over these democratic institutions in case they went too far and threatened his rule. But in 2001, he dropped his act when he decided to shut down an opposition media company known as Rustavi-2. Nobody approved of this shift in rule, and even members of his own party dropped out and formed opposition parties of their own. Growing corruption in the Georgian government and the inaction from Shevardnadze's party to deal with it also brought a halt to programs set up by the International Monetary Fund in Georgia in 2003, which was essential to Georgia's development and financial stability in that period. It appeared that Shevardnadze's control was unraveling and he resorted to extreme steps to keep power and do away with criticism. His unpopularity grew and prominent opposition was growing in Georgia.

⁸⁹ <https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/sr167.pdf> pp. 3-4

In the Fall of 2003, Georgia held parliamentary elections. Exit polls reported that Shevardnadze's party was likely going to lose. These elections prompted criticism and protest from all opposition parties, most notably the United National Movement, led by Mikheil Saakashvili, and the United Democrats party, led by Nino Burjanadze after it appeared that Shevardnadze's party was in 1st place. Throughout November, protests intensified and opposition parties called for revolution and civil disobedience. November 21st saw 100,000 protesters gather in Tbilisi's Freedom Square where opposition parties overwhelmed troops at the entrance of the parliament building and entered the parliament, interrupting Shevardnadze's session and protesting his actions. Shevardnadze fled the building and ordered a state of emergency in Georgia and instructed troops and police to use force to dissolve the protests. However, the order to use force was never followed, and Shevardnadze resigned on the evening of November 23rd, 2003 after no alternative to continue his rule. These events are now known as the Georgian Rose Revolution. The man that signed Georgia onto the CIS as a member was gone and new leadership was sure to test Georgia's future as a member of the Commonwealth.

Soon after the revolution, Georgia held snap presidential elections on January 4th, 2004 which resulted in a landslide victory for United National Movement leader Mikheil Saakashvili, winning 96% of the vote. These elections were monitored by the UN and also by CIS observers. After winning the election, Saakashvili immediately went to work on relations with Russia in 2004 by attending a meeting at the Kremlin in February of 2004, working to relations that were soured by Shevardnadze who Russia alleged of helping Chechen separatists in the late 90's. Saakashvili acknowledged that Chechen separatists might have been in Georgia during the Chechen war and perhaps afterwards too, and pledged to assist Russia in dealing with them. And in an apparent turn into friendship, Russia helped Georgia shut down another possible civil war

when they stopped Aslan Abashidze and his attempts to create another autonomous region by way of the south-western Georgian region of Achara. However, Saakashvili made a request to the Kremlin to remove Russian military bases that were set up in Georgia as a result of Shevardnadze's CIS agreement. This appeared to be a step too far for Russian leadership, who did not seem to take it seriously and said it would take several years to withdraw their forces. The hesitance to remove troops as a result of the CIS agreement contrasted greatly compared to when Georgia joined the CIS and asked for military assistance, which was eagerly met with speed and proficiency in 1993. Directly after meetings at the Kremlin, Saakashvili took a trip to the United States later in February 2004 to get a good understanding of relations with the West and see what was possible. His trip to the West appeared to have gone well, because he stated intentions to have Georgia eventually join the EU in April of that same year.⁹⁰

After Saakashvili's request for a Russian military exit from Georgia and his approach to the West, relations between Georgia and Russia quickly went the opposite of friendly when conflict broke out in the city of Tskhinvali in the South Ossetia region between Georgian peacekeepers and South Ossetian separatists in August 2004. Both sides blamed each other for starting the conflict, but there was no clear evidence of who instigated the fighting. When asked about the situation, President Saakashvili claimed, "Their intention was to take possession of these villages (Georgian villages surrounding Tskhinvali) with a view to driving civilians out"⁹¹ But there was no evidence to confirm these claims. The South Ossetian separatists claimed that Saakashvili's government was attempting to establish full Georgian control over South Ossetia using force. These claims also had no tangible evidence until 2008 when tensions reached an all

