

Ukraine's transition to democracy has been hindered by the absence of democratic traditions and a new constitution with a clear division of powers among the executive, legislative and judicial branches. President Kravchuk remains in control, though the new government of PM Kuchma has been successful in acquiring expanded powers.

Parliament has become more assertive but remains a weak institution. Opposition parties are active and have called for new elections to replace the current parliament, elected in 1990 before independence. Concerns remain about the independence of the largely state controlled media.

While its politics are increasingly nationalist driven, Ukraine has been successful in avoiding ethnic tensions. The dispute over Crimea is a potential focus for conflict among Ukrainian, Tatar and Russian residents.

Armenia has a popularly-elected president and a functioning multi-party system. There is vigorous parliamentary debate and a fractious independent press.

Democratic development and economic reform are constrained by the spreading Armenian-Azeri conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh. Armenian fighters in Karabakh have been accused of atrocities. Hostage-taking is routine.

Since 1988, virtually all of Armenia's Azeri inhabitants have left for Azerbaijan, while most Armenians from Azerbaijan (other than Karabakh) have been resettled in Armenia.

Political turmoil in Azerbaijan led to the fall of the neo-Communist regime and the holding of multi-party presidential elections in June. President Abulfaz Elchibey of the Azerbaijan Popular Front was the clear winner, campaigning on a platform of market economics and political reform.

Local human rights organizations have accused the authorities of unlawfully arresting and mistreating leading members of the political opposition.

Most of the new government's energies have been diverted to military efforts to reassert control over Karabakh. Azeri forces have been accused of "ethnic cleansing" in areas retaken from the Armenians.

Belarus has been slow to implement political and economic reforms. Strongly influenced by entrenched interests, President Shushkevich is pursuing gradualist policies and maintaining traditionally close links with Russia.