Institute for the Danube Region and Central Europe

Scenarios for Elections in Ukraine

An IDM Foresight Exercise

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Executive Summary

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has interrupted the country's regular electoral cycle. Parliamentary elections originally scheduled for 2023 and presidential elections for 2024 could not take place because Ukrainian legislation prohibits national elections under martial law. As discussions about a possible ceasefire and the country's political future continue, the question of elections is becoming increasingly relevant. Yet the central challenge is not simply when Ukrainians will return to the ballot box, but under what conditions elections can be conducted in a manner that is legally sound, democratic, inclusive and secure.

This foresight exercise by the Institute for the Danube Region and Central Europe (IDM) explores five possible scenarios for Ukraine's next national elections. Each pathway examines how different legal, political and international circumstances could affect the conduct and credibility of elections as well as the consequences for Ukraine's democratic institutions and European integration. The study does not seek to predict the timing or outcome of elections.

Four scenarios are organised around two key variables: whether Ukraine's electoral framework is adapted to the realities created by war and displacement; and the level of external financial, technical and logistical support.

- **Scenario 1: Diaspora for Democracy** combines an adapted electoral framework with strong international support. It offers the most favourable conditions for broad participation and effective election administration, thereby boosting public confidence in the electoral process.
- **Scenario 2: Ambition without Resources** assumes that legal reforms are implemented but international assistance remains limited. While the legislative foundations for more inclusive elections would exist, insufficient resources could prevent their effective implementation.
- **Scenario 3: The Paradox of Recognition** examines elections conducted under the existing electoral framework but supported by substantial international assistance. Despite improved organisation and international confidence, structural barriers to participation and political representation could persist.
- **Scenario 4: Legitimacy under Pressure** combines an insufficiently adapted legal framework with limited external support. This creates the greatest risk within the four core scenarios of unequal participation and contested legitimacy, leading to political instability.

A fifth, exceptional scenario, **Democracy in the Line of Fire**, examines the possibility of elections taking place while large-scale hostilities continue. This pathway highlights the legal, security-related and democratic challenges of conducting national elections before conditions resembling a post-war environment have emerged.

Across the scenarios, several issues recur. Millions of displaced Ukrainians, military personnel, citizens living in temporarily occupied territories and people with disabilities may face significant barriers to electoral participation. Restrictions on candidacy, unequal campaign conditions, threats from Russian foreign information manipulation and interference, and damage to electoral infrastructure could further affect the credibility of the process.

The exercise highlights a crucial distinction between the **legality of elections, their democratic legitimacy and their international recognition**. These dimensions are closely connected but not interchangeable. Neither the formal termination of martial law nor international support alone can guarantee that elections will be inclusive and competitive.

Ukraine's institutions are already developing proposals to address some of these challenges. The extent to which these proposals are adopted and effectively implemented, together with the security situation and the availability of international assistance, will shape the conditions under which future elections take place.

Ultimately, the scenarios demonstrate that restoring the electoral calendar is only one part of restoring democratic political competition. Ukraine's international partners can contribute resources, expertise and observation, but responsibility for electoral decisions must remain with Ukrainian institutions. The legitimacy of future elections will depend not primarily on how quickly they are held, but on whether Ukrainian citizens can meaningfully exercise their political rights.

Introduction

Elections in Ukraine are long overdue. Parliamentary elections should have taken place three years ago in October 2023, while presidential elections should have taken place in spring 2024. However, Russia's full-scale invasion has interrupted the regular electoral calendar, as martial law prevents national elections from taking place. Following the lifting of martial law, Ukrainian legislation stipulates that elections must be called within one month. However, the law does not establish a deadline for when elections should commence. The timing of the first post-war elections is therefore not predetermined but will depend on political decisions and, potentially, further legislation.

Even after the war ends, Ukraine's return to national elections will take place under conditions that are fundamentally different from those that shaped previous electoral cycles. Millions of Ukrainian citizens have been displaced internally or abroad, large numbers are serving in the armed forces, parts of the country may remain occupied, and electoral infrastructure has been damaged or destroyed. The key question is therefore not simply when elections can be held, but under what conditions they can be organised in a way that is legally sound and politically inclusive.

The Central Election Commission has developed proposals for the organisation of national elections following the termination or lifting of martial law that reflect the specific situation the country will face. Moreover, a working group established by the Chairperson of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine and chaired by its First Deputy Chairperson has been developing legislative proposals to facilitate the participation of Ukrainian citizens living abroad during post-war elections.