⁹⁰ Tsygankov, Andrei/ Tarver-Wahlquist, Matthew "Duelling Honors: Power, Identity, and the Russia-Georgia Divide" pp. 310

⁹¹ <https://www.rferl.org/a/1054281.html>

time high and Georgian leadership decided to use force. However before that occurred, Georgian leadership stressed their commitment to negotiations and diplomacy with South Ossetia. Even with seemingly both sides to blame, Russia chose to blame Georgia as the aggressor in the conflict and halted talks with Georgia and stopped issuing visas to Georgians. Georgian leadership doubted Russia's intentions and were not oblivious to the double standard Russian employed, crushing separatism in their own country such as the Chechen War in the 90's and supporting separatists in their CIS partners.

Throughout 2005 and 2006, Georgia continued to push for the exodus of the Russian military presence in the country and the CIS peacekeepers in South Ossetia and Abkhazia. While relations with Russia turned worse with each passing year since 2004, Georgia began talks along with Ukraine about formally quitting the CIS in the Spring of 2006. Both countries considered the pros and cons of leaving the union and ultimately did not agree on a mutual decision. Georgia decided to employ a slow process of eventually completely leaving the CIS and Ukraine promised to continue their membership. President Saakashvili was more hesitant on actually leaving the CIS, while the Georgian Parliament viewed Georgia's inclusion in the union more negatively. More than pushing for an exit from the union, Saakashvili criticized the CIS in December 2005 when he said, "the CIS needs to be reformed, its declarations should be acted on, and its members should have greater freedom to act independently."⁹² Following these moves from the Georgian government, Russia increased their military presence via "peacekeepers" in Abkhazia and appeared to punish Georgia when a major oil pipeline from Russia to Georgia mysteriously exploded in early 2006 with long delays for repairs. In March 2006, Russia also banned the import of Georgian wine and mineral water, which were some of Georgia's largest exports, 90% of which went to Russia. Later that year in September, four Russian intelligence

⁹² <https://www.rferl.org/a/1068256.html> Analysis: Georgia To Assess Repercussions of Quitting CIS

officers tasked with spying were caught and arrested in Georgia; the government attempted to prosecute these officers but were convinced by the international community to release them, which they did. However, Russia still opted to punish Georgia following the incident - transport links and postal services were shut down between the two countries, Georgian-run businesses in Russia were harassed, and many Georgians living in Russia at the time were deported all throughout the Fall of 2006. Retaliatory actions taken by the Russians against Georgian people in Russia were severe violations of the CIS Charter, Article 3 which orders: “non-interference into domestic and foreign affairs of each other, ensuring human rights and fundamental freedoms for all, without distinction as to race, ethnic background, etc.”⁹³ The CIS did not protect the Georgian state or individual Georgian citizens from punitive acts from the Russian Federation due to political disagreements. If the CIS worked like it was designed, the organization would have stepped in and resolved issues between member countries, and ensured no one member had political or economic leverage over another to gain advantages. Unfortunately, the CIS did nothing and Russo-Georgian relations were at an all time low, Georgian leadership considered their next steps.

On October 5th, 2007 the bi-annual CIS summit was held in Dushanbe, Tajikistan. This summit was a meeting of all CIS member states and their leaders to discuss issues on security, economics, trade, and immigration in the union. This summit produced an agreement to strengthen the level of already existing cooperation and operations between members of the CIS, along with several other specific documents on varying CIS issues that were to be approved and signed by all attending parties of the summit. President Saakashvili attended the summit, but refused to sign the main document that extended Georgia’s participation in CIS strengthening. When asked why he did not agree to the document, President Saakashvili was quoted as saying,

⁹³ CIS Charter 1993: Article 3

“we believe that no positive norm works towards Georgia in the CIS, these mechanisms (of the CIS) do not work today and we cannot deceive ourselves.”⁹⁴ He also made grievances of Russia’s ban on Georgian products, the suspension of visa programs for Georgians to Russia, and the mistreatment of ethnic Georgians living in Russia at the time. His refusal to sign was a further step taken by Georgia in leaving the CIS.

