

Fistfights and Democracy in Ukraine

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You know it is a rough time for democracy in the former Soviet Union when [images of fisticuffs from the floor of the Ukrainian parliament](#) are broadcast all over the world; and that those images of fistfights, eggs being thrown and wrestling over a giant Ukrainian flag represent some of the better news regarding democracy in the region. Obviously, debate and discussion is more appropriate than violence and shouting matches in any legislature, but sadly, this incident is one of the rare signs of democratic life in the region.

First, while violence in parliament is not a healthy sign of democratic stability, it is far better than violence on the street, like what was seen in Kyrgyzstan last month. Politics are very polarized in Ukraine primarily along regional lines with President Viktor Yanukovich and his orientation towards Russia far more popular in the east, while western Ukrainians voted heavily for Yanukovich's opponent Yulia Tymoschenko in the last election. There is always the potential for violence in any society, particularly one as polarized as Ukraine, but if that violence is restricted to parliament, that is a good sign for Ukrainian democracy.

Second, the fight in the Ukrainian parliament occurred because the MPs participating in the fight believed that what the parliament decided was important and would have bearing on national policy and law. This seems obvious, but in much of the region, parliaments are still primarily hotbeds of corruption which do little more than automatically approve whatever the president proposes. It is perhaps counterintuitive, but the intensity of the fights in the parliament, even if they were physical in nature, demonstrates the strength and relevance of the legislature. If nobody cared or thought what parliament did was important, then there would never be any fights, or even heated rhetoric.

The third and related point is that the fights in parliament demonstrated that politics in Ukraine are about something. In other words, party differences are not based simply on the personalities of their leaders, but on real policy differences. The fight in the Ukrainian parliament was intense because it was about an issue, extending a lease to the Russian navy, that was important and divisive. In much of the region, politics are rarely about anything substantive at all, focusing instead on arguments over who should be in power. This is clearly not the case in Ukraine.

The fights in the Ukrainian parliament occurred at almost the exact same time as the president of another former Soviet country, Georgia's Mikheil Saakashvili, speaking in the U.S., eloquently dismissed widespread concerns, which have been expressed by the [U.S. State Department](#), [media watchdog groups](#) and academics, regarding press freedom in his country as "[total b&lsh#t](#)", and only a few weeks after another leader in the region, Kyrgyzstan's Kurambek Bakiev, who was also once viewed as a great democratic hope,

fled his country after his kleptocratic and thuggish regime had been overthrown. Beyond these countries, throughout the region, from Moscow to Baku to Astana, democracy has been in retreat. While the events a few days ago in Kiev demonstrate that Ukrainian democracy has a long way to go, they also demonstrate that Ukrainian democracy and debate is stronger than in many surrounding countries and, at least for now, while sloppy and contentious, still may have a future.