

# How does holding elections during active conflict alter the accountability mechanisms and legitimacy of Ukraine's governance structures, and what are the long-term implications for post-war stability and power consolidation?

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## Executive Summary

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The evidence suggests that holding national elections in Ukraine during active conflict would significantly undermine the legitimacy of its governance structures and risk long-term post-war stability by fracturing domestic political consensus. While digital and civil society oversight mechanisms have provided a resilient foundation for accountability in the short term, the inability to conduct inclusive elections due to mass displacement and Russian occupation would produce a geographically skewed electorate, leading to a disputed mandate and increased vulnerability to internal and external delegitimization. This approach prioritizes national survival and consolidated stability over immediate electoral renewal, aiming to prevent deeper political cleavages that could hinder post-war democratic consolidation.

## Key Findings

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### Altered Accountability and Legitimacy During Conflict

Ukraine's governance structures have adapted to wartime conditions by relying on alternative accountability mechanisms, yet the absence of formal elections strains democratic legitimacy. Digital democracy tools, such as the "Diia" app with over 20 million users, have been reported to maintain public satisfaction [1, 10, 15]. For instance, A single source reports that a successful petition in July 2023 led to the dismissal of the Minister of Culture [1]. The evidence gathered here does not establish whether this was a general mechanism or an isolated incident. However, this operational definition of legitimacy, while resilient in the short term, decouples executive authority from formal citizen consent, as Parliamentary mandates are extended under constitutional provisions if their term expires during martial law [8, 12, 14]. This has contributed to a decline in public confidence in civilian democratic institutions, with The evidence gathered here

does not establish whether trust in parliament fell to 15% by December 2023. While constitutional provisions extend mandates under martial law, the inability of citizens to regulate representatives through voting creates a democratic deficit [9, 11, 12].

## **Challenges to Inclusive Electoral Participation**

Conducting national elections during active conflict would face insurmountable logistical and security challenges, making inclusive participation nearly unachievable and risking a fractured domestic consensus. Approximately 19% of Ukrainian territory remains under Russian control, disenfranchising over 4 million citizens [12]. Additionally, Over 5.9 million Ukrainians have fled abroad, and more than 3.7 million are internally displaced [1, 10, 12, 17]. This widespread displacement and territorial control mean a wartime election would systematically underrepresent those most affected by the war, creating a "rump" electorate whose mandate could be perceived as incomplete or illegitimate [17]. Public opinion strongly opposes wartime elections, with 84% of Ukrainians opposed holding a presidential election in December 2023 [10, 18].

## **Executive Power Concentration and Public Trust**

The postponement of elections has led to a concentration of power in the executive branch, impacting public trust in democratic institutions. While President Zelenskyy's trust rating was 90% in May 2022 and 77% in December 2023 [11]. This shift, while legally permissible under martial law, highlights a growing democratic deficit where formal electoral accountability is absent [9, 11, 12]. Comparative historical cases show that active combat often drives the expansion and centralization of executive authority, as seen in Ukraine and other nations like Mali and Chad where military juntas have postponed elections to entrench control [2, 12, 19]. However, these cases also demonstrate that The evidence gathered here does not establish whether legislative oversight is not systematically paralyzed. For example, the UK's 1945 election, held after wartime, saw a decisive shift in power, indicating that wartime leadership does not guarantee permanent political immunity [7, 13].

## **Long-Term Implications for Post-War Stability**

Holding elections during active conflict would likely undermine post-war stability by fracturing national consensus rather than consolidating power. A flawed wartime vote, with millions disenfranchised, risks intensifying societal dissatisfaction and creating new

political cleavages [1, 12]. Russia would likely exploit these procedural imperfections and geographic exclusions to sow internal discord and delegitimize Ukraine's democratic credibility internationally [17]. Ukraine's electoral adaptation record between 2014 and 2020, which included modifying voting logistics for internally displaced persons (IDPs) and military personnel, demonstrated resilience and strengthened state legitimacy by maintaining democratic continuity under conflict conditions [16]. This historical experience suggests that adaptive measures can preserve the social contract and institutional stability, but the current scale of displacement and occupation presents a far greater challenge [16]. Ultimately, without a comprehensive ceasefire and verifiable security guarantees, the procedural flaws of a wartime vote would likely outweigh the benefits of renewing the executive mandate, making post-war elections a more viable path for durable democratic consolidation [6, 17].

## Implications

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The findings suggest that Ukraine's current strategy of postponing national elections during active conflict, while creating a democratic deficit, is a pragmatic approach to preserving national unity and long-term post-war stability. The reliance on digital and civil society mechanisms for accountability mitigates immediate governance gaps but cannot fully substitute for formal electoral mandates. For post-war stability, prioritizing the full territorial integrity and safe return of displaced populations before holding elections is crucial to ensure a truly inclusive and legitimate mandate. Rushing elections under current conditions would likely lead to a fragmented political landscape, vulnerable to external manipulation and internal dissent, thereby hindering the consolidation of power and democratic institutions in the long run. International partners should focus on supporting Ukraine's alternative accountability mechanisms and preparing for comprehensive, inclusive elections once security conditions allow, rather than pressuring for premature wartime polls.

## Limitations and Caveats

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The research is limited by the absence of specific data on which political parties or coalitions would benefit most from wartime elections, or their projected vote shares among displaced populations. Direct cost and timeline estimates for implementing biometric verification for displaced voters via the Diia app compared to traditional polling station expansion are also not available, making it difficult to fully assess the feasibility of

a 2027 election window [3, 12]. Furthermore, the research does not detail specific policy concessions proposed by opposition parties to win back displaced demographics during a wartime campaign. While comparative historical cases offer insights into executive power consolidation during conflict, the unique geopolitical context of Ukraine's war with Russia and its advanced digital infrastructure present distinct challenges and opportunities not fully captured by these historical analogies.

**Sourcing audit.** The claims above were checked back against the source material this report was written from. These could not be traced to a passage in that material, and have been qualified in the text:

- "A single source reports that a successful petition in July 2023 led to the dismissal of the Minister of Culture [1]. The evidence gathered here does not establi..." - The provided source material snippets do not contain any mention of a petition, the Minister of Culture, or their dismissal in July 2023.

- "The evidence gathered here does not establish whether trust in parliament fell to 15% by December 2023." - The provided source material snippets do not contain any data regarding trust in parliament falling to 15%.

- "The evidence gathered here does not establish whether legislative oversight is not systematically paralyzed." - The provided source material snippets do not contain any discussion of legislative oversight paralysis or its dependence on partisan dynamics.

## Sources

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