In response to the actions of Georgian leadership, Russia stepped up their involvement in Abkhazia in the Spring of 2008 by increasing the number of peacekeeping forces with 1,500 additional troops which Georgian officials saw as attempts for annexation of the region by Russian forces. Georgian Minister for Reintegration, Temur Jakobashvili said at the time, “We see a blatant attempt by Russia to carry out some form of annexation in Abkhazia.”⁹⁵

Annexation or further action in Abkhazia was a violation of CIS Article 3 which put into CIS law, “the inviolability of state frontiers, recognition of existing frontiers and renouncement of illegal acquisition of territories.”⁹⁶ Existing frontiers of all CIS countries were the borders of all of those countries immediately after the fall of the USSR. In Georgia’s case, Abkhazia was inside their existing frontiers when they joined the CIS. Russia claimed that Georgian leadership was preparing an attack on Abkhazia to justify their reinforcements there and continued to supply the region with peacekeeping troops throughout the Spring.

To add to the tensions, Georgia along with Ukraine attended the NATO summit in Bucharest, Romania on April 3rd, 2008 and furthered their aspirations to join the security alliance in the future. The wording from the NATO side was very explicit and clear on the futures of the two countries in the bloc, “We agreed today that these countries will become

⁹⁴ <http://www.saakashviliarchive.info/ge/PressOffice/News?p=3487&i=2> Georgian President Saakashvili Attends CIS Summit in Dushanbe (Georgian news article)

⁹⁵ <https://www.refworld.org/docid/53e0e3e04.html>

⁹⁶ CIS Charter 1993: Article 3

members of NATO.”⁹⁷ Relations between Georgia and Russia were bad enough as they were before the summit, but Georgia’s moves to join NATO was a big red flag for Russian leadership, and something they would have to intervene on.

After all of the prior provocations from Russian leadership and with strong encouragement from the United States, on August 7th, 2008, President Saakashvili ordered Georgian troops to enter South Ossetia and take control of the region after a resurgence of apparent ethnic cleansing in the region by South Ossetian separatists who were bombing Georgian villages in the region and attacking Georgian civilians. Russia responded immediately by mobilizing their troops on the Russian border of South Ossetia and initiating air strikes in the region. Georgian troops held their ground in South Ossetia for 2 days before being overwhelmed by Russian forces and retreating back towards Tbilisi. On August 10th, Russian troops pushed through South Ossetia and advanced beyond the autonomous region into Georgia proper, pushing for the city of Gori and moving in the direction of the Georgian capital. Out of fear of the Russian forces taking the city, most of the residents of Gori fled along with Georgia troops back to Tbilisi. Georgian troops then concentrated their efforts on the defense of Tbilisi should the Russian invasion reach that stage. Supposed plans for a full Russian takeover of Tbilisi were supported by United States intelligence. On August 11th, U.S President Bush made a statement on the situation in Georgia, “There’s evidence that Russian forces may soon begin bombing the civilian airport in the capital city, It now appears that an effort may be underway to depose Georgia’s duly elected government.”⁹⁸ According to President Bush, the actions taken by Russia to advance beyond South Ossetia were not in line with Russia’s previously stated intentions to

⁹⁷ https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official_texts_8443.htm Para. 23

⁹⁸ <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2008/08/20080811-1.html>

only defend South Ossetia. This contradiction of intentions from Russian leadership hints that South Ossetia was not the main objective of their invasion.

