

# Is Russia Gaining Influence in Post-Soviet Space?

written by BRI Political Studies Group BAI Siyasi Arařtırmalar Qrupu

On 8 October 2024, Moscow hosted a meeting of the Council of Heads of State of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). The regular meeting of the CIS Council of Foreign Ministers, as is tradition, was held the day previous. CIS meetings and gatherings do not usually garner attention in the CIS countries themselves, much less the broader international community. However, the recent Moscow summit can be seen as exceptional in this regard. The two official documents adopted are somewhat different from the usual standard in character and content and are of particular importance when viewed in the context of the current tense and uncertain international circumstances. The serious rapprochement observed in Russia-Azerbaijan relations recently should not be overlooked. We also need to continue to analyze new occurrences in these relations. For instance, the visit of the head of Russian security services to Baku and the discussions he held are of interest. This article examines decisions taken at the CIS Summit in Moscow, reasons why Russia is trying to revitalize the organization now, and new developments happening in Russia-Azerbaijan relations.

The Russian-led Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), a regional intergovernmental organization in Eurasia, now includes nine former Soviet states: Russia, Belarus, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Moldova, and Armenia. Turkmenistan has the status of a neutral state but participates in CIS events as an associate member. Moldova has not participated in CIS events since Maia Sandu was elected President in 2020. He subsequently [announced](#) a gradual withdrawal from agreements signed under the CIS umbrella. Therefore, apart from Russia, there are only 7

former Soviet countries represented in the CIS. Taking into account the [refusal](#) by Armenia, another member-state, to endorse two important documents at the Moscow summit, we can say that only 6 countries within the former USSR act together with Russia and share Russia's position with regard to international relations. The official documents, which Armenia was not a signatory to, are the statements on the *Principles of Ensuring Security in Eurasia* and *Inadmissibility of the Use of Unilateral Measures in International Relations* adopted at the meeting of the CIS Council of Foreign Ministers.

First of all, both statements are examples of cynicism and hypocrisy in the sense that the texts contain references to the UN Charter, international law and condemn attempts of any state to dictate its position to other states by force. However, Russia has been waging a major war in Ukraine for 2 years and 8 months and has occupied the territories of a neighboring country, contrary to the UN Charter and all norms of international law.

The first [statement](#) says that it is unacceptable to adopt rules, standards and norms developed without the participation of all interested parties in international relations, and the role of the CIS in the development of these rules and norms should be increased.. The statement also notes: "The CIS member states are in favor of adapting the Eurasian architecture of interaction in the field of security, economy, culture and other spheres to multipolar realities." According to the second [statement](#), state and private property, assets, including bank accounts, bonds, real estate, diplomatic and consular premises, shall be immune and cannot be frozen or confiscated through another state's unilateral measures.

The points outlined in both statements are an expression of Russia's official position and a repetition of its propaganda. Although the West is not explicitly mentioned in either statement, its policies are criticized. One of the statements is entirely concerned with sanctions against Russia, and six

other countries expressed their support against sanctions. The statements also express no disagreement among the seven states about whether to strengthen the CIS. Russian President Vladimir Putin noted this point in a [speech](#) after the meeting. According to another [decision](#) adopted by the body, the CIS Inter-Parliamentary Assembly will regularly organize an international conference entitled *The Russian Language as a Basis for Dialogue toward Integration in the Commonwealth of Independent States*. Russia is interested in protecting the position of the Russian language in post-Soviet space, which it calls its near abroad and considers to be a zone of vital interest. Russia seeks to use Russian language and culture as a tool of its soft power to maintain and preserve Moscow's ability to influence these republics.

The Ukraine war's influence on geopolitical processes in post-Soviet geography is an undeniable reality. This war is a test of the former superpower's military strength and is of great importance in terms of its regional and international influence. The West, led by the United States, is hesitant in its military support to Ukraine, and the fact that the occupying army has been able to advance at a slower pace in the last year has increased Russia's influence with the remaining CIS members. The results of this are manifested primarily in the post-Soviet region, including the South Caucasus. Although the Georgian government was granted EU candidate status, its current ruling party has sabotaged the process of European integration and paved the way for Georgia's return to the Russian sphere of influence. (The results of the upcoming October 26 parliamentary elections are very important in this regard). Georgia has made an unambiguous strategic choice and included the goal of Euro-Atlantic integration in its constitution, but the ruling party has been able to ride dissatisfaction with the integration process. The West has excessively delayed Georgian integration. Moreover, before the war on Ukraine, Georgia,

Ukraine and Moldova were not granted EU candidate status, not even the prospect of membership, and no steps were taken towards the realization of the NATO decision on Georgia and Ukraine at the 2008 Bucharest Summit.

