

When Not Holding Elections is the Most Democratic Thing to Do: Wartime Election Administration Decisions in Ukraine

*“He refuses to have Elections, is very low in Ukrainian Polls [....] A Dictator without Elections, Zelenskyy better move fast or he is not going to have a Country left.”
- American President Donald Trump on Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy*

On Feb. 18th, 2025, American President Donald Trump called President Volodymyr Zelenskyy of Ukraine a “dictator” for not holding elections.ⁱ He could not have been more wrong. Ask anyone familiar with election administration.

LEGAL BARRIERS

Holding elections may seem like the hallmark of democracy, but in Ukraine’s current environment, they are neither legal nor feasible. The country has been under martial law since the war began in 2022, renewed every 90 days by vote in the Verkhovna Rada (Ukraine’s parliament).ⁱⁱ The Ukrainian constitution – which predates President Zelenskyy – specifically forbids conducting national elections under martial law.ⁱⁱⁱ Any attempts to change the law to allow elections during the current state of martial rule could themselves be considered undemocratic.

PRACTICAL CHALLENGES

Even *if* holding war-time elections wasn’t currently illegal under the Ukrainian constitution, it would be highly unadvisable – and logistically impossible. In the case that Ukrainian officials were able to hold an election in an active war zone, the practical challenges would render any such election unrepresentative, undemocratic, and illegitimate. Election

administrators and observers know that democratic elections require careful administration, accurate voter rolls, and a secure environment – all of which is impossible during active conflict.

Population Displacement & Administrative Issues

The war has caused significant demographic changes in Ukraine which pose serious challenges for election administrators attempting to ensure the necessary voter enfranchisement required for free, fair, and open elections. In addition to casualties and military mobilizations, at least one third of Ukraine's total population has been forcibly displaced.^{iv} Much of the voter registration information held in Ukraine's State Register of Voters database is now incorrect,^v rendering millions of eligible citizens unable to legally cast their votes even if they can get themselves to a functioning polling place. True democratic legitimacy comes not from the mere act of voting but from the ability of *all* citizens to safely and freely participate in shaping their nation's future.

As a result of the narrow voting pool, any winners of such an election would struggle to prove they have a viable democratic mandate of the people, and the legitimacy of the election would likely be called into question. This would only further destabilize the war-torn nation and bolster Russia's claims that Ukraine's government is illegitimate and ineffective.

Polling Stations: A Prime Target

Security is another critical concern. It would be incredibly difficult to safely and securely conduct an election while a ground war remains active. Like most other democracies, Ukraine has an extensive system of robust procedures designed to ensure election integrity. These procedures include tight rules over visibility, chain of custody, and observation of ballots, ballot

boxes, voter lists and other important documents.^{vi} Russia, meanwhile, has a history of active interference with other countries' elections – not only in Ukraine,^{vii} but also in the neighboring countries of Moldova, Romania, and Georgia.^{viii} With active conflict, damage to election infrastructure, and much of the population mobilized or absent, it would be logistically challenging to ensure the election's integrity. Russian President Vladimir Putin would likely relish the opportunity to interfere while the Ukrainian election system is under wartime strain.

In addition to inviting foreign tampering, holding wartime elections also presents a real risk to the public, election administrators, and security forces. Ukrainian election law requires in-person voting at designated polling places, with no provisions for absentee or online voting.^{ix} Polling stations, both as symbols of Ukrainian independence and as large gatherings of civilians, could be prime military targets. Forcing a vote without being able to guarantee safe access to the ballot simply does not align with the concept of “free and fair elections.”

An Expensive Endeavor

Another challenge? Elections are expensive. While their true costs are hard to accurately measure,^x they require significant funds, labor, and time. According to Ukraine's Central Election Committee, holding presidential elections in 2023 was estimated to cost around \$196.7 million, while parliamentary elections would require approximately \$135.9 million.^{xi} For context, Ukraine is estimated to have earned \$43.7 billion in revenue during 2024 but spent almost twice that, \$82.3 billion, *without* election costs.^{xii}

In response to foreign calls for Ukrainian elections, President Zelenskyy has requested that western governments provide the necessary election funding, observers, and support.^{xiii} If President Trump is truly concerned with the state of democracy in Ukraine, American assistance

is welcome. Until then, diverting valuable resources from the war effort and humanitarian relief would be unwise and foolish for a wartime president focused on defending his nation's sovereignty and survival.