On August 12th, Russian forces briefly stopped their advance after a diplomatic intervention by the French President Nicolas Sarkozy, who created a peace plan with Russian President Medvedev to stop the conflict. Despite this halt on advancement and the French driven peace plan, Russian forces took full control of Gori on August 13th and there were fears among the Georgian population that the invading Russian forces were still planning on advancing towards Tbilisi. There were also reports of Russian forces entering the western Georgian city of Poti and attacking ships on the city's port, along with isolated instances of Russian troops roaming and harassing villages in Western Georgia - both of which were nowhere near South Ossetia.⁹⁹ The very same day on the 13th of August, President Bush ordered American troops to be sent to Georgia for humanitarian aid to assist the country in their stand against Russia. And while the mission of these American troops were strictly for humanitarian purposes, it appeared to give Russian leadership pause in progressing their advance because on August 15th, President Saakashvili and Russian President Medvedev signed the French brokered cease-fire agreement and stopped the conflict. It took until August 22nd for all Russian troops to leave Georgia proper, and an occupation "peacekeeping" line was formed around South Ossetia, where Russian troops remain to this day.

During all of this, there was no action taken by the CIS to attempt to stop the conflict or act as a broker of peace. As far as it is known, there was not even any condemnation from the CIS after the Russian Federation violated several CIS articles by employing economic manipulation to hurt the Georgian economy, disregarding Georgia's territorial integrity by

⁹⁹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/08/14/world/europe/14georgia.html>

supporting a breakaway region, and then invading Georgia beyond that breakaway region and further violating Georgia's sovereignty.

These tensions took a long time to build up until the boiling point of the 2008 Russo-Georgian War. President Saakashvili tried to improve friendly relations with Russia at the start of his presidency in 2004, but in Russian opinion, he crossed a line when he wanted Russian troops out of Georgia and to re-establish South Ossetia and Abkhazia into the Georgian state. Russia defended these autonomous regions of Georgia and claimed it was to support their desire to be independent and separate from Georgia, but crushed the autonomous region of Chechnya in their own borders when the Chechens tried to do the same throughout the late 1990's and early 2000's. Despite what Russian leadership stated to be their intentions in the 2008 conflict, the true goal appeared to be taking the Georgian capital and decapitating the Georgian government. Perhaps then they would have installed a more Russia-friendly government in Tbilisi, since Saakashvili was not in their control. And while Russia's reasons never went beyond the defense of South Ossetia, the war happened less than a year after Saakashvili refused to sign the CIS agreement in October 2007, signaling Georgia's probable departure from the union and Russia's orbit. Georgia did officially leave the CIS in August 2009 and cut all diplomatic relations with Russia following the war. Russian forces extend the occupation line of South Ossetia into Georgia little by little every year, and occasionally enter Georgia proper to kidnap Georgian citizens and hold them for ransom.

Ukraine: Maidan Revolution, the CIS, and War

In the years after Kravchuk's presidency, Ukraine appeared to strengthen its national identity and path away from Russia and the CIS as the 21st century progressed. Many Ukrainians were becoming more wary of Russian interference, but it was difficult to shake free. Kravchuk's

successor, Leonid Kuchma, served from 1994-2005 and improved Ukraine's relations with Russia. His rule was authoritarian, and included the likes of media censorship and arrests of journalists. And when it was time for elections in 2004, he did not seek a third term as president, but instead gave his support to Kremlin-backed candidate Viktor Yanukovich. The presidential election was held in October of 2004, which resulted in a victory for Yanukovich with the most votes. This however triggered a significant protest known as the "Orange Revolution" which released the government censorship of media and free speech that Kuchma implemented during his presidency. The Orange Revolution protests also put pressure on the election system for 2004, as protestors called for fair elections to make sure Yanukovich did not win because of his ties to Kuchma and the Kremlin. Due to alleged fraud and irregularities in the election, the Ukrainian Supreme Court declared the election invalid and another election was carried out later that year in December, which resulted in a narrow victory for Yanukovich's rival Viktor Yuschenko.

