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Do the CIS member states share foreign policy preferences?

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A B S T R A C T

Relying on a large quantitative data set from the United Nations General Assembly voting records in the years 1992–2013, this study analyses developments in the foreign policy preferences of the member states of the Commonwealth of Independent States [CIS]. It finds that the general level of disagreement between the member states as a whole has increased significantly and that policies have become more radicalised, causing member states to hold directly opposing views still more often. It also finds that a majority of member states, led by Russia, have converged on the foreign policy mean, causing the core of the organisation to become still denser. This suggests that the CIS will undergo a future development where member states will travel along increasingly different trajectories. This research has important implications for our understanding of the CIS and of the policies of the individual member states.

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1. Introduction

Established in December 1991, the Commonwealth of Independent States [CIS] has provided a forum for a majority of the former Soviet republics to advance both their individual and collective interests, be these of a political, economic, military, cultural or different nature. Whereas for some member states (mainly Georgia, Moldova, Turkmenistan and Ukraine) the CIS has been little more than a necessary and not least temporary evil designed to manage the complex interdependencies created by the shared existence within the former unitary Soviet state, for others it has provided the foundation on which something much more ambitious eventually would be built.[1] These

latter have since worked to bring the CIS member states closer together and to both widen and deepen their integration in all policy spheres (Kosov & Toropygin, 2009; Kubicek, 2009: 241).

Much of the Western scholarly literature on the record of the CIS is negative. Writing in the late 1990s, Richard Sakwa and Mark Webber (1999: 379) noted that the organisation "has failed to integrate the Soviet successor states in any meaningful sense", and a majority of writers seem to have reached similar conclusions, if not always expressed so directly, since then. These writers will usually point to the continued existence of serious conflict, military even, within the membership circle, the frequent policy opt-outs, the low of the lowest common denominator, the lack of supranational decision-making bodies and enforcement mechanisms as well as withdrawals — or a combination of it all (for instance Åslund, Olcott, & Garnett 1999; Hansen, 2013; Kramer, 2008; Kubicek, 1999, 2009).

There is an alternative and more positive interpretation, however. Taking a "glass half full" perspective, these scholars emphasise what has been achieved rather than

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[1] Former Russian President Boris Yeltsin "thought of the CIS as a new type of union, formed to rescue Soviet integration as the Soviet state was falling apart, leading in a few years to a confederal arrangement, similar to the European Union" (Brzezinski & Sullivan 1997: 41).

what may be lacking. One recent such study, by Willerton, Slobodchikoff, and Goertz (2012), analyses the dense security treaty network within the CIS, arguing that it is a sign of a mature organisational culture, where member states willingly let their future actions be restricted and defined by a shared legal framework. Willerton et al. (2012: 60) insist that their findings from the CIS security domain are relevant to other policy fields as well, and they remain optimistic about the future of the CIS, guided as they are by assumptions about the positive effect of the treaty lock-ins for learning, socialisation and incremental change among the signatory states.

Other scholars (for instance Costa-Buranelli, 2014; Pourchot & Stivachtis, 2014) share these positive conclusions. Relying on English School insights they argue that a regional shared understanding — a *society* — has emerged according to which common rules should be observed and common institutions respected. They see the gradual strengthening of a shared normative structure within the CIS which points to a continued positive development; as Willerton, Slobodchikoff and Goertz they focus on those elements which have moved relations beyond the mini anarchy which we could otherwise expect to find in a regional setting such as that covered by the CIS.

Some of these assumptions are drawn from social constructivist integration theory according to which we should expect to see still greater policy co-operation, co-ordination and eventually integration among member states across a wide range of issues. It is argued that a high level of interaction, for instance within an organisational setting such as the CIS, may gradually reduce differences between the actors involved, eventually making them much more similar by giving them a more or less full set of shared norms, identities and preferences (Checkel 2007; Herrmann, Risse, & Brewer, 2004; Risse-Kappen, 1996; Tonra, 2003). This is due to the cognitive capacity of actors; as they interact, they tend to learn from each other, developing and internalising new world views and standards of behaviour in the process, and in general begin to think and act in increasingly similar ways (Checkel, 1999, 2005; Checkel & Moravcsik, 2001).

Social constructivists further insist that state interests are not defined and fixed a priori but instead develop during interaction with others; put differently, preferences are endogenous to interaction. And they will point, for instance, to studies of the European Union [EU] member states or other groups of states with frequent interaction to show that this preference harmonisation — or socialisation — does indeed take place. Thus, it has been suggested, for instance, that the EU member states have developed a still higher degree of foreign policy harmony — and that this has been achieved *despite* even the intake over time of a relatively large number of new member states (Johansson-Nogués, 2004; Luif, 2003; Marchesi, 2010).

This study builds on and tests these assumptions as it seeks to increase our understanding of the CIS, the closest we get to an organisational embodiment of the Soviet superpower that was once was. It does so by analysing the actual foreign policy behaviour of the member states — as seen in their individual voting records in the United

Nations [UN] General Assembly — in order to observe and assess possible developments within the group as a whole. The integration theory just sketched gives us reason to expect, all things being equal, that the CIS member states have converged still more on a foreign policy mean, gradually causing differences in preferences to have been ironed out. The available data will show if this is so.

It should be noted that Article 4 of the CIS Charter, signed on 22 January 1993, declares that member states should strive for "foreign policy co-ordination", which in itself alone would seem to suggest policies ranging from mere advance consultation to a full harmonisation of foreign policy behaviour. However, as Article 1 of the same Charter lists among the fundamental aims of the organisation "the future development and *strengthening* of … mutual understanding and mutually beneficial co-operation between the member states", the original ambition indeed seems to have been that policies should show still greater convergence and that member states would gradually move towards the deeper end of the integration pool (*Ustav*, 1993). While the Charter *is* rather vague on foreign policy — quite obviously a reflection of what little could be achieved when it was being negotiated — there is little doubt that growing *divergence* would go against the hopes and aspirations of the CIS "founding fathers".

I perform four main tasks in this study. Firstly, I give a short background to the CIS and to the UN membership of the member states. Following this, I go over the methodology of using the UN voting records to measure the foreign policy cohesion between two or more states. I then present and discuss the findings for the whole CIS before looking at specific dyads of states, focussing on both core and outlier states as well as on key issues of agreement and disagreement. Finally, based on these different findings of the study, I offer a few perspectives on the future development of the CIS and on individual relationships between the member states.

2. The CIS member states and the UN

The 8 December 1991 announcement by the then leaders of Russia, Belarus and Ukraine that the Soviet Union would cease to exist by the end of that year suddenly threw into *real* sovereign existence all the 15 former Union republics. Whereas by this time a majority of the republics had already declared their sovereignty, although not always strictly as understood by international law, they now all had to seek international recognition and to develop the full machinery of a sovereign state. General international recognition of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania had started pouring in already in early September 1991, but the other republics had to wait longer; the United States of America [USA], for instance, waited until 25 December 1991 before recognising *en bloc* the sovereignty of the remaining 12 Soviet republics.

With universally recognised sovereignty came membership of the UN. As the official successor state of the Soviet Union, Russia did not have to apply for membership but simply took over all former Soviet rights and obligations in the UN system, including the prestigious