Summary

Russia and the West's current struggle over Ukraine has sent ripples throughout the entire former Soviet Union. The crisis has further polarized former Soviet states into pro-Russian, pro-Western and neutral camps. However, given the sharp political, economic and security changes many of these countries have faced since independence, and the evolving demographic and cultural landscape of the region, the broader foreign policy orientation of the former Soviet states is far from set in stone.

Analysis

After the Soviet Union collapsed at the end of 1991, 15 new countries emerged. The disintegration of the Soviet Union and its institutions was neither smooth nor uniformly applied throughout the bloc. Several ethnic and territorial conflicts emerged leading up to and immediately following the Soviet Union's dissolution, including a war between Moldova and the breakaway territory of Transdniestria, the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh between Armenia and Azerbaijan, ethnic conflicts between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks in southern Kyrgyzstan, and civil wars in Georgia and Tajikistan.

Russia, the Anchor
By far the largest of these newly independent republics was the Russian Federation, which assumed many of the Soviet Union's powers, assets and responsibilities in the region, especially in the area of security. Russia kept troops in many former Soviet republics well after 1991 and maintains a military presence — whether forcefully or with consent — in several former Soviet countries to this day, including Armenia, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and breakaway regions in Moldova (Transdniestria) and Georgia (Abkhazia and South Ossetia).

However, Russia faced its own serious problems after the Soviet collapse, including an economic crisis resulting from the rushed privatization process and its own territorial conflicts in the North Caucasus republics. Thus, Russia was domestically and internationally weak during the 1990s and early 2000s — the same time the European Union and NATO expanded into much of Russia's periphery. All of the former Warsaw Pact countries, as well as the Baltic states, had joined the European Union and NATO by 2004.

By the mid- to late 2000s, Russia's fortunes reversed. The political and security apparatus had been re-consolidated under President Vladimir Putin, the economy had recovered on the back of high energy prices, and the Kremlin had greater room to make foreign policy maneuvers (particularly in the former Soviet space) as a result of U.S. and Western distraction in the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Russia pushed back against the West by defeating Georgia in the August 2008 war, reversing color revolutions in Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan, and launching its own Customs Union bloc with Belarus and Kazakhstan in 2010.

Russia built on these gains to return to the status of a legitimate regional power, forcing the former Soviet countries and even Europe to take its interests into account. However, it was this very ascent — along with the ends of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan — that convinced the Europeans and the United States to focus on containing the Russian resurgence. This culminated in the uprising against the pro-Russian regime in Ukraine, which has led to the current standoff between Russia and the West that has spread into the rest of the former Soviet Union.

**The Pro-Russian Bloc**

The current state of the former Soviet Union is marked by an intense competition between Russia and the West over influence among the smaller former Soviet republics. This contest is arguably at its fiercest level since the end of the Cold War, playing out differently in each sub-region and in each individual country of the former Soviet Union. However, there are three broad categories into which the former Soviet states fall: those that are pro-Russian, those that are pro-Western (countries that are members of the European Union and NATO and countries seeking membership in the Western blocs) and those that prefer to avoid alignment with either.
The countries firmly in the Russian camp are Belarus, Armenia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. All of these states are members of the Collective Security Treaty Organization, a Russian-led military bloc that is essentially Moscow's answer to NATO. Belarus and Kazakhstan are also members of Russia's economic bloc, the Customs Union, which in 2015 will evolve into the Eurasian Union and include Armenia and Kyrgyzstan as members, with Tajikistan likely to join eventually. These states are integrated with Russia economically, politically and in the area of security, eschewing any meaningful ties with the West in these same areas.

The Russian orientation also penetrates deep into the society of these countries. Much of the population is suspicious of the West and views Russia favorably, due in part to the prevalence of Russian media. For many, these views have only intensified as a result of the Ukraine crisis. The West is blamed for instigating an illegitimate coup against the government in Ukraine, while Russia's position in the country is deemed rightful.

Genuine nostalgia for the former Soviet Union is also a major component with the pro-Russian bloc. This can be seen in the Soviet street names within cities, the statues of Vladimir Lenin in many public squares and the widespread use of the Russian language in daily life. These pro-Soviet proclivities are rooted not only in ideological or cultural reasons but also in economic interests. Much of the population, and in some case entire cities, experienced greater stability and prosperity during the Soviet era than they have since, further explaining their favorable view of Russian integration.

The Pro-Western Bloc

The second group of countries in the former Soviet Union — those oriented toward the West — can be divided into two categories: states that have joined the European Union and NATO (the Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania) and states that are trying to integrate with and become members of the Western blocs (Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia). All of the countries have territorial disputes with Russia or pro-Russian forces to motivate their hostilities and their efforts to secure political and security backing from the West. Just as the Ukraine crisis pushed the pro-Russian countries closer to Moscow, so it exacerbated the fears of the pro-Western countries, driving them to seek greater support from the West.