The new reality that has emerged in the South Caucasus over the past two years is the rise and deepening of the Russian-Azerbaijani strategic partnership to the level of alliance. The [Declaration](#) on *Allied Interaction between the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Russian Federation*, signed on 22 February 2022, was at first not taken seriously by the local community and the West, but now experts are seeing the intentions expressed with that document in a new light. It is worth recalling that Article 4 of the declaration states that Russia and Azerbaijan hold the same or similar positions on topical international issues; Article 5 states that the parties cooperate in the field of foreign policy activities in order to ensure stability and security in the Caucasus and Caspian regions; Article 7 states that the parties will refrain from any actions that, in the opinion of one of the parties, damage the strategic partnership and allied relations of the two states; Article 25 states that Russia and Azerbaijan will refrain from carrying out any economic activity that causes direct or indirect damage to the interests of the other party. Putin's visit to Baku in August, who was called to be arrested under a warrant from the International Criminal Court, and his warm [reception](#) are cited as a demonstration of the level of relations between the two countries. Another indicator of developing allied relations was the official visit of Sergei Naryshkin, Director of the Russian Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR), to Baku a few days before the CIS Summit on 2-3 October.

Detailed information about the visits of heads of special services and the issues they discuss is not usually disseminated. In this respect, it was surprising that the SVR issued a nonstandard [press release](#) containing important information about the trip. "Russia's SVR, along with

Azerbaijan's special services, emphasized the importance of efforts to identify hostile aspirations of Western intelligence services aimed at undermining internal political stability in both countries," the SVR stated. Moreover, Naryshkin [told](#) the media in Baku that recently Russian and Azerbaijani special services have jointly managed to ward off the threat of a US provocation against a Russian diplomat. However, he revealed no details when, where or how the incident took place.

Azerbaijan, however, has yet to provide any official information about Naryshkin's visit, his meetings with the country's president and heads of special services. Azerbaijan made no official information in response to the SVR's statement. Officials in Baku would hardly welcome such open information from Russia about closed meetings and intelligence cooperation circulated in the press. Moreover, the text also referred to the *West's hostile aspirations* on behalf of Azerbaijan. President Aliyev has considerably toughened his rhetoric against the West, but relations with the West are not considered hostile in Baku yet; at least no such statements have been made openly. Azerbaijani leadership has not yet defined a category of unfriendly countries at an official level. Russia's disclosure of the contents of the closed talks and statement circulated in the press about the joint operation of the two countries' special services against the United States undoubtedly serves to deepen the problems in Azerbaijan-West relations. If there is a real break with the West, Azerbaijan's need for Russia will only increase, and Moscow will have additional opportunities to realize its regional interests. The disclosure of secret negotiations can also be seen as a preventive step against Azerbaijan's evasion of taking a stance.

As for Russia and Azerbaijan's joint struggle against the *non-systemic opposition*, it is important to understand what forces this term refers to. The concept of non-systemic opposition appeared in Russia under Putin. In Russia's view, the

inclusion of the opposition in the system can occur on two planes: formal (parties that are officially registered, represented in government and the State Duma) and informal (parties that have any form of cooperation with authorities). Political forces and non-governmental organizations that remain outside the two planes (for example, the Anti-Corruption Foundation founded by Alexei Navalny and other projects) are called non-systemic. Any person or entity who makes a deal with the authorities but fails to become a part of their socio-political ecosystem and refuses to accept the legitimacy of the non-democratically and uncompetitively elected government, is considered non-systemic and is prosecuted in Russia. Non-systemic oppositionists who are considered particularly dangerous, as in the cases of Nemtsov and Navalny, might be killed. In Azerbaijan, the concept of non-systemic opposition is not part of official rhetoric. But one can recognize a similar distinction between oppositions in the Azerbaijani government's treatment of groups. Entities that the Russian would consider non-systemic under the above definition are typically stigmatized. The Azerbaijani government refers to these as radicals, anti-nationalists, those playing into the enemy's hands, traitors and other epithets. The government also uses the term *PFAP-Musavat pair*, which refers to the political forces that were in power from 1992 to 1993 and are currently in opposition. Other opportunistic political forces claiming to be opposition, which receive representation in parliament with Azerbaijani leadership's permission, establish cooperation with the ruling power, participate in so-called dialogs, are called *bus opposition* in Azerbaijani public opinion. This term emerged after the leaders of these parties visited Karabakh on the same bus with Adalat Valiyev, presidential aide and organizer of the dialog process. Those who agreed to take this bus trip are considered to have been backed by the system. It follows from the press-release by the Russian Foreign Ministry that Moscow will either support Azerbaijani authorities in fighting such forces or is already providing this support.

Thus, we see that Russia can significantly influence the domestic, foreign and security policies of its partners and allies in the CIS. While Moldova rapidly and Armenia cautiously are trying to move away from Russian influence, there has been a tendency for rapprochement between Russia and Georgia, a non-CIS member, for the past two years.