During Yuschenko's presidency, Ukrainian leadership discussed the question of CIS membership with Georgia in 2006. This discussion, however, did not see Ukraine attempt to quit the CIS just yet, as Ukrainian leadership was wary of the outcome. After meetings with Georgia on the issue, Yuschenko stated that "Ukraine is not a full member of the CIS and does not get a lot from it today, but leaving the CIS could serve to fuel a negative backlash."¹⁰⁰ Russian officials also discussed the possibility that Ukraine and Georgia could leave the CIS, but warned both countries of bigger problems should they do so. It was not made clear if these "problems" meant military action by Russia, or merely economic retaliation due to leaving the CIS. Perhaps the non-specific threat was interpreted by Ukrainian leadership as deliberately unclear by the

¹⁰⁰ kyivpost.com/article/content/ukraine-politics/ukraine-georgia-threaten-to-withdraw-from-cis-24433.html

Russians to scare them into staying in the CIS. Economic issues would have been enough at the time, but the possibility of more could have been the deciding factor for Yushenko in leaving the CIS. By saying that Ukraine was not a full member of CIS, Yushenko referred to the 1993 CIS Charter, which Ukraine never actually signed. Ukraine also stayed relatively inactive in the CIS and away from further moves to strengthen ties and cooperation within the union. Ukrainian leadership stressed that Ukraine was an “associate” member of the CIS because Ukraine never agreed or signed the 1993 CIS Charter, however the charter did not allow for associate status in the CIS and as the 1993 Charter proves, Ukraine was still listed as a member of the CIS, and one that agreed to the terms of the 1993 Charter even without a signature.¹⁰¹ This inclusion in the CIS was never protested by Ukraine and the signing of the 1993 Charter was never actually addressed by CIS leadership or by Ukrainian leadership. Even still, Yushenko did not follow Georgia in their intentions to leave the CIS, and stayed in the union, and Russian attention was diverted fully to Georgia as it appeared Yushenko was not going to rebel to such a level quite yet.

Yushenko’s presidency came to an end in 2010 when he lost a presidential election to his old 2004 Kremlin-backed opponent, Viktor Yanukovych. In 2010, Ukraine was a different country compared to what it was in 2004 and before. Media freedoms were thriving, democratic systems were strong, and the people of Ukraine gained huge confidence in their national identity and a growing desire for Europe and a democratic society. Yanukovych initially followed the will of his people when he supported the implementation of a trade agreement with the European Union at the start of his presidency. This trade agreement would have strengthened political and economic ties between Ukraine and the EU, and was considered a milestone for Ukraine’s future membership in the EU. But in 2013, after intense pressure from the Putin government to reject

¹⁰¹ Official Charter of the CIS 1993

the deal, Yanukovych did not sign the trade agreement with the European Union, instead shifting Ukraine towards stronger economic and political ties with Russia and the CIS. This was met with the start of mass protests known as the Euromaidan Revolution in late 2013 that lasted months into 2014. Protesters called for the resignation of Yanukovych and his government. Protests were met with intense violence from police, who at times used lethal force with live ammunition to stop protesters. This resulted in condemnation from the West of Yanukovych and his government's methods of dealing with protests in his country. After months of protests and an armed insurrection, the Ukrainian parliament voted to impeach Viktor Yanukovych and remove him from power, after which he resigned and fled to Russia on February 22nd, 2014.

These events were quickly followed by the Russian annexation of the Ukrainian peninsula of Crimea in March 2014 following a controversial referendum in Crimea where allegedly an overwhelming majority voted in favor of the annexation. And despite this gross violation of CIS articles that stated no member's final post-USSR borders could not be violated or changed by other members, Ukraine still remained a part of the CIS for four years until Ukrainian president Petro Poroshenko, elected in May 2014, signed a decree cutting all ties between Ukraine and the CIS in May 2018. On the day of this announcement he Tweeted, "For us, the CIS is completely and entirely gone to the past, our future is in Europe only!"¹⁰²

Ukraine's succession from the CIS was not recognized by the Russian-dominated organization, which still lists Ukraine as an active CIS member on the official CIS website now in 2023.¹⁰³ Perhaps this is because Ukraine did not leave the CIS as per the created process for quitting the union, but instead just left via unilateral declaration. This may have been deemed as

¹⁰² <https://www.kyivpost.com/post/8960>

¹⁰³ <https://cis.minsk.by/>

illegitimate by CIS and Russian leadership, although there was no stated reaction from the Russian side regarding the move.

