

# Belarus Leads the CIS in 2013

Belarus assumed the presidency in the Commonwealth of the Independent States (CIS) on 1 January 2013. This is the international organisation which was intended to replace the Soviet Union in 1991.

For politicians who formed their vision in the Soviet Union, the CIS remains a substitute of the former empire, although the organisation's existence serves little practical sense. Minsk is now officially the capital of the CIS.

Despite the marginal importance of the organisation, the presidency of Belarus will be a serious challenge for the Belarusian diplomacy.

For the twenty years of its existence, the CIS has achieved only the creation of a free trade zone and the impression of the integration in the post-Soviet space. Citizens of the Commonwealth member states move within its territory with no visas. The states also signed a series of documents which provides some useful opportunities for ordinary people, such as recognition of higher education certificates.

The Kremlin, as the integration initiator, has turned away from the CIS and has embarked on its own projects, such as the Customs Union or the Eurasian Union.

## **The history of the Soviet Union's substitute**

The leaders of the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic and Ukraine signed an agreement on 8 December 1991 in Belavezha Forest, in Western Belarus. According to the agreement, the Soviet Union had ceased to exist and the CIS was to take its place. Post-Soviet politicians created the Commonwealth of Independent States in order to prevent the Soviet Union from further

downfall.

In the opinion of former president of Azerbaijan, Abulfaz Elchibey, today "Russia uses the CIS as a means of trying to preserve the old empire in a new form, inventing various mechanisms for that." The Kremlin retains the organisation. However, according to Elchibey, the CIS does not exist *de facto* anymore, as "a collective farm with no rights cannot possibly exist".

Officially, nine countries are CIS member states: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Russia, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. Two more countries – Ukraine and Turkmenistan – participate in the organisation in fact, but they have not ratified the CIS Charter – the necessary document for participating countries.

Georgia was a CIS member until 2009. However, on 12 August 2008, four days after the Russian-Georgian war started, President Saakashvili announced that Georgia was leaving the CIS. The Georgian Parliament supported this decision unanimously on 14 August.

The Baltic States never joined the organisation as they did not want to have much interaction with the former Soviet Union.

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Belarus has promoted the re-integration of the broken Soviet Union since the very beginning. In the early 90s, the idea of re-integration was popular among Belarusians. Belarus used to be one of the most developed Soviet republics. Therefore, Belarusians wanted to get back to the "Soviet family" in order to improve their material situation. In 1991, 82.7 per cent of Belarusians supported the preservations of the Soviet Union at a referendum.

## **Belarusian plans for the presidency**

On 5 December 2012, at the CIS summit in Ashkhabad, the Council of CIS State Leaders officially announced that Belarus would take the presidency of the organisation in 2013. The presidency rotates according to alphabetic order.

Belarusian officials will lead the sessions of the organisation's common bodies for the next twelve months. Official Minsk will organise the work of the most important CIS institutions: the Council of State Leaders, the Council of Governments' Heads, the Council of Foreign Ministers and the Economic Council.

Belarus has not presented the concept of its presidency or an events plan. According to Lukashenka, "The Belarusian presidency will work under the motto 'Integration for the benefit of the people: strengthening of good neighbourhood relations, development of ecological cooperation, expansion of cultural dialogue". The CIS member states will pay special attention to ecology and protection of the environment.

The participating countries of the union pay fees in accordance with the indices of their participation in the CIS GDP. The CIS budget remains tiny for an integration union. The member states will spend only \$22m for the functioning of the organisation in 2013.

According to BELTA news agency, in 2013 the Belarusian authorities plan to facilitate the development of a common informational field as a means of increasing inter-cultural and inter-ethnic cooperation, in the framework of the CIS. The MFA Spokesman Andrei Savinykh says that the Belarusian presidency will be concentrated on humanitarian issues: "The issues that are close to the people and influence their lives the most".

During the year of the presidency, the Belarusian authorities will promote the development of common radio and television

for all CIS countries, such as Radio Mir. Although the Belarusian MFA promises to promote the CIS work to the new qualitative level, we should not overestimate the importance of the Belarusian presidency. In 2013, the CIS member states are not going to sign any significant economic or political documents.

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Today, the most important feature of the CIS for Belarus lies in its international observation of elections. The CIS election missions pay no attention to the numerous violations and falsifications at Belarusian elections and always recognise them as democratic.

### **Senseless organisation**

The CIS has no supra-national competencies. The structure mostly performs the function of a discussion forum for sharing opinions, not for taking decisions. Even the summits held in the framework of the CIS are considered simply opportunities to organise more important bilateral meetings simultaneously.

Back in 1994, the states signed an agreement for the creation of a free trade zone within the CIS. The agreement never came to life. There appeared a new agreement instead, which came into force this year. The former Soviet republics walked the path to the creation of a free trade zone for more than 20 years. Today, more and more politicians have realised that the CIS will not become a great integration project.

The Kremlin understands this. This is why Putin created the [Customs Union](#) and is on the way to creating the [Eurasian Union](#). The CIS became the reason for solving many integration processes in the post-Soviet space.

The main difference between the old integration structures

like the CIS or the Union State and the new integration projects lies in the economic domain. According to Putin's plan, the integration of economies is the key to Russian prevalence at the post-Soviet space. If the Belarusian regime does not change its policy, Belarus will inevitably become a part of this new empire.

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