Against this background, the Institute for the Danube Region and Central Europe (IDM) has developed this foresight exercise to explore a range of possible electoral pathways. It seeks to identify the major choices, constraints and trade-offs that could shape Ukraine's first national elections after the current interruption of the electoral cycle.

Scenario-planning is particularly useful in this context because several decisive variables remain uncertain. To what extent will the electoral framework be adapted to post-war realities? How much external assistance will be available? The scenarios seek to imagine the effect of different political decisions taken at national and international level.

Methodology

The scenarios were developed through an iterative foresight process. The initial framework was developed by Sebastian Schäffer (Director, IDM), Sophia Beiter, Ninon Bouteloup, Peter Techet and Rebecca Thorne (Research Associates, IDM). The team first identified the main challenges likely to shape future Ukrainian elections, drawing on the emerging public debate, the existing legal framework and ongoing work by Ukrainian institutions.

A first expert workshop was held on 11 June 2026, bringing together representatives from academia, civil society and policy institutions to discuss the principal challenges surrounding future elections in Ukraine. Natalia Mamchenko (Chief Scientific Consultant of the Department of Legal Policy and Organisation of Public Authority of the Research Service of the Verkhovna Rada) presented research on the voting rights of Ukrainian citizens abroad and comparative approaches to out-of-country voting. The discussion helped identify additional legal, administrative and political variables that needed to be reflected in the scenario design.

Based on this input, the IDM team drafted the first set of scenarios, which were subsequently presented during the 21st DRC Summer School 'EU36: Imagining Europe's Future', held from 26 July to 1 August 2026 at the OTH Regensburg. The discussion with participants provided an opportunity to identify questions that had not yet been adequately addressed.

Following the summer school, the draft scenarios were circulated to the participants of the first workshop for written comments and further expert feedback. A second, smaller workshop took place on 17 September 2026. During this meeting, Natalia Mamchenko provided expert feedback on the draft scenarios, with particular attention to their legal and institutional feasibility. The scenarios were then revised again by the IDM team on the basis of this feedback.

Scenarios

The structure of the scenarios is based on two variables that have a direct impact on the organisation and quality of future elections: the extent to which the electoral framework is adapted to address the consequences of war and displacement; and the level of external support. These two variables form a 2×2 matrix containing four core scenarios. A fifth scenario sits deliberately outside the matrix: the Grey Swan scenario, 'Democracy in the Line of Fire', examines the exceptional possibility that, due to significant political pressure, national elections take place before there is a meaningful cessation of large-scale hostilities.

The four core scenarios assume that a ceasefire or other security arrangement is sufficient for martial law to be terminated or lifted.

	Strong external support	**Limited external support**
Adapted post-war electoral framework	Scenario 1: Diaspora for democracy	Scenario 2: Ambitions without resources
Existing electoral framework	Scenario 3: The paradox of recognition	Scenario 4: Legitimacy under Pressure
Grey Swan Scenario: Democracy in the Line of Fire		

Scope

The purpose of the scenarios is to make assumptions explicit, illuminate trade-offs and provide a structured basis for discussion among Ukrainian and international policymakers, election practitioners and civil society. The main focus is on the ability of Ukrainian citizens to participate meaningfully in national elections and on the institutional conditions necessary to support that participation. However, the scenarios do not attempt to model every possible dimension of post-war electoral politics. Elements from different scenarios could coexist, and circumstances may change during the preparation and conduct of an election.

Our study addresses the issue of fair and equal competition among political actors during electoral campaigns, focusing on access to campaign time and institutional resources. While we recognise the importance of issues related to campaign financing, including transparency and corruption-related issues, these aspects fall outside the scope of our analysis.

Question of temporarily occupied territories

Our scenarios focus primarily on the possibility of including displaced Ukrainians and the impact of external support on the conduct and perception of national elections. We are not assuming the outcome of the war, what the ceasefire would entail or the status of territories that are currently occupied by Russia.

If military control remains as it is today, Ukrainian citizens in the temporarily occupied territories would still be eligible but most likely practically unable to vote.