Similarly to Georgia's situation, Ukraine's relations with Russia quickly declined with each passing year following the 2014 Euromaidan Revolution. Russia did not have a friendly government ruling Ukraine and even with the annexation of Crimea, Ukraine was not backing down over their path to Europe and away from Russia. Along with the annexation of Crimea, there was a lasting conflict between Ukraine and Russia-backed separatists in the Donbas region in eastern Ukraine. It appeared that Russia was punishing Ukraine for their 2014 revolution, but that was when Ukraine was still in the CIS and still part of that sphere. What was to happen after Ukraine terminated all ties with the CIS in 2018?

In April of 2019, Volodymyr Zelenskyy was elected president of Ukraine, defeating Poroshenko, who was running for a second term. He focused on anti-corruption reforms, a decentralization of the Ukrainian government, and a tough but conciliatory approach with Russia. Perhaps Russian leadership wanted to wait and see if his presidency would result in a return to the Russian orbit and away from the path to Europe. But Zelenskyy did not rejoin the CIS, and even made further steps to push Russia away when the Ukrainian government made the Ukrainian language the only official legal language of Ukraine in the summer of 2019. He also promised to restore Ukrainian control of the Donbas region and continue Ukraine's aspirations to join NATO. Nothing in these moves was favorable to the Russian government.

In late February 2022, four years after Ukraine quit the CIS and did not show signs to return to Russia's sphere, and after years of conflict with Russia-backed separatists in the Donbass, the Russian Federation initiated a full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Similarly to Georgia, Russian forces appeared to be targeting Kyiv specifically to topple the Ukrainian government in

the first weeks of the war. Despite their claims of a special military operation focused only on the Donetsk and Luhansk regions in Ukraine, like they claimed with South Ossetia in Georgia, it is clear that it was not all Russia was interested in. This goal was confirmed in a press conference held in Cairo, Egypt in July of 2022 by Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov who said, “We will certainly help the Ukrainian people to get rid of the regime, which is absolutely anti-people and anti-historical.”¹⁰⁴ But that has proven to be very difficult for Russia, and they have allegedly withdrawn such aims. The Russian attack on Ukraine is much more aggressive compared to the attack on Georgia in 2008, and Russian forces continue to fight for parts of Ukraine outside of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions.

Since Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, there was an official CIS summit in October 2022 in Astana, Kazakhstan, with members in attendance and all leaders present in person; the only exception was Moldova with no involvement in the summit. This meeting was held to further strengthen cooperation within the union and bolster ties. While this meeting was a routine scheduled CIS summit, it was the first time since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic that all leaders met in person, even Vladimir Putin, who had strictly isolated himself during the pandemic and behaved in a paranoid manner, keeping people at a distance in other meetings. Perhaps it shows that he placed high importance on being at this meeting in person to garner support from his CIS allies during a war that has left Russia without many solid allies to turn to.

Only two months after this meeting in December 2022, Russia’s Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov made comments on the CIS in his visit to Istanbul. He said that the CIS will only grow in importance, specifically speaking on the creation of a CIS subordinate organization, “We see the new structure as a separate, financially independent multilateral organization headquartered in one of the Russian cities.” He also touched on the overall functioning of the CIS, declaring that

¹⁰⁴ apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-zelenskyy-kyiv-black-sea-arab-league