President Zelenskyy is also not alone in his desire or decision to postpone elections. Ukraine's major political parties, both ruling and opposition, have agreed several times to postpone holding any national election until after martial law is lifted.^{xiv} The elites aren't the only ones who feel this way – both civil society and members of the public agree that truly protecting Ukrainian democracy requires waiting for stability. In 2023, 100 civil society organizations signed a joint statement emphasizing the impossibility of holding fair elections during the war.^{xv} The results of a KIIS (Kyiv's International Institute of Sociology) survey in October 2023 show that 81% of Ukrainian respondents believe that elections should be “held after the war now is not the time.”^{xvi}

Historical & Contemporary Precedents

Ukraine is not the first nation to make this choice. There is also precedent in the international community for the suspension of elections. International IDEA, an intergovernmental organization that supports democracy worldwide, has compiled a list.^{xvii} During World War II, both France and the United Kingdom chose to postpone their elections until after the war ended. Israel has done the same several times during instances of heightened conflict with Hamas, even doing so as recently as 2023 and 2024.^{xviii} War is also not the only emergency that has warranted election suspension or postponement – natural disasters and public health emergencies have earned the same treatment. During the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, over 80 countries postponed their elections.^{xix}

International IDEA also provides examples of states who buck this protocol, holding wartime elections to their ultimate detriment. Both Afghanistan and Iraq held elections in the early 2000s amid active insurgencies and armed conflict. Turnout was low due to violence or the fear of violence, and the legitimacy of these elections remains in question.^{xx} Ukraine's decision to postpone clearly aligns with tried-and-true practices designed to protect democracy in moments of crisis.

Russian Elections: A Cautionary Tale

Russia's own elections, held during the war in 2024, are an example of a flawed, corrupt process rather than a truly democratic exercise. According to FreedomHouse, a global democracy watchdog, incumbent President Putin was reelected with nearly 88 percent of the vote but "the election featured rampant fraud, and genuine opposition candidates were barred from participating."^{xxi} Official election materials, carefully vetted in most strong democracies to ensure no swaying of voters, clearly signaled the desired outcome. The official symbol of the election adopted by Russia's Central Electoral Commission was the V-sign known to represent the ground incursion into Ukraine, and the slogan was "Strong together - vote for Russia!"^{xxii}

In occupied Ukrainian territory, Russian occupation forces conducted these same 'elections.' Armed guards and elections officials went door to door asking the remaining residents to cast their vote.^{xxiii} Research shows that a voter's decision can be affected by the smallest of details: the building in which they are voting,^{xxiv} the nearby signage,^{xxv} the order of names on the ballot^{xxvi} – the list goes on. If prosaic details like these have an impact on voter choice, it is easy to imagine the effect that the incursion of armed forces may have.

According to the Election Integrity Project's 2024 Global Report for Electoral Integrity, Russia received an election integrity score of 24 of 100 – fourth from last in Europe.^{xxvii} President Trump calls President Zelenskyy a “Dictator without Elections.” But if democracy is reduced to the mere act of holding elections, what does that make President Putin – a ‘Dictator **with** Elections’?

CONCLUSION

True democracy is not simply about holding elections – it is about ensuring that elections are free, fair, and representative of the people's will. These are extraordinary circumstances. Given the legal, logistical, and security challenges of holding elections during an active war, Ukraine's decision to postpone them is not a rejection of democracy but rather an effort to safeguard it.

To force an election now would not only violate Ukraine's own constitution but also risk further destabilization, disenfranchisement, and manipulation by hostile forces. By waiting, Ukraine is choosing democracy over disorder. When the war ends and conditions allow, Ukraine will hold elections that reflect the voices of all its people – not just those lucky enough to cast a ballot under duress. That is not the death of democracy – it is its preservation.