An alternative approach would be to conduct nationwide elections without organising or conducting voting in temporarily occupied territories or other territories where voting is deemed impossible due to security-related circumstances, while preserving the electoral rights of Ukrainian citizens residing in these territories and providing mechanisms enabling them to vote elsewhere in Ukraine. This approach is already reflected in Ukrainian legislation and has been further developed in the legislative proposals approved by the Central Election Commission on 7 January 2026.

Key terms and concepts

Central Election Commission (CEC)
The Central Election Commission (CEC) is Ukraine's independent state body responsible for organizing presidential and parliamentary elections, registering candidates, supervising election procedures, and establishing official election results. It consists of 17 members appointed by the Verkhovna Rada following nominations by the President of Ukraine. Members serve seven-year terms and elect the Chair, two deputy chairs, and a secretary from among themselves.

Constitution
The Constitution of Ukraine was adopted by the Verkhovna Rada (Parliament) on 28 June 1996. It is Ukraine's supreme law and sets out the basic structure of the state, including the rules governing elections and constitutional amendments.

Constitutional amendment
A formal change to the Constitution of Ukraine. Under Articles 154–159, most amendments require 226 votes initially and 300 votes at the next regular session. Amendments to Chapter I (General Principles), Chapter III (Elections, Referendum) or Chapter XIII (Amendments to the Constitution of Ukraine) require 300 votes and approval in a nationwide referendum.

All proposed constitutional amendments are subject to prior review by the Constitutional Court of Ukraine to ensure compliance with Articles 157 and 158 of the Constitution. Amendments are prohibited during martial law or a state of emergency and may not abolish or restrict human rights and freedoms or undermine Ukraine's independence or territorial integrity.

Constitutional composition of the Verkhovna Rada
The constitutional composition of the Verkhovna Rada is 450 MPs, as defined by Article 76 of the Constitution. Voting thresholds that refer to the constitutional composition are calculated on the basis of these 450 seats. Therefore, a simple majority of the constitutional composition means 226 votes, while a two-thirds majority means 300 votes.

Diaspora
In this study, the term diaspora refers to Ukrainians living abroad and eligible to vote.

Electoral Code
The Electoral Code of Ukraine was adopted on 19 December 2019. It sets out the rules for presidential, parliamentary and local elections, including electoral procedures and election administration.

Electoral framework
The following (a-d) is relevant for all scenarios:

a. Voters in Ukraine must vote at their assigned polling station based on their registered electoral address.
b. Internally displaced people can temporarily change their place of voting without changing their electoral address for national elections. Under this provision, the relevant application must be submitted no later than five days before election day.
c. Ukrainian citizens abroad may voluntarily change their electoral address, while the State Register of Voters may also be updated using information provided by competent authorities.
d. The Central Election Commission may establish special polling stations along with relevant election commissions within military units upon a submission from the Ministry of Defence of Ukraine.

An adapted electoral framework, relevant for the first two scenarios, is based on the draft law entitled *'On the Specific Features of Ensuring the Organisation and Conduct of National Elections Following the Termination or Lifting of Martial Law in Ukraine'*, which was prepared by the Central Election Commission (CEC) and approved as part of its legislative proposals on 7 January 2026. The draft has not been formally registered with the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine. It envisages the following amendments:

a. Active voter registration abroad to estimate how many Ukrainian citizens intend to vote and where, helping determine the need for additional polling stations.
b. Creation of additional polling stations abroad by including diplomatic service officials in the composition of precinct election commissions at out-of-country polling stations upon nomination by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine.
c. Extended voting hours abroad, allowing polling stations, where necessary, to remain open beyond 8 p.m. and until midnight. (Multi-day voting abroad has been discussed by the parliamentary Working Group but is not included in the CEC's current proposals.)
d. The CEC draft establishes a sequential model: presidential elections first, with the process starting no earlier than six months after martial law ends, followed by parliamentary elections on the last Sunday of the 90-day period after the presidential results are announced.

External support

In this study, external support means financial, technical, logistical, security, cyber-resilience and election-observation assistance requested by Ukraine. It should strengthen Ukrainian institutional capacity rather than substitute it. Core electoral decisions, voter registration, administration, counting and certification remain Ukrainian responsibilities.

International observation

is analytically distinct from operational or financial support. A scenario with limited external support can still include ODIHR and other international observers if Ukraine invites them and security conditions permit.

Martial law

Ukraine's law '*On the Legal Regime of Martial Law*' was adopted on 12 May 2015. Martial law was introduced nationwide on 24 February 2022 following Russia's full-scale invasion. It establishes a special legal regime under which certain rights and political processes may be restricted.