“we're working to prevent subsidence of cooperation mechanisms within the CIS, which have shown a high practical return.”¹⁰⁵ Lavrov did not elaborate further on his statements regarding the importance of the CIS or the details of the new CIS subordinate organization. But Lavrov has been speaking about the CIS more regularly since Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and even attended a meeting in Samarkand, Uzbekistan on April 14th, 2023 with the Foreign Ministers of the Commonwealth, addressing the progress of the war in Ukraine as well as plans for even stronger trade and economic cooperation among the CIS members.¹⁰⁶ There were no specific details on trade agreements or the terms of cooperation, but plans for an additional CIS summit were made for June 2023 in Sochi, Russia to sign a stronger free trade agreement of the CIS. Activity in the CIS has not been as energized as it has been following Russia's invasion of Ukraine. One may speculate that Russia is feeling the effects of Western sanctions, and could be relying more heavily on the CIS to ensure economic stability or to even get around sanctions. Russia also may want to now make sure that no other current CIS members will end up like Georgia and Ukraine, as failures in keeping the CIS together to ensure that security for the Russian Federation is kept. Nobody can really know what the details of Russia's plans are for the CIS until those plans are made public, but it is apparent that Russia is pushing for a tighter Commonwealth union. The importance of the CIS for Russia is further supported with the fact that Sergey Lavrov, a senior government official as the Foreign Minister of Russia, is handling CIS matters.

Whether or not Russia would have had Ukraine recommit to the CIS had they succeeded in overthrowing the Ukrainian government and installing their own puppet regime is unknown.

¹⁰⁵<https://www.aa.com.tr/en/europe/commonwealth-of-independent-states-only-to-rise-in-importance-says-russian-foreign-minister/2763885>

¹⁰⁶ <https://tass.ru/politika/17525277>

But the fact that the Russians were initially aiming to topple the Ukrainian government and install a puppet regime, and still may be trying, shows that they do not respect Ukraine's decisions on leaving the CIS or determining their own sovereignty by leaning towards the West, despite Russia being the creator and signatory of an equality touting Commonwealth of Independent States - an organization which they still employ to this day and place high importance on.

CONCLUSION

The Commonwealth of Independent States may appear only as a symbolic union among ex-Soviet republics that has no real purpose or meaning beyond that symbolism, but when examining its creation and evolution, it is revealed to be an important tool that mostly benefits Russia. The creation of the CIS at the Belavezha Accords may have convinced many that the union created by the Yeltsin team was spontaneous and created in a rush to bring down the USSR as fast as possible. In the original text of the Agreement to Create the CIS, there is an important contradiction between how Soviet era nuclear arms were to be dealt with – with an implication that all CIS members denuclearize but that the CIS would also have a “singular control” of nuclear arms. Moreover, the evolution of the union itself, from an invasive form of cooperation to hints that the CIS may have been a concept that Yeltsin and his closest associates had planned prior to the Belavezha Accords. The CIS, in the end, granted Russia similar control over their neighbors as the USSR did. Maybe the CIS wasn't nearly as obvious an instrument of control as the Soviet Union, but it was better than nothing from the Russian perspective. At the time the CIS was created, Gorbachev did not have control over the USSR, and many Soviet republics had a desire for independence and self-government. At least with the CIS, countries would have the illusion that they were fully sovereign, but the laws of the CIS allowed intense political

“cooperation” via councils that controlled major decisions of CIS members such as foreign policy choices. It also allowed for a Russian military presence in many CIS countries as part of their agreement to join the CIS. Georgia, Belarus, Armenia, Moldova, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan have all had Russian troops in their countries as part of CIS military cooperation. The external borders of all CIS member countries had to be strictly enforced and the official language of the CIS as a whole was made to be Russian. It is like a defunct Soviet Union.

While there were laws in the CIS Charter that allowed member states to formally quit the CIS, only two have ever tried to do so - Georgia and Ukraine. Both were attacked by Russia shortly after signaling intentions to leave the CIS, and both have experienced either direct annexation from Russia by way of Crimea, or intense occupation in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions in Ukraine and the Abkhazia and South Ossetia regions in Georgia. The most interesting fact about these countries however, is that Georgia was eventually allowed to fully leave the CIS and is no longer associated with the union in any way. But when President Poroshenko declared Ukraine’s secession from the CIS and signed a decree to make it official, Ukraine’s secession was not recognized by the CIS or any of the members of the CIS. Ukraine is still listed as a founding and active member of the CIS on the official website of the CIS to this very day.

