

Putin Looks to Strengthen Ties With Former Soviet Neighbors

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Vladimir Putin leading a pack of CIS leaders in his first official meeting as president with foreign heads of state. **Denis Sinyakov**

President Vladimir Putin said Tuesday that the influence of the Collective Security Treaty Organization in regional affairs will increase and indicated that Russia would take a lead role in forming the organization's new policies.

"We share a common approach toward the questions of international and regional safety. I am sure that the role of the Collective Security Treaty Organization will increase," Putin said during the opening remarks of the CSTO summit, a group of seven former Soviet states that was founded in 1992.

The Collective Security Treaty Organization, whose members include Armenia, Belarus, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan and Russia, operates a 3,500-soldier force with a structure resembling that of NATO.

The CSTO summit was held simultaneously with an informal meeting of the Commonwealth of Independent States, which includes the members of the CSTO and other countries like Ukraine, Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan and Moldova.

Meeting with his Ukrainian counterpart Viktor Yanukovich on the sidelines of the summit, Putin called on Ukraine to ratify a free trade agreement it has signed along with other CIS states.

Relations between Russia and Ukraine have grown increasingly tense since former Prime Minister Yulia Timoshenko was jailed last year. She was sentenced to seven years on charges that she signed a damaging gas treaty with Russia during Putin's tenure as prime minister.

But Putin, who seemed comfortable in the company of CSTO and CIS leaders — many of them authoritarian rulers — did not appear in front of media at the event, despite earlier indications that he might do so.

After the summit, the CSTO members produced a joint declaration expressed their dismay over U.S. plans to build a missile shield in Europe, saying that it could cause "damage to international security."

The CSTO, whose provisions — like NATO's — include a chapter that an attack on one of the organization's members constitutes an attack on all, will see its military role increase under a Putin presidency, military expert Igor Korotchenko said Tuesday.

Korotchenko, editor of National Defense magazine, said that with growing instability near the borders of the organization's Central Asian members, the authoritarian regimes there "will be pushed toward greater loyalty to Moscow."

He was referring to worries in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan that the regimes there could fall under a wave of radical Islamists pouring over their borders after U.S.-led coalition forces leave Afghanistan by 2014.

Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, which both host Russian military bases, also indicated that they might join the Customs Union of Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan.

Russian media earlier reported that Putin — who indicated in one of his policy articles while running for president that he would make strengthening cooperation with former Soviet states a priority — will pay his first official visit as president to neighboring Belarus.

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