Under Article 19 of Ukraine's law '*On the Legal Regime of Martial Law*', presidential, parliamentary and local elections cannot be held while martial law is in force. The Electoral Code also provides for the postponement of elections if martial law prevents their conduct. After martial law ends or is lifted, elections are to be held in accordance with the applicable electoral legislation.

Remote internet voting

In this study, remote internet voting is not used as a baseline solution. The CEC's 2026 proposals focus on physical voting, additional polling stations and temporary changes of voting location. Cybersecurity, secrecy, verification and public trust remain major concerns for remote electronic voting (c.f. Policy Report by the NGO Ukrainian Prism)

Timing of post-war elections

Article 20(1) of the Electoral Code of Ukraine requires elections to be called or the electoral process to be announced within one month of the termination of martial law. Articles 78 and 136 establish the regular electoral process periods (90 days for presidential and 60 days for parliamentary elections). Article 83(4) of the Constitution of Ukraine extends the powers of the Verkhovna Rada until the first session of the newly elected Parliament.

The CEC proposes a special post-war procedure under which presidential elections would take place after a preparatory period of at least six months, followed by parliamentary elections.

Universal suffrage

Article 71 of the Constitution provides that Ukrainian elections are based on universal, equal and direct suffrage by secret ballot. Ukrainian citizens generally have the right to vote from the age of 18.

Voter registration

is the process of maintaining the official State Register of Voters of Ukraine. It records eligible Ukrainian citizens and their voting addresses and is used to establish voter lists for elections. The register is administered by the Central Election Commission (CEC).

The accuracy and completeness of the register is particularly important after large-scale displacement of the population and changes in residence. Since 1 January 2026, the Central Election Commission has restored voter-related functions of the State Register, including the ability to check and update voter data, although some registry offices remain unable to operate in areas affected by fighting or temporary occupation.

Scenario 1 – Diaspora for democracy

The first scenario is based on an adapted post-war electoral framework with strong international support.

Legal amendments and preparatory steps

1. Following a ceasefire, martial law is lifted by the President of Ukraine. This removes the legal prohibition on holding elections during martial law, although additional legal, security-related and organisational conditions would still need to be addressed.
2. The legislative proposals prepared by the Central Election Commission (CEC) are further considered and formally introduced in Parliament by an authorised holder of the right of legislative initiative. This may occur before or after the lifting of martial law. These proposals include:
    a. Active voter registration abroad to estimate how many Ukrainian citizens intend to vote and where, helping determine the need for additional polling stations.
    b. Creation of additional polling stations abroad by including diplomatic service officials in the composition of precinct election commissions at out-of-country polling stations.
    c. Extended voting hours abroad, allowing polling stations, where necessary, to remain open beyond 8 p.m. and until midnight.
    d. A six-month buffer period to allow sufficient time for the necessary administrative, logistical and financial preparations ahead of presidential elections.

External support

a. **Financial support for election administration**: The provisions of the EU's resolution on 8 July 2026 call the EU and its member states to financially support the organisation of voting outside Ukraine. This could include funding to cover rental costs, equipment and staff at polling stations as well as staff training costs. International support could also finance the improvement of access to polling stations in and outside Ukraine for disabled voters, as the number of disabled people has increased by at least 300,000 since the full-scale invasion. Funding could also cover necessary psychological support for military personnel and veterans reintegrating into politics.
b. **Voters' education**: External support could facilitate communication strategies needed to raise awareness about electoral procedures among Ukrainians inside and outside of the country (e.g. how to actively register abroad; education of young people on the importance of elections for democracy, etc.).
c. **Countering cyber and hybrid threats**: The EU, as it formally stated it in its resolution on 8 July 2026, could assist in countering foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI), like the assistance provided to the Republic of Moldova. Cooperation may also include countering hybrid and cybersecurity threats against foreign aggressions.
d. **International missions of observation**: The OSCE in The Hague Declaration 2026 and the EU in the European Parliament resolution of 8 July 2026 support international missions of observation ensuring compliance with democratic standards and greater public confidence.
e. **Security guarantees**: The Coalition of the Willing, with commitments from July 2026 in Paris, could provide security guarantees after the ceasefire in Ukraine. These security guarantees would facilitate the return of internally displaced citizens to their homes, the organisation of voting in frontline areas, and support the military personnel in service in case they must leave their duties to cast their votes.

