

# Ukraine Leaving CIS Shoots Down Kremlin's Imperial Ambitions

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People walk near a board displaying the Ukrainian coat of arms in Kiev May 27, 2014.

Ukraine's announcement Tuesday that it is quitting the Commonwealth of Independent States would be the last nail in the coffin of the Kremlin's Moscow-centered integration project built on the bones of the Soviet Union, analysts said.

Ukraine's Foreign Ministry has filed paperwork on the country's departure from the CIS with the country's parliament, the Verkhovna Rada, acting ministry head Andrii Deshchytisia said, Itar-Tass reported.

Ukraine's newly elected President Petro Poroshenko had not commented on the matter as of this story's publication.

Russia has alternative integration schemes for the post-Soviet space, but in the absence of Ukraine, they are likely to remain opportunistic alliances whose members — mostly

Central Asian nations — would be looking for Russian money but not strategic affiliation with Moscow, experts said.

"For a thinking man, a neo-Soviet Union without Ukraine is nonsense," said independent political analyst Sergei Shelin.

However, Ukraine may yet backtrack on its decision to leave, given that it is party to numerous collective treaties with the CIS, said Konstantin Zatulin of the pro-government Institute of CIS Countries in Moscow.

The insurgency-plagued Ukraine, which had been due to chair the CIS throughout this year, resigned the chairmanship in March, shortly after Russia annexed Ukraine's pro-Russian Crimea Peninsula.

Deputy Foreign Minister Vasily Nebenzya said in April that quitting the CIS would void 223 collective treaties Kiev has signed since the bloc's inception in 1991.

The list is mostly low-level deals, but also includes a labor agreement that allows thousands of Ukrainians to work in Russia.

Ukraine is part of the free-trade zone deal also ratified by Belarus and Russia, Ukraine's biggest trade partner with a bilateral turnover of \$39 billion in 2013, according to official statistics.

Moscow has already attempted a "customs war" with Ukraine earlier this year, tightening import rules, and has threatened to cancel the free trade regime altogether.

But Ukraine is edging toward integration with the European Union, which could offset the short-term losses. Visa-free travel could be introduced by the year's end, and a free-trade regime has already been de-facto installed.

Departure from the bloc is a protracted bureaucratic procedure. Georgia, the only nation to have left the bloc, spent a year going through the formalities from 2008 to 2009.

Tbilisi took care to replace collective treaties with new deals when it quit the CIS, but Moscow was and remains under no obligation to support that, Zatulin said.

### **'Civilized Divorce' Completed**

The main intended function of the CIS was, however, geopolitical — not economic or humanitarian — integration, and in this respect the bloc, by near-universal admission, has failed.

Even President Vladimir Putin conceded in 2005 that the CIS was only a form of "civilized divorce" for former Soviet states.

The bloc has been politically inactive for years, and its disintegration was sealed by the Russian-Georgian war of 2008, which it did nothing to prevent, said Alexei Malashenko of the Carnegie Moscow Center.

Without Ukraine, the CIS is likely to be either mothballed or disbanded altogether, depending on what best suits Russia's interests, Malashenko said.

"Ukraine's departure from the CIS means nothing for the bloc because the organization has been dead for a long time," quipped analyst Shelin.

Zatulin, a former lawmaker known for his pro-Kremlin stance, said the CIS may ramp up its integration work without Ukraine, which he said had always obstructed its operations.

But even he conceded that "a member's departure from a regional bloc is never good news for the rest of the members."

With the departure of Ukraine, the bloc's second most populous nation, the CIS would be down to nine members, compared to 15 republics that comprised the Soviet Union. In addition to Russia, the list includes two European states — authoritarian Belarus and tiny, impoverished Moldova — as well as the South Caucasus' sworn geopolitical enemies Armenia and Azerbaijan, and four Central Asian states, including the rising regional power Kazakhstan.

The current crisis in relations with Kiev arose in spite of Moscow's titanic attempts to keep it within Russia's sphere of influence and prevent its EU integration drive, Shelin said.

The Russian effort failed despite economic arm-twisting, political pressure, offers of lavish subsidies and even military intervention in Crimea, he said.

## **Wary of the Empire**

The Kremlin has launched a fresh reintegration drive for the ex-Soviet space in recent years with new blocs, including the Moscow-based Collective Security Treaty Organization and the Customs Union of Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan, to which other countries were cordially invited. Armenia said last September it would join the Customs Union, and Kyrgyzstan indicated interest.

But former Soviet republics still remain cautious of such projects for various reasons, both Shelin and Malashenko said.

Belarus has been playing Russia for years, extracting economic concessions for token integration moves, Malashenko said.

Kazakhstan is currently afraid of spoiling relations with Russia, fearing Moscow could lay claims to its northern provinces with predominantly Russian populations — just as it did in Ukraine, Shelin said.

Armenia, which is heavily dependent on Russian arms supplies, had no alternative but to join Moscow's integration projects, while the remaining countries, including Kyrgyzstan, simply expect more economic support from Russia, he said.

Some support for reintegration exists across the Soviet Union, Malashenko conceded. But it is not nearly enough to fuel the recreation of the Communist empire, he said.

"This is shaping into an Asia-oriented alliance where everybody expects material benefits

from Russia, which would struggle to feed them all," Shelin said.

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