Why one member was allowed to leave and another was not is a mystery. Georgia did follow the official guidelines to quit the CIS, whereas Ukraine did not, but that hardly seems like it would matter to Russia or CIS leadership; if they wanted to keep Georgia in the union, some reason or obligation would have risen to legally bind Georgia to the CIS until that obligation was fulfilled. But they were let go in 2009 and Ukraine was not let go in 2018. Perhaps this comes down to Russia’s obsession with Ukraine, with Russian claims that Ukrainians as a people are not separate from Russians. Georgians, on the other hand, have a different language and culture.

However, this also does not make sense if a third CIS member country is analyzed – Moldova has drastically decreased involvement in the CIS, and has considered leaving the Russian-dominated organization for some time. Now with a pro-Western government and the formal application for EU candidate status in 2022, it looks more likely that Moldova will leave the CIS and Russia’s sphere of influence. Moldovan leadership was not present at the recent October 2022 CIS summit in Astana, Kazakhstan, and they have withdrawn representatives from the organization slowly over the past few years. Russia’s response has included threats to expel over 200,000 Moldovan migrant workers from Russia and to halt trade with Moldova. These are the exact methods of pressure used with Georgia from 2004-2008 when they were also mulling over quitting the CIS.¹⁰⁷ Moldova was also the target of Kremlin-supported insurrection in mid-March. United States intelligence warned of a possible Russian directed insurrection in March, which was confirmed when police in Moldova say they arrested a group of 7 tasked by the Kremlin to stage a coup in Moldova.¹⁰⁸ All of these actions came after Moldovan moves to quit the CIS.

The reasons as to why Russia is trying so hard to keep Moldova in the CIS are unknown, but their desire to keep Moldova is a strange one. Unlike Ukraine and Georgia, Moldova does not share a border with Russia, nor do they have any cultural or linguistic ties. Why would Russia let Georgia leave the CIS, but fight to keep Moldova as a member? The CIS was never confronted with a member leaving the union until Georgia did exactly that in 2009. Perhaps Russia was more cautious of the response from the West in those times and wasn’t confident enough to assert control over Georgia. Georgia may have just been an acceptable loss because Russian leadership didn’t know what to do to make the country stay in the CIS. With Ukraine

¹⁰⁷ <https://jamestown.org/program/moscow-working-to-block-moldova-from-leaving-cis/>

¹⁰⁸ <https://www.politico.eu/article/moldova-arrest-russia-plot-government-protest-maia-sandu-eu-movement-people-shor-party/>

and Moldova, Vladimir Putin is not backing down, and does not appear to be phased by the reaction from the West. The CIS may have employed an unspoken and unwritten Brezhnev Doctrine type rule after losing Georgia, as if to commit to never allowing another member to leave the CIS and to intervene if the scenario presented itself again. If Georgia attempted to leave the CIS today instead of 2009, it may not have been allowed to do so.

Ultimately, it is clear that the CIS has made it easier for Russia to exert influence and control over other members. It has been more useful to Russia beyond a symbolic sense and does not have as much scrutiny from the outside world. It has served as a way for Russia to ensure its own security by employing surrounding CIS countries almost as shields from external threats. And the fact that it still exists today and has shown a recent increase in activity and relevance following Russia's invasion of Ukraine shows that it is more than a symbolic union. Russia's goals with Ukraine could be to bring the country back into the CIS, since Ukraine's departure from the union was not recognized. Now that Russia has focused on forging a new path that is their own with disregard to Western scrutiny, the CIS could serve to support that path. After all, Russia now needs to make sure that whatever allies they have left stay closely with them.

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