



Can Elections in Ukraine Help to End the Russo-Ukrainian War?

The Origins and Functions of a Russian Propaganda Mirage

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Executive Summary

One aspect of the recent transmutation of US foreign and domestic affairs has been the new administration's public adoption and reproduction of certain Kremlin narratives about current international relations. These concern above all the sources and nature of Russia's expansionist aggression and the putative pathways to contain it.

Among the most vivid expressions of the new US approach to the Russo-Ukrainian War is a proposition that national elections in Ukraine would be possible, and could be helpful or even decisive in concluding the war. Some actors not only in Moscow, but also in Washington present this scenario as plausible even though, judging from the realities on the ground, elections in Ukraine are currently far away. Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022 and Ukraine's martial law enacted in response mean that nationwide voting is currently impossible. There would in fact need to be a transition period after fighting ends before meaningful national voting could take place. The war has affected Ukraine's society, polity, economy, demography and infrastructure to such a degree that there is now consensus in Ukraine that a new law on post-war elections would need to be adopted and implemented to take account of the novel circumstances. Preparations for the elections once martial law has ended would need at least half a year and could take as long as one year.

Moscow's excuse for its call for Ukrainian elections is its alleged concern about the democratic legitimacy of the current Ukrainian leader. However, the Kremlin and its propaganda channels are populated by people who have disdain for democracy, pluralism, freedom and the rule of law. The Kremlin's aim is not to protect popular rule in Ukraine, but to use the country's increased vulnerability during an electoral campaign and national voting to conduct intensified political warfare against the Ukrainian polity, civil society and national unity.

The motive behind the Russian campaign for national elections in Ukraine is not a stable peace between the two countries, but to improve the conditions for foreign subversion and subsequent subjugation of the Ukrainian state. Non-Russian contributors to the ongoing international debate about Ukrainian presidential and parliamentary elections should inform themselves and others about the idea's dubious sources, wider context and destructive intentions. Politicians, diplomats and commentators interested in Ukrainian stability, sovereignty and democracy should expose the goals behind Moscow's pseudo-democratic rhetoric and the naivety (or conscious anti-democratic collaboration) of non-Russian supporters of the Kremlin's political warfare strategy.

On 30 March 2025, The Economist published an article, "[The prospect of early elections in Ukraine has everyone in a spin](#)", speculating that the White House's disrespectful treatment of President Volodymyr Zelensky and the subsequent increase in support for Zelensky in Ukrainian opinion polls might lead Ukraine's president to opt for a snap election in 2025. Zelensky could, so the argument went, thereby neutralize recent increased international – if not US – questioning of the legitimacy of his rule after his first regular term ran out in 2024. Until the recent spike in Zelensky's popularity, the major subtext of the demand for presidential and parliamentary elections had been the idea that a resulting change in the Ukrainian presidential office and government would ease Russo-Ukrainian peace negotiations.

The Emergence of an Odd Narrative

Even before the victory of US President Donald J. Trump in November 2024, the proposition that a change in national leadership in Ukraine was a precondition for ending Russia's war had become a matter of public debate outside Ukraine. Two years ago, [various media outlets influenced by or sympathetic to the Kremlin](#) began to spread the idea that Ukraine's legislature and executive would have to be re-elected in 2023–24 or risk losing their political legitimacy. Since 2023, influential western commentators from former [Fox News anchor Tucker Carlson to Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe \(PACE\) President Tiny Kox](#) have taken on [Russia's](#) propaganda line to one degree or another.

Today, the gist of the Kremlin's public messaging is that replacing Zelensky has been necessary since 21 May 2024, when he allegedly became illegitimate. Another head of state would, in Moscow's inflammatory rhetoric, make Ukraine less "fascist", and thus Russia more inclined to compromise. While the new US administration has not repeated verbatim Moscow's descriptions of Zelensky, Russia's dislike of him appears to resonate with the current mood in the White House. Zelensky became a problem during Trump's first presidency in 2017–21, when Trump was forced to go through an eventually unsuccessful impeachment process related to a phone conversation with the then newly elected Ukrainian President.

On becoming US President for a second time in January 2025, Trump tried to fulfil his election promise to rapidly end the Russo-Ukrainian War. However, the proposed unconditional ceasefire was only accepted by Kyiv while Moscow announced it would agree to a truce only once certain conditions had been met. These involved Russian demands for limitations on Ukraine's national sovereignty, military defensibility and territorial integrity. It is not even certain how far the Kremlin's proposals on reducing the independence, size and stability of the Ukrainian state represented a genuine conduct of negotiations or [mere theatre](#).

