

“Healthy elections” in Ukraine Kyiv’s Dilemmas and Moscow’s War Goals

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Almost three years into Russia’s full-scale invasion, the United States is encouraging Ukraine to hold elections following a ceasefire, preferably before the end of the year. According to US Special Envoy for Ukraine and Russia, Keith Kellogg, elections are a “sign of a healthy democracy.” This brief highlights the challenges Kyiv faces, as well as how Moscow could use elections to advance its end goal of controlling Ukraine.

UKRAINIAN LEGISLATION PROHIBITS holding parliamentary elections under martial law. According to Article 83 of the Constitution, the Verkhovna Rada (Parliament) remains in office until a new Verkhovna Rada is elected—an election that can only take place after martial law is lifted. However, elected parliamentarians who retire or resign cannot be replaced before new elections, which means that the parliament may at some point lack a quorum. Moreover, Ukrainian legislation from 2015 also bans presidential and other elections under martial law. In 2023, the government decided against holding elections, as doing so before the end of the war could undermine national unity. According to surveys by the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology (KIIS), a majority of Ukrainians, along with opposition leaders such as Arseniy Yatsenyuk (Narodnyi Front), supported the decision.

Once martial law is lifted, the country will need to prepare for both presidential and parliamentary elections. After three years of war, this is not going to be an easy task for Ukraine.

PRACTICAL ISSUES

Ukraine takes its democracy seriously. National elections must be inclusive, free, and fair. And already here, problems are mounting up. The first obvious obstacle is that millions of Ukrainians are refugees within their own country, which poses serious challenges for their participation in a vote.

A general problem in many parts of Ukraine is the lack of voting infrastructure. This concerns not only the number of polling stations, where elections can be organised – normally schools and administrative buildings. There are also insufficient electoral administration offices, as well as challenges in the logistics of printing, distributing, and collecting ballots. Ukraine is a large country, so securing polling stations at a reasonable proximity to all its voters is difficult.

What is more, it will take time for citizens lacking a valid passport or other types of ID to apply for renewed documents. The demand for new personal identification documents in turn poses a significant administrative problem for Ukrainian authorities, both at home and abroad.

Measures targeting voters unable to visit polling stations will need to be significantly expanded. With a substantial increase in disabled veterans and civilians, such measures will add to the administrative and financial burden of the state.

There are also millions of Ukrainians abroad, some without valid identification. The registration procedures in place are a huge administrative burden for consulates and embassies overseas.

FINANCIAL SHORTCOMINGS AND VOTER TURNOUT

Elections are expensive. According to the Central Election Committee, the costs for presidential elections would run to roughly USD 200 million, and

parliamentary elections around USD 135 million.¹ The elections would take place at a time when Ukraine would also need to spend scarce resources rebuilding the country.

Compared to the current method of voting with paper ballots, a cheaper and smoother administrative way of arranging elections, at least in theory, would be to open up the possibility of voting online. A project to develop a new electronic voting system has been initiated, but it is far from ready to be launched in the near future. Many Ukrainians lack access to mobile devices and the internet. An e-voting system would also be vulnerable to hacking campaigns that could threaten an election outcome.

In order to deem elections democratic and fair, the voter turnout would need to be high enough to define the vote as legitimate. Moreover, possible candidates would require sufficient time to have a fair chance to finance and organize election campaigns. A scenario where low voter turnout renders Ukrainian elections illegitimate would weaken the Ukrainian government.

SECURITY ISSUES

Moreover, Russia occupies almost 20 percent of Ukraine's territory. Russian authorities have pressured Ukrainians to exchange their Ukrainian passports for Russian ones. This raises the question of who will count as eligible to vote and on what grounds. And for those who still cling to their Ukrainian passport, the Russian government would hardly assist Ukraine by conducting elections on occupied territory. Even if this remains a theoretical possibility, the elections would probably not be free, fair, or inclusive.

In fact, Russian interference is a key factor in discussions about Ukraine's elections. Russia has previously been implicated in meddling with elections in, for instance, Moldova and Georgia.² Russian President Vladimir Putin has repeatedly called President Volodymyr Zelenskyi "illegitimate" and accused him of usurping power after his original term expired in the spring of 2024. These actions appear designed to weaken

Zelenskyi's position and Ukraine's political sovereignty. Russia's hybrid warfare, characterised by the systematic use of political, economic, informational, psychological, and cyber measures, is identified as a main threat in Ukraine's national security strategy.³

The Russian leadership appears to be aware of all the challenges that Ukraine faces, which is precisely why they would insist on elections. War is expensive, and, so far, Russia has not been impressive on the battlefield. Meddling in the internal affairs of Ukraine would be an additional way to try to reach the ultimate goal of gaining control over it.

President Putin has already said that an agreement could be signed only with legitimate Ukrainian authorities, that is, the Verkhovna Rada, since he deems Zelenskyi illegitimate. For the period pending the elections and the assumption of office by the next President of Ukraine, the presidential duties, with some restrictions, shall be vested in the Chairman of the Verkhovna Rada. For Russia, the most beneficial negotiation situation would be to pressure Ukraine to hold presidential elections and, in the meantime, negotiate only with the Verkhovna Rada, which is internally divided.

If Moscow demands elections in Ukraine as a precondition for negotiations, or as a clause in an agreement, Russia will have leverage over Ukraine.

LOOKING AHEAD

Despite the difficulties and challenges, Ukraine will host future elections at some point. The political scene in Ukraine is starting to heat up, and the informal election season has begun. Zelenskyi (Sluha Narodu party) has not revealed whether he will run for a second period, but Ukrainian media suggests he will. According to polls in late December 2024, 52 percent of Ukrainians said they "trusted" Zelenskyi. This is a significant drop compared to previous polls, yet many Western leaders would be happy to have the support of more than half the population. Moreover, unlike the Russian president, Zelenskyi became president through free, fair, and inclusive elections. ■

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1 Elena Davlikova, "Wartime Ukraine's Election Dilemma," *Focus Ukraine* (blog), Kennan Institute, 1 February 2025, www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/wartime-ukraines-election-dilemma. See also: Editorial, "Minfin poiasnyv, navishcho pytav u TsVK vartist vyboriv na nastupnyi rik", *Radio Svoboda*, 23 September 2023, www.radiosvoboda.org/a/news-minfin-cvk-vartist-vyboriv/32561108.html.

2 Oana Popescu-Zemfir, "Russian Interference: Coming Soon to an Election Near You," *Carnegie Europe: Strategic Europe*, 13 February 2025, <https://carnegieendowment.org/europe/strategic-europe/2025/02/russian-interference-coming-soon-to-an-election-near-you?>

3 National security strategy of Ukraine, Presidential decree no. 392/2020. <https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/392/2020#Text>.