

# Publication

## Ukraine's Presidential Elections

### The Workings of a Post-Soviet Democracy

Since gaining independence from the Soviet Union in August 1991, Ukraine has prided itself on its status as a democratic nation. The guiding principle of democracies is the right to free and fair elections, enshrined in chapter 3 of the Ukrainian constitution, with [Article 69](#) of the constitution stating that *"the expression of the will of the people is exercised through elections, referendum and other forms of direct democracy"*.

After becoming a democracy, Ukraine has had its fair share of civil unrest: [the Orange Revolution](#) of 2004-2005, [the Euromaidan Protests](#) beginning in 2013, the [subsequent Revolution of Dignity](#), and [Russia's 2014 annexation of the Crimean Peninsula](#). Further instability was brought to the country through controversial laws such as a language law adopted in 2019 which deprives the Russian language and its speakers of the protection against discrimination other languages are [receiving](#).

Despite these prior periods of political tension, presidential elections in Ukraine have always gone ahead as planned [every 5 years](#). That was until the 2022 Russian invasion, whereby martial law was introduced, thus cancelling the elections planned for 2024. This has been seen as critical by many due to its impact on Ukraine's democracy.

### **Lack of a presidential election: constitutional obstruction or democratic backsliding?**

Due to the ongoing military conflict in Ukraine and the continuance of the state of martial law, the presidential elections which were scheduled for this year, have been suspended until further [notice](#). This poses a dilemma situation in the war-torn country due to its potential to compromise the democracy in Ukraine. According to recent polls, if the elections were to be held as planned, the incumbent president Volodymyr Zelensky would only get 21.1% of the votes while Valerii Zaluzhnyi, the former Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces of Ukraine would get a total of 46.4% of the [votes](#).

There are a variety of challenges with holding national elections aside from the fact that the country is under martial law: five million Ukrainians are internally displaced, and a further several million are abroad where they are only allowed to vote in embassies. This creates a wide array of logistical problems.

What is interesting to note is the rivalry between Zelensky and Zaluzhnyi. Despite being on the same side, there is a known power struggle in Kyiv between the president and his commander and chief. Zaluzhnyi is credited by many as having saved Ukraine in the early days of the invasion. Initially, Zelensky gave his generals autonomy in creating battlefield strategy. However, as the war progressed, Zelensky decided to intervene more in crafting battlefield strategies, and his visions increasingly clashed with Zaluzhnyi's. Zelensky dismissed Zaluzhnyi in February 2024. Given Zelensky's desire to win a second term and Zaluzhnyi's popularity in opinion polls, one has to wonder if Zelensky's dismissal of the general and inaction in confirming a new election date is more of a political act by Zelensky to try to derail a potential political opponent.

The danger in Ukraine's lack of a presidential election lies in its potential impact on the legitimacy of the country's government. As current polls illustrate, if the country were to elect a new leader as planned, Volodymyr Zelensky would clearly lose his position and would be replaced by Valerii Zaluzhnyi. This lack of legitimacy could have a severe impact on the internal unity and stability of the country. This is of essence when dealing with the ongoing war in Ukraine. Only time can tell what impact the lack of this presidential election will have on Ukraine.