Nonetheless, Washington has been exerting increasing pressure on Kyiv to make further concessions, which Zelensky has so far resisted with broad societal support. In doing so, he may have created more discomfort in the White House. As a result, Russia's idea that a leadership change in Kyiv will be necessary to bring the war to an end continues to have adherents in the Trump administration.

Elections, War and the Law

According to Ukrainian peace-time legislation, in the absence of Russia's war on Ukraine, regular parliamentary and presidential elections would have taken place in October 2023 and March 2024 respectively. However, Ukraine's 2000 [law "On the Legal Regime During a State of War"](#), which was renewed in 2015, forbids the conduct of presidential, parliamentary or local elections during a state of emergency. On the postponement of parliamentary elections, Article 83 of Ukraine's Constitution specifies: "[In the event that the term of authority of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine expires while martial law or a state of emergency is in effect, its authority is extended until the day of the first meeting of the first session of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, elected after the cancellation of martial law or of the state of emergency](#)".

Accordingly, the 2023–24 national elections have been postponed until after the end of large-scale fighting and following repeal of martial law introduced in 2022. Such a suspension of normal democratic processes during large-scale warfare has been regular [practice throughout the history of many democracies](#) including, among others, the United Kingdom during World War I and World War II. It is today entrenched in the legislation of various countries around the world, such [as for instance in Article 115 of Germany's Basic Law](#).

Moreover, meaningful elections can not take place immediately after the end of the Russia's attempted war of annihilation. According to current rules, [parliamentary elections must be held 60 days and presidential elections 90 days after the lifting of martial law](#). However, given the grave repercussions of the war on Ukraine's society in general and its electoral infrastructure in particular, a conclusive, legitimate and democratic electoral campaign and voting procedure would need proper preparation under conditions of peace.

A January 2025 [report](#) by the reputed Ukrainian election observation group, Opora (Base), states that national polls would only be possible at least six months after the termination of the state of emergency. They may, in fact, even need to take place as long as one year after the cessation of fighting. Already in 2023, [the leaders of the Verkhovna Rada had come to the conclusion](#) that a new election law would have to be adopted to take account of all the consequential changes that Ukraine has experienced since the start of the war in 2022 and may yet go through before the end of it.

Recent calls for a swift political renewal at Ukraine's top are thus premature and naïve, at best, or manipulative and subversive, at worst. Russia's full-scale invasion, with constant fighting in the east and air raids across the entire country, has made the holding of orderly elections impossible as long as the war continues. A public statement by Ukrainian NGOs organised by Opora noted on 20 February 2025: "[The unstable security situation, the threat of shelling, terrorist attacks and sabotage, as well as large-scale mining of territories create significant obstacles at all stages of the electoral process](#)".

Russia's aggression since 2022 has displaced millions of Ukrainian citizens within and outside of Ukraine. The new demographic situation would demand novel forms of voting, an update of Ukraine's voter registry and a large number of electoral precincts to be set up abroad. Within Ukraine, Russia's bombardment of Ukrainian settlements and the various after-effects have destroyed parts of the Ukrainian electoral infrastructure, including the buildings – most often schools – used as polling stations. Notwithstanding, the Kremlin has for the past two years managed to make an alleged lack of democratic representation among Ukraine's leadership a salient theme among various audiences across the world of discussions about paths to end the Russo-Ukrainian War.

Russia's Manipulative Demands for Elections

Since 2023, Russian and pro-Russian politicians and influencers have repeatedly demanded that Ukraine conduct national elections under conditions of full-scale war. By insisting on and spreading this proposal, Moscow is repeating a strategy it started to use in 2014, at the start of its covert intervention in mainland Ukraine's Donets Basin (Donbas). In 2014–2021, Moscow and its collaborators used the Minsk Accords, signed by Kyiv under duress, to demand that Ukraine conduct regional and local elections in the so-called Donetsk and Lugansk People's Republics.

