**Language conflicts**

Pulling no punches

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HENRY HITCHINGS was certainly right when he wrote in "[The Language Wars](http://www.amazon.com/The-Language-Wars-History-English/dp/0374183295)" that “wherever more than one language is used, conflict of some kind is inevitable.” Last week a conflict of the physical kind broke out amongst members of the Ukrainian Rada (parliament) in Kiev, where members were debating a bill brought by the current President Viktor Yanukovych's Party of Regions. The years-old [proposal](http://www.economist.com/blogs/johnson/2010/09/language_politics) would have afforded Russian the status of a regional language—allowing Russian-speaking regions of Ukraine (predominately in the south and east of the country) to carry out school classes and everyday business in Russian as well as Ukrainian.

Ukraine has always been sensitive to bullying by Russia: though relations have improved under Mr Yanukovych's presidency, many Ukrainians are nervous about falling again into a Russian sphere of influence. Yulia Tymoshenko, a former prime minister, called the proposed bill “a crime against Ukraine, the nation, its history and people.” She is currently [in jail](http://www.economist.com/node/21554249), so it was up to her Batkivshchyna Party to fight the bill, claiming it would rend the country in half. Fight they did. The Rada looked more like the [UFC](http://www.ufc.com/) octagon than a place of spirited but democratic debate as portly politicians swapped verbal sparring with words for actual gloves-off fighting.

There is a serious point behind the fisticuffs: yes, the sight of suited parliamentarians fighting is funny, and this isn't first time that those in the Rada have come to blows (last time it was worse—[eggs were involved](http://www.nytimes.com/2010/04/28/world/europe/28ukraine.html?_r=1)). But neither is it the first time that battles have been fought over language. Throughout history the imposition of a language has regularly been one of the first steps colonial or imperial powers take when they arrive. When empires dissolve, the language question predictably provokes conflict, as it has throughout the former communist bloc.   

Our sister blog Eastern Approaches has regularly written of [Latvia's self-torment](http://www.economist.com/blogs/easternapproaches/2012/02/latvias-referendum)over adopting Russian. (In February, Latvia's government put the problem to their people: 75% decided against officially allowing Russian, but the argument [rumbles on](http://www.economist.com/blogs/easternapproaches/2012/02/more-questions-please).) The Kosovo conflict of the 1990s was inflamed by Slobodan Milosevic's insistence on pressing the Serbian language upon ethnic Albanians. Kyrgyzstan is currently engaged in [a debate](http://iwpr.net/report-news/row-over-uzbek-language-kyrgyzstan) as to whether Uzbek children in the country should be able to take exams in their own language, rather than Kyrgyz or the secondary official language (Russian, ironically perhaps).

Language is of course all-important to a country. But this truism hides several thorny questions. The breakup of the former Soviet bloc left nearly no monolingual countries; how far to accommodate a minority is just the first of two difficult questions.  Having once been dominated by Russia, countries like Ukraine and Latvia can be forgiven for wanting to strut their national stuff, including their languages. But does that then give them the right to impose those languages on minorities?  What if those minorities are Russian?  What if they're not, but rather deeply-rooted minorities like Hungarians in Romania, Albanians in Macedonia or some such?

The second difficult question is that of practicality: Ukrainian is not a language of wider communication, nor is Latvian. Preserving the role of Russian (since so many people inside and outside the country already speak it) could be useful for those countries. English might be more useful still, but there is not a deep well of fluent speakers already in the country.

Facile conclusions about what to do in these countries should be avoided. Well, one conclusion is easy enough: fistfights are probably not going to settle the matter.  A country trying to polish its democratic credentials (so as not to lose its role [co-hosting the European football championships](http://www.economist.com/node/21555919), say), should behave a little better. Of all things, debates about language should be settled with words, not blows.

(The Economist online-go here to read blog and watch video: http://www.economist.com/blogs/johnson/2012/05/language-conflicts)