

In October, the Belarusian parliament rejected a petition organized by the nationalist opposition Belarus Popular Front calling for new elections and the resignation of the current parliament, elected before independence in 1991. A new constitution has yet to be passed.

Georgia faces ethnic-based conflicts and a continuing insurgency led by ousted former president Gamsakhurdia. Multi-party elections in October resulted in a new parliament and confirmed former Soviet Foreign Minister Shevardnadze as head of state.

The conflicts are absorbing much of the government's resources, with little left for economic initiatives and social programmes. Relations with Russia are strained over Georgian fears Russian forces are tacitly supporting the separatists.

The Georgian forces combatting the Ossetian and Abkhazian insurgencies are drawn from poorly-trained and undisciplined political militias. They continue to exert inordinate influence over the civilian government.

Kazakhstan has tried to preserve stability and the delicate balance between Kazakh and Russian communities (roughly 40% each) by downplaying political reform. President Nursultan Nazarbaev was the sole candidate in the December 1991 elections, and commands the will of the Soviet-era parliament.

The authorities have refused to register Islamic or nationalist parties. The media is generally tame, with radio and television under strict government control. Economic reform has made some limited progress.

Kyrgyzstan has one of the best human rights records in the region. President Askar Akayev has actively promoted a civil and political rights agenda, and is pushing for the adoption of a new post-Soviet constitution.

The capital, Bishkek, has become a meeting-place for reform activists from across Central Asia. Ethnic tension with the Uzbek minority has been defused by the president through personal mediation. The government is committed to economic reform, but lacks the resources and trained personnel to proceed quickly.

The absence of a permanent solution to the conflict in the Transdnistr region in Moldova is blocking progress on economic and political reform. The July 21 agreement signed with Russia stopped the fighting between government and separatist forces, creating a tripartite control commission to monitor the ceasefire.

Since then, however, positions have hardened. Russia's ability to act as mediator is compromised by the continued presence of the Russian 14th Army which has heightened tensions.