In these countries, the Russian language is used less often than in the pro-Russian countries. Much of the adult and elderly population, as well as the sizable ethnic Russian minorities, can still speak Russian as a result of their Soviet-era education. However, native languages are receiving greater emphasis, and the use of the Russian language is decreasing among the younger generations. The populace also views the Soviet era much less favorably, building Soviet occupation museums in cities such as Tbilisi and Riga rather than giving streets Soviet names or erecting Lenin statues.

There are of course, exceptions. Each country in this group has pro-Russian elements within society other than the ethnic Russian populations. The Baltic states all have political parties that cater to ethnic Russian interests and seek closer ties with Moscow. Moldova has the Communist Party and the Russian-oriented region of Gagauzia. Ukraine, too, has the pro-Russian regions of Donetsk, Luhansk, and until recently, Crimea, which Russia annexed with support from the pro-Russian majority of the
population. Ultimately, however, most people in these countries prefer to tie their fate to the West rather than Russia.

The Neutral Bloc

Finally, there are the former Soviet Union's non-aligned states: Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. It is perhaps no coincidence that all of these states are major energy producers, which has afforded them more economic independence and greater room to maneuver in foreign policy (the pro-Russian Kazakhstan is also an energy producer, but it has a long and open border with Russia and a significant ethnic Russian minority). Each has energy and economic ties with both Russia and other powers — Turkey and Europe in the case of Azerbaijan, and China in the case of Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. Each also has avoided military alliances and the presence of foreign troops on their soil, with Uzbekistan going so far as to close a NATO base used for transiting supplies and troops to Afghanistan following Western criticism of the Andijan crackdown in 2005.

On the societal level, each country has constructed a very strong national identity in terms of language and culture and created distance from Russia and the Soviet era. The older generations and intellectuals still understand Russian, but the local languages are used more frequently. Soviet symbols are largely absent. At the same time, Western cultural influence is also limited due to the centralized and authoritarian nature of the regimes. These countries have preferred to go their own way, both politically and culturally, while maintaining cautious relations with both Russia and the West.

The Possibility of Changes

Of course, not all states within each grouping behave the same way, and not all are completely uniform in the extent of their allegiance (or lack thereof) to external powers. Moreover, not all groupings are set in stone. In the decades since the Soviet Union collapsed, several former Soviet states have changed their allegiances and foreign policies. Ukraine is perhaps the best example, as it swung between alignment with Russia and alignment with the West several times over the past decade.

The future of the former Soviet Union is likely to be no different. While the current crisis in Ukraine has increased the polarization between the Russian-oriented and Western-oriented blocs, no country's orientation is fixed forever. For example, the pro-Western Moldova could, due to its internal political divisions and weak economy, reverse its orientation or become neutral. In Georgia, there is a broad consensus among the population for Western integration, but economic opportunities from Russia and a lack of concrete support from the West have dampened the public's enthusiasm. Ukraine in particular could ultimately temper or abandon its Western integration efforts given the challenges it faces in the eastern provinces created by the Western-backed uprising and Russia-supported separatist movement.

Those countries closely tied to Russia are not fixed in their policies, either. Belarus previously has flirted with the West. Moreover, Belarusian President Aleksandr Lukashenko is worried about a repeat of the Ukrainian scenario in his country, making Minsk more careful in its dealings with the Europeans
so that it avoids alienating itself from the West. Kazakhstan, which has been ruled by Nursultan Nazarbayev since independence, has approached political integration with Russia carefully and could see changes in the wake of Nazarbayev's succession. Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are both hampered by their own internal political and economic weaknesses, making them shaky partners for Russia.

The neutral states are likely to remain non-aligned in the areas of politics and security. However, they could strengthen their energy ties with Russia or choose to distance themselves from Moscow somewhat by striking more energy deals with other countries, depending on the broader geopolitical circumstances of the region.

Russia itself is likely to see a significant transformation in the future. The country will face demographic challenges as a result of a declining Slavic population, just as the non-Slavic and Muslim populations of the North Caucasus and Ural regions continue to grow. Russia's political future is uncertain in terms of who will succeed long-serving President Vladimir Putin. And no matter who takes control of the Kremlin, Russia's economy is likely to face some hardship as Europe attempts to wean itself from Russian energy over the long term. Russia's cultural influence is also likely to weaken as younger generations without memories of the Soviet era become more prevalent and those in other former Soviet countries — even pro-Russian ones — speak Russian less and less.

However, Russia has often maintained the ability to project power in its near abroad despite its economic and political weaknesses. While Russia certainly is not as strong as it was during the Soviet era, it is still the most powerful player in the region and shapes each state's decision-making. While the former Soviet states will no doubt continue undergoing significant changes in the coming years, Russia's influence is likely to continue driving the entire region in the near- to mid-term.

Send us your thoughts on this report.

Russian Resurgence Timeline

- SEP 26, 2014
  At the U.N., Searching for Substance Amid the Noise
- SEP 21, 2014
  Conversation: Examining the Reality in Ukraine