Consequences

The adapted post-war electoral framework allows a larger proportion of displaced Ukrainian citizens to vote. Strong international support in financial, technical and logistical matters furthermore ensures that **the elections are free, fair and secure for Ukrainian citizens**, whether residing in Ukraine or abroad. Polling stations would also be more accessible for disabled people. With displacement due to the war omen who may have been forced to leave Ukraine during the war Measures to **counter FIMI** help safeguard the integrity of the electoral campaigns while targeted initiatives facilitate the reintegration of soldiers and veterans into political life, ensuring that their experiences and perspectives are reflected in post-war governance.

However, the new law does not necessarily overcome all challenges. Firstly, the opening of additional polling stations abroad also depends on national law in the respective country; certain countries, such as Canada and the Czech Republic, impose restrictions on locations outside of embassies and consulates. Nonetheless, the existence of such restrictions does not necessarily mean that **establishing additional polling stations** in these countries is out of the question. The possibility of establishing such polling stations would depend on reaching appropriate arrangements with the competent authorities of the respective host countries.

Although the Constitution of Ukraine establishes residency requirements for candidates in parliamentary and presidential elections, consideration could be given to amending relevant legislation to further **clarify the concept of residence** in Ukraine, taking into account the circumstances of citizens who have been displaced as a result of the war. Given that it has mostly been women who have been forced to leave Ukraine, a clarification of this kind would allow more women to stand for election, thereby promoting **gender equality**. Such amendments would have to remain consistent with the constitutional requirements established by Articles 76 and 103 of the Constitution of Ukraine.

Finally, **Ukrainian military personnel still serving are entitled to vote** and to stand for election, but the question of feasibility is another matter. Firstly, at what is now the frontline, there are hardly any buildings that could serve as a polling station. The border regions in post-war Ukraine will likely remain a particularly vulnerable area where personal safety and the security of the ballots may be at risk. Furthermore, if military personnel leave their posts to vote then they are potentially compromising the security of the nation. While no legal amendment is necessary in this case, there would need to be a special procedure to allow soldiers to exercise their rights. Furthermore, standing for election may be incompatible with service. While the constitutional rights already exist, additional legal and organisational mechanisms may be necessary to ensure these rights can be effectively exercised. Neither voting nor standing for election should create a gap in defence, nor should it be a way to escape from duty.

Nonetheless, the proposed legal amendment ensures a **broader representation of Ukraine's diverse population**, both among those standing for election and those exercising their right to vote, than would be possible with the existing electoral framework. International support furthermore contributes to a smooth and stable transition to a new government, contributing to a strong post-war future for Ukraine.

Results

1. **Democratic legitimacy:** An adapted post-war electoral framework, combined with strong international support, would contribute to the inclusivity of the elections, enabling a large proportion of Ukraine's displaced population to participate. Assistance in countering foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI), ensuring ballot security and supporting electoral administration would furthermore help protect the integrity of the elections. However, persistent logistical and security constraints could still create inequalities in voting rights and electoral participation, particularly for military personnel.

2. **International recognition:** With measures and support in place to ensure that elections are as inclusive as possible, Ukraine would receive international recognition for the integrity of its elections. Comprehensive international observation would further strengthen confidence in the electoral process.
3. **Accelerated EU accession process:** Credible post-war elections would demonstrate Ukraine's commitment to democratic governance, thereby contributing positively to the EU accession process. An orderly transition to a new government would further reinforce confidence in Ukraine's democratic institutions. Given the assumption of a ceasefire accompanied by security guarantees, this scenario provides favourable conditions for progress towards EU membership, potentially enabling accelerated accession negotiations.

Probability

This scenario is comparatively likely because discussions on the draft law and other proposed amendments to the electoral code are already underway. Furthermore, the financial support for Ukraine during the ongoing war shows that much of the international community is committed to Ukraine's future as a free and democratic nation.

Scenario 2 – Ambition without resources

The second scenario again assumes that there is an adapted post-war electoral framework, as described above (see Scenario 1), but with limited international support. In the absence of external assistance, Ukraine would be required to rely on its own budget and resources to organize elections. Given the cost of fighting a war for more than four and a half years, this scenario would pose significant challenges for the integrity and credibility of the electoral process.