That demand was made despite the fact that the Ukrainian government did not control the areas where it was supposed to organise a democratic campaign and voting. Instead, the Russian government continued to exercise effective control of the two de facto regimes within Ukraine's Luhansk and Donetsk oblasts. Until their annexation in 2022, at no time did Moscow ever indicate any readiness to reduce its grip on the two pseudo-republics it had artificially created in eastern Ukraine in the spring of 2014. Nonetheless, the Kremlin continued to insist that Kyiv hold elections on these territories before it had gained access to them.

Neither in 2014–2021 nor since 2023 have Moscow's demands for greater Ukrainian democracy been driven by Russian worries about popular rule and the legitimacy of power in Ukraine. The Kremlin suppresses voter rights, the rule of law, political pluralism, civic activity, opposition parties and freedom of expression inside Russia – sometimes using deadly violence. These and other circumstances indicate that other motives were behind and are driving Moscow's external behaviour in general and insistence on Ukrainian elections in particular.

In the words of Maria Popova and Oxana Shevel, the eventual aim of the Russian leadership is [Ukraine's destabilisation and "vassalisation"](#). Depending on the concrete situation, Russia is using various combinations of kinetic and non-kinetic warfare to achieve its overall goal of subverting the Ukrainian state. The Kremlin hopes that an, unlike in Russia, fully competitive electoral contest and open-ended nationwide voting in Ukraine will provide enough vulnerabilities for Moscow's hybrid interventions to have an effect. Such operations, during a transition period for Ukraine's state and polity, would be designed to polarise Ukrainian society, escalate intra-Ukrainian conflicts and confuse foreign observers.

Moscow's demand for elections under impossible conditions is one of several tools in the Kremlin's hybrid playbook that includes cyberwarfare, misinformation campaigns, economic pressure, [negotiation theatre](#), terrorist acts and the corruption of politicians. Ukraine's NGOs warn, in the above-mentioned collective appeal, that ["\[t\]he biggest challenge for electoral democracy in Ukraine will be interference in this process by Russia, which will be ready to use any means to do so – from cyberattacks to direct bribery of voters, from spreading disinformation and splitting society with its help to discrediting candidates 'unacceptable' to the Russian authorities and financing the campaigns of loyal politicians"](#).

In late March 2025, the Russian President made another attempt to initiate a leadership change in Kyiv through the replacement of the Ukrainian government with a temporary UN administration, which in Putin's words would ["hold democratic elections, to bring to power a viable government that enjoys the trust of the people, and then begin negotiations with them on a peace treaty"](#). Putin added: ["Under the auspices of the United Nations, with the United States, even with European countries, and, of course, with our partners and friends, we could discuss the possibility of introduction of temporary governance in Ukraine"](#). However, Moscow's proposal was so strange that even Washington rejected it immediately.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Lay observers of post-Soviet affairs, including western politicians and their advisers, are being misled by the Kremlin's propaganda machine about the root causes and possible resolution of the Russo-Ukrainian confrontation. It is not worries about democratic legitimacy but the Kremlin's aim to destabilise Ukraine that lies behind the demand that Ukraine conduct national elections. In Moscow's ideal scenario, a haphazardly prepared and insufficiently secure election campaign and voting process under difficult conditions would provide multiple entry points for outside interference. It would allow the Kremlin to lobby for anti-western candidates, escalate political tensions, sow distrust among voters and foreign observers, and infiltrate the election infrastructure.

Opora's above-quoted "[Roadmap for ensuring organization of postwar elections in Ukraine](#)" and similar studies provide pertinent political, legal and technical recommendations on ensuring the orderly preparation for and conduct of an electoral campaign and national vote once martial law has ended. The following additional suggestions are made for public communication by governmental and non-governmental actors interested in the sovereignty, democracy and stability of Ukraine:

1. Remind your audiences about Ukraine's pre-war legislation, which forbids nationwide elections under conditions of armed conflict and martial law.
2. Highlight the relevant articles in the constitutions and laws of other democratic countries that prevent the conduct of elections during a state of emergency.
3. Highlight the Russian origin and subversive purposes of calls for national elections in Ukraine during or soon after Russia's full-scale invasion.
4. Juxtapose Moscow's critique of Ukrainian democracy and the rule of law with the realities of pseudo-electoral politics and legal arbitrariness in Russia.
5. Detail the democratic achievements of Ukraine's political development since gaining independence in 1991, such as frequent leadership changes.
6. Contextualise Moscow's narrative on Ukrainian elections within the larger set of instruments of [Russian political warfare](#) against Ukraine.



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