



a 35-minute meeting with Mr. Christopher in Helsinki, where this week's visit was quickly arranged. "Secretary Christopher said in a very forthright, clear way that the United States supports Ukraine's independence and sovereignty and territorial integrity, that we think that Ukraine is a strategic priority in Europe, and we think that Ukraine's continued independence is important for Europe as a whole," Mr. Burns said.

"We see Ukraine as a major priority for us."

Will Russia's Bear Growl in Anger Again?

Moscow has adopted a more hawkish stance, write Askold Krushelnysky and Miranda Anichkina.

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The announcement that Yevgeny Primakov is to become the Russian Federation's new foreign minister, has sent shudders through the independent states that once formed the Soviet Union.

The 66-year-old, who replaces Andrei Kozyrev, is viewed as a relic of the old communist era and, as such, his appointment has been greeted with approval by both Russia's Communist and nationalists alike.

The reason is that Primakov is known to be enthusiastic about reconstituting links between the former republics into something that amounts, in everything but name, to a new Russian-dominated Soviet Union.

The Communists and nationalists, who won the biggest share of votes in last month's Russian parliamentary elections, had long demanded Kozyrev's dismissal, accusing him of being too pro-western.

But, although regarded as a liberal by western politicians, Kozyrev varied only in degree in his own ambitions to draw the new sovereign states back into Moscow's sphere. It was under his administration that the phrase "the near abroad", to describe the former Soviet republics, gained currency.

To those republics it is a chilling code word. It shows that the Kremlin has not reconciled itself to their independence. Many Russians cannot bring themselves to refer to the former imperial territories as "abroad".

The fear of the new nations is that eventually, through economic pressure, Moscow's ambition is to reassert Russian hegemony over the region and reduce their sovereignty to a fiction.

Kozyrev, trying to maintain his urbane image, had to be subtle in promoting Russian ambitions with regard to the former republics. Primakov, who was tipped to become foreign minister just before the

Soviet Union disintegrated, and who was notorious for his hostility to the West, is not similarly circumscribed and is expected to be more strident.

He has been placed there to assuage the resurgent Communist Party, which gained the single largest bloc in the lower house of parliament, the state Duma, after the December 17 elections. One of the popular planks of the Communists' manifesto was the reconstitution of the Soviet Union.

They will support Primakov's moves to extend the Kremlin's influence over the former republics, as will the nationalists of Vladimir Zhirinovskiy and others. Alexander Kovalyev, an analyst at Moscow's US and Canada Institute, described Primakov's appointment as the "re-nationalisation" of Russia's foreign policy.

The shifting of Primakov from chief of foreign intelligence to head the ministry for foreign affairs dismayed a leading American expert on Russia, Marshall Goldman, because of Primakov's "long record of adversarial politics" regarding the West, especially during the Gulf War.

That sense of change in the air increased when Primakov's appointment was closely followed by the removal of Yeltsin's chief-of-staff Sergei Filatov who, if not exactly an outright liberal, was regarded as a relative moderate. His replacement by hardline former nationalities minister Nikolai Yegorov continues a post-election pack-shuffling which leaves Russia looking considerably more hawkish.

But the most serious blow to reformers came when Anatoly Chubais, the last remaining reform-minded figure in the cabinet, was eased out. He had led the privatization drive in Russia since 1992, first as head of the privatization ministry and later in overall control of trying to turn Russia into a market economy.

The bombarding of the Chechen rebels in Dagestan - in contrast to Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin's "softly-softly" line during a similar terrorist raid last year - shows how the political winds have changed in the Kremlin.

Primakov has stated that the main priorities of Russia's foreign policy should be the establishment of a closer, some say confederate, Moscow-led relationship with the countries of "the near abroad".

Elements of the Russian political establishment long to restore the old Soviet Union for a variety of reasons. Some are purely economic. Russia wants access to be as easy as possible to Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan's oil, Yzbekistan's cotton and natural gas, Tajikistan's uranium and so on.

Another factor is the millions of Russians living in the former republics. Their relatives are outraged that they now have to obtain visas to visit places that used to have no real borders. Many Russians living in the

"near abroad" face occasional or systematic discrimination.

But there are also sentimental and cultural forces at work. A traditional fear of invasion by the West means that many Russians, egged on by ultra-nationalists and the military, feel they need huge landmasses to protect themselves from invaders, as well as to give them prestige. Nationalists and historians passionately declare that the bonds between the Slav components of the former empire - Russia, Ukraine and Belarus - are unbreakable, and preach that a union of the three is inevitable.

The status of Ukraine is particularly painful for Russians. The Dark Ages state of Kiyvan-Rus is regarded as the cradle of modern Russian history. It existed centuries before Moscow was founded.

The Kremlin has not shied away since the disintegration of the USSR in 1991 from urging plans for centralised regulation of economic, defence and foreign policy for the former republics and for strengthening the presently loose association of those countries within the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). Its aim is to equip the CIS with supra-national political bodies, controlled by Russia, with sovereign powers delegated to it.

Meanwhile, it has used its economic clout to hamper the attempts by some of the states to attain independent financial viability by forging trade links with other countries without consulting Moscow. Belarus's finances are in such dire straits and its national identity, eroded by centuries of Russification, so feeble that it may be the first republic to ask for reunion with Russia.

Ukraine's economy has suffered from the imposition of international prices for Russian-supplied oil and it has now been talked into conceding naval bases for the Russians in Crimea. Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan have felt the pressure from Russian business and political interests to give Moscow a slice of the action over international sales of oil. Russian military intervention in Transdnestria, Georgia, Nagorno Karabakh, Tajikistan and Azerbaijan has illustrated the instability of the new borders of the former Soviet Union. The continuing and bloody Chechen saga provides further evidence of an increasingly tortured transition.

Russia has been keen to become involved in the international peacekeeping effort in the former Yugoslavia. The hope is that an international presence in troubled areas such as Bosnia will make it harder for the West to protest if Moscow sends forces into the former republics.

Sergey Karaganov, a senior defence and foreign policy adviser to President Boris Yeltsin, wrote: "A key part of Russia's new mission in the world is to prevent ... the transformation of the territory of the former Soviet Union into a geostrategic hole, radiating instability and wars."