Legal amendments (see also Scenario 1)

a. Active voter registration abroad.
b. Creation of additional polling stations abroad.
c. Extended voting hours abroad.
d. A six-month buffer period ahead of presidential elections.

Limited external support

a. Low funding for rental costs, equipment, staff, training and accessibility improvements.
b. Limited education of voters on the importance of democracy and how to actively register abroad
c. Little international assistance in countering Russian FIMI and cybersecurity attacks; no protection of election infrastructure, no support for election administration.
d. Few international programmes supporting the political participation of veterans or military personnel.

Note: The absence of external support does not necessarily mean the absence of international election observation.

Consequences

The lifting of martial law and the adoption of the necessary legal amendments establishes a **legal basis for holding elections** and allow Ukraine to resume its democratic electoral process following a ceasefire. Nevertheless, formal legality would not necessarily translate into broad democratic legitimacy.

Firstly, the absence of sufficient external financial, technical and logistical support could create **considerable difficulties in organising elections**. Consequently, practical barriers might prevent a significant proportion of eligible citizens from exercising their rights.

Secondly, the lack of international observation and external oversight could **undermine confidence in the electoral process**. If substantial organisational difficulties occur, or if the process is perceived as insufficiently transparent, the legitimacy and acceptance of the outcome could be contested.

Thirdly, the absence of external support could contribute to **political instability**. The government could face criticism for its inability to organise a credible electoral process under difficult post-war conditions. At the same time, domestic political actors could attribute shortcomings in the elections to the insufficient commitment of Ukraine's international partners. Such perceptions could strengthen EU-sceptic or EU-critical political forces, particularly if the lack of external assistance is interpreted as a sign that Ukraine's European integration is no longer a priority for its partners.

Finally, **questions concerning the recognition and legitimacy of election results** could create legal and political uncertainty which could also complicate Ukraine's EU accession process.

Results

1. **Contested democratic legitimacy:** Formal legal conditions for holding elections are restored, but practical barriers to participation and the absence of sufficient external oversight risk undermining public confidence in the electoral process and the acceptance of the results.
2. **Contested international recognition:** The elections may be legally valid under Ukrainian law, but insufficient international observation, technical assistance and logistical support could weaken confidence in their integrity.
3. **Insufficient support for Ukraine's EU accession process:** From Ukraine's perspective, the absence of external assistance could be perceived as a signal of insufficient international commitment to the country's European integration. From the EU's point of view, challenges to the electoral outcome and declining public confidence in democratic institutions could become an obstacle to accession negotiations, further complicating prospects of Ukraine's future EU membership.

Probability

The likelihood of this scenario is twofold: while legal changes following the lifting of martial law are highly likely (and indeed necessary), a complete lack of international support is less likely, given the support provided by at least some EU countries so far. It would also be highly problematic and risky to organise elections without any international support. Therefore, it is unlikely that Ukraine would make legal preparations for elections without securing international support in advance.

Scenario 3 – The Paradox of Recognition

In this scenario, Ukraine holds elections as per the current legislative framework that no longer fits the realities of post-wartime elections. However, the provision of external support can contribute to alleviate the legislative burdens. This would depend on elections in the EU (e.g. France in spring 2027) resulting in friendly governments for Ukraine that are willing to enact support mechanisms for the organisation of elections. And international bodies are willing to contribute their expertise and capacities to ensure free and fair elections, despite a short time for elections preparation. However, this external support would differ from that envisaged under Scenario 1 in its intensity, given the absence of a six-month buffer for election preparation, necessary to respect the requirements of international partners.

Existing electoral framework

a. There is no early active voter registration abroad before the electoral process begins, meaning that the authorities will have limited overview of how many displaced Ukrainian citizens intend to vote and at which polling stations.
b. Voting abroad is only possible in Ukrainian embassies and consulates. No additional polling stations abroad can be introduced.
c. Voting hours abroad are limited until 8p.m.
d. There is no six-month buffer time between the lifting of martial law and the start of the presidential election campaign. Under the existing framework, the one-month requirement to call elections after the lifting of the martial law creates pressure to start the electoral process. A longer delay would be constitutionally permissible but would become a legitimacy issue. Election day for parliamentary and presidential elections must take place 60 to 90 days respectively after the electoral process has begun.

There is furthermore no clarification of the concept of residence in Ukraine, meaning that displaced Ukrainians cannot run for deputies' elections if they have been out of Ukraine for more than 5 years, and not for presidential elections if they have been out of the country for more than 10 years (except for exceptional reasons defined by the Ukrainian law).

