

Russia's imperial CIS designs

By Taras Kuzio,
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The domination of the new Russian parliament by three pro-presidential forces – “pragmatic nationalists” (Unified Russia), extreme nationalists (the Liberal Democrats and Motherland parties) and communists – will have a profound impact on Russia’s relations with other CIS states. This is the first Russian parliament since 1990 which has no democratic pro-reform constituency.

The contours of a tougher, neo-imperialist policy were already evident before the election. After the elections, Russian policy will be especially aggressive towards three countries: Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia. This will lead to a deterioration in Russia’s “strategic partnership” with the U.S., formed after 9/11. The U.S. has already condemned Russia’s refusal, despite its promises to the OSCE and extensions, to withdraw its military bases from Moldova and Georgia.

Russian national identity and the CIS

Russian policies towards the CIS reflect the fact that Russian elites do not recognize the border between Russia and the rest of the CIS. Russia has proposed allowing non-Russian CIS citizens to join its armed forces. Such a policy is consistent with the view commonly held in Russia that the “Near Abroad” (the CIS) is not entirely foreign.

Russia has consistently promoted the legalization of dual citizenship by CIS states. Turkmenistan agreed to allow dual citizenship, but changed its mind earlier this year; Moldova recently changed its constitution to allow it.

In September, Putin introduced a bill making it easier for citizens in CIS countries and the Baltic states to become Russian citizens. The draft law introduces amendments to the 2002 citizenship law that waive a five-year residency restriction and language test.

Russia has preferred to maintain the “Near Abroad” as less than foreign by not demarcating its 61,000 kilometer border with the CIS states. Russia prefers to keep these borders as only delimited, a position that is only slightly better than the one that pertained during the Soviet era, when the borders were internal to the Soviet Union, and therefore semi-fictitious.

Military intervention

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Ivanov has stated that, under its new military doctrine, Russia will undertake pre-emptive strikes if threats arise and diplomacy has failed. This has been dubbed the “Putin Doctrine.” It emulates U.S. policy, now that the U.S. has claimed a right to pre-emptive military action.

Russia would intervene if there was a threat to Russians and Russian speakers living in the CIS. Georgia has already been threatened with intervention, in the Pankisi Gorge, and has experienced Russian bombing raids, allegedly against Chechen terrorists.

Russian as the “official” CIS language

Last September, Eleonora Mitrofanova of Russia’s Foreign Ministry said that Russia aims to obtain official status for Russian in the CIS. That has President Vladimir Putin’s support. His wife Ludmila heads the state-sponsored Russian Center for the Development of the Russian Language, the task of which is to promote Russian in the CIS.

In Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan the status of Russian has already been upgraded to that of an “official” language, alongside that of each state’s respective ethnic language. Moldova is set to follow suit and make Russian an official language next year, although there is strong domestic nationalist opposition to this move.

Russian officials and ambassadors to CIS states have regularly called upon the latter to elevate Russian to the status of an official language. An argument that is continually used by these officials is that the Russian language has never in history been a foreign language in CIS states.

Russian concerns in the CIS

Three major issues particularly cause concern in Moscow. First, the steady closure of Russian-language schools. Most CIS states have steadily reduced the number of such schools by adopting what in Western parlance would be termed “affirmative action” in favor of languages subjected to discrimination in the USSR. Even CIS states that are close to Russia, such as Kazakhstan, have applied such policies.

Second, the reduction of the retransmission of television and radio programs from Russia. This has been followed by a reduction in the amount of available Russian-language media from Russia.

Third, the attenuation of Russian cultural ties, seen as a method of maintaining the close ties that existed during the Soviet era. From this vantage point, Russian-speaking minorities are looked upon by Moscow as bridges between Russia and the CIS states. It is therefore important that Russian-speaking minorities remain in place, a position at odds with that of CIS states, which pursue language policies that aim to reverse the legacies of Russification.

Next year Russia plans to spend 252 million rubles assisting Russian speakers in the CIS, an increase over the 210 million rubles dispersed

this year. The majority of the Russian speakers who are to be targeted live in Kazakhstan and Ukraine.

In May 2001, the Russian Press Association (VARP) held its third world Russian Press Congress in Ukraine. It was attended by representatives from all CIS states and 40 other countries. VARP executive committee member Andry Derkach, a Ukrainian mogul, read out a greeting from President Leonid Kuchma.

In 2002, Russian-language schools in the CIS were provided with one million books, videos and pieces of computer software through local Russian embassies. Also, 925 scholarships for higher education in Russia were provided to CIS states.

Russia is also wants to reverse the trend whereby officers from CIS states go to military academies in NATO countries. They want to maintain Soviet-era links between the security forces.

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