President Zelenskyy, when it comes to elections, continue your course. Move slow, and your country will thank you later.

ⁱ Trump, D. J. [@realDonaldTrump.] (2025, February 19). *Think of it, a modestly successful comedian, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, talked the United States of America into spending \$350 Billion Dollars* [Truth]. TruthSocial. <https://truthsocial.com/@realDonaldTrump/posts/114031332924234939>

ⁱⁱ Yurii Kliuchkovskiy and Volodymyr Venher (July 2022). "Organisation and holding of elections in post-war Ukraine. Prerequisites and challenges". *Council of Europe*. <https://rm.coe.int/en-organisation-and-holding-of-elections-in-post-war-ukraine-net-2769-/1680a8e995>

ⁱⁱⁱ See Footnote ii.

^{iv} *Ukraine refugee crisis: Aid, Statistics and News | USA FOR UNHCR*. The UN Refugee Agency. (n.d.). <https://www.unrefugees.org/emergencies/ukraine/>

^v See Footnote ii.

^{vi} Reaney, Lee; Wasserman, Joel (11 July 2023). "Wartime Elections in Ukraine Are Impossible". *Foreign Policy*. Retrieved 6 March 2025. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/07/11/ukraine-democracy-wartime-elections-russia-zelensky/>

^{vii} Cavan, S. (2021, February 4). *Foreign interference in Ukraine's election*. Atlantic Council. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/foreign-interference-in-ukraine-s-election/>

^{viii} Popescu-Zamfir, O. (2025, February 13). *Russian interference: Coming soon to an election near you*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. <https://carnegieendowment.org/europe/strategic-europe/2025/02/russian-interference-coming-soon-to-an-election-near-you?lang=en>

^{ix} See Footnote vi.

^x Mohr, Z., Kropf, M., McGowan, M. J., & Pope, J. (2024). *A Republic If You Can Afford It: How Much Does it Cost to Administer Elections?* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

^{xi} Davlikanova, E. (2024, February 1). *Wartime Ukraine's election dilemma*. Wilson Center. <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/wartime-ukraines-election-dilemma>

^{xii} See Footnote xi.

^{xiii} Starkov, N. (2023, August 27). *Zelenskiy says elections could happen under fire if west helps* | reuters. Reuters. <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/zelenskiy-says-elections-could-happen-under-fire-if-west-helps-2023-08-27/>

^{xiv} See Footnote vi.

^{xv} See Footnote xi.

^{xvi} See Footnote xi.

^{xvii} Shypilova, Y. (2025, February 24). *Explainer: Conducting elections during war*. International IDEA. <https://www.idea.int/news/explainer-conducting-elections-during-war>

^{xviii} See Footnote xvii.

^{xix} See Footnote xvii.

^{xx} See Footnote xvii.

^{xxi} *Russia: Freedom in the World 2025 Country Report*. Freedom House. (2025).
<https://freedomhouse.org/country/russia/freedom-world/2025>

^{xxii} Shevchenko, V. (2024, March 13). *Occupied Ukraine encouraged to vote in Russian election by armed men*. BBC News. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-68535301>

^{xxiii} See Footnote xxii.

^{xxiv} Berger, J., Meredith, M., & Wheeler, S.C. Contextual priming: Where people vote affects how they vote, *Proc. Natl. Acad. Sci. U.S.A.* 105 (26) 8846-8849, <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.0711988105> (2008).

^{xxv} Green, D., Krasno, J., Coppock, A., Farrer, B., Lenoir, B., & Zingher, J. (2015). *The Effects of Lawn Signs on Vote Outcomes: Results from Four Randomized Field Experiments*. *Electoral Studies*. 41. 10.1016/j.electstud.2015.12.002.

^{xxvi} *Ballot order effects*. Ballot order effects | MIT Election Lab. (2022, April 20).
<https://electionlab.mit.edu/research/ballot-order-effects>

^{xxvii} Garnett, H. A., James T. S., & Caal-Lam, S. 2024. Year in Elections Global Report 2024. The Electoral Integrity Project. <https://www.electoralintegrityproject.com/reports>