External support (see also Scenario 1)

a. **Logistical support for election administration abroad:** To ensure that all Ukrainian citizens abroad can exercise their right to vote, international support could alleviate the logistical constraints due to the voting taking place only in consulates and embassies. In 2019 Ukrainian elections, in the second round, only 13% of citizens registered abroad voted due to long queues, logistical constraints and limited awareness about procedures. External support can help logistically with, for instance, the organisation of appointment systems to alleviate the waiting time on voting day.
b. **Financial support for election administration**: As in Scenario 1, external support could help cover the financial costs emerging from the organisation of elections. However, any staff training or accessibility improvements would be limited due to a lack of appropriate time.
c. **Voters' education**: Awareness-raising on electoral procedures and democracy. For this scenario, it would be important to inform voters about how to update the State Register of Voters.
d. **Countering FIMI, cyber and hybrid threats**: The EU could assist in countering FIMI threats. Cooperation may also include countering hybrid and cybersecurity threats against foreign aggressions.
e. **International missions of observation**, as conducted by the OSCE and the EU.
f. **Security guarantees**: The Coalition of the Willing could provide security guarantees after the ceasefire in Ukraine.

Consequences

Ukrainian citizens' right to vote is enhanced thanks to external support, within limits. **Internally displaced people** would receive security guarantees from international partners, such as the Coalition of the Willing, in order to vote at their registered electoral address. Alternatively, they may vote temporarily at another polling station, provided they submitted the necessary administrative request in time i.e. five days ahead of election day. However, this temporary change would be logistically challenging in the short time allocated.

Front line areas, despite security guarantees, no longer have the facilities necessary to organise the polling stations due to the war damages. External support could help in financing temporary polling stations and observing the integrity of the electoral process (storage of ballots, transmission of results, etc.), despite a major time constraint.

Ukrainians living abroad are better informed about the voting procedures and get a better voting experience thanks to external financial and logistical support. However, the fact that polling stations would be restricted to embassies and consulates would pose logistical constraints that may hinder Ukrainians from casting their vote.

Disabled Ukrainian citizens benefit from assistance and adapted polling facilities to cast their vote. However, time constraints may prevent full implementation of accessibility measures.

Some temporary polling stations for **military personnel** may be established within military units, but would be hindered by time constraints, infrastructure requirements and practical organisational matters such as the composition of election commissions.

Significant parts of the Ukrainian population are underrepresented as candidates. For example, the **gender gap in Ukraine political representation** would be widened considering that it is mostly women who have been forced to leave Ukraine and they therefore might not meet the residency requirements to run for elections. While **military personnel** would not be deprived of their constitutional right to run for elections, the electoral campaign may be incompatible with military service.

Results

1. **Mixed democratic legitimacy:** Despite enhanced external support, certain groups may not be able to vote or run for candidacy due to the lack of an adapted legal framework and suitable timeframe.
2. **International recognition of elections:** Strong observation, cooperation against cyber threats as well as security guarantees would increase international confidence. This would also contribute to widespread acceptance of a smooth political transition.
3. **Incentives for further progress towards EU accession:** Credible elections would ensure trust in Ukrainian electoral mandates and reinforce Ukrainians' confidence in the integration process. At the same time, the significant shortcomings in political participation and electoral law would generate recommendations and incentives for further reforms.

Probability

A scenario involving no amendment to the existing legal framework seems unlikely considering the current work by the CEC on an electoral draft law. However, it might not be the worst-case scenario, as external support could alleviate some constraints and paradoxically help secure recognition of the elections, despite concerns about inclusiveness and representation.

Scenario 4 – Legitimacy under Pressure

As in Scenario 3, the draft law for amending the electoral code is not implemented and elections are held under the existing electoral framework, which is not adapted to the specific post-war situation Ukraine will face. In contrast to the previous scenario, however, there is no substantial international financial, technical or security assistance to compensate for the lack of legal changes and make the elections as inclusive as possible within a short timeframe. This scenario assumes that any current external support is either stopped or discontinued.

Existing legal and institutional framework (see Scenario 3 for more details)

a. No early active voter registration abroad before the electoral process begins.
b. Voting abroad is only possible in Ukrainian embassies and consulates.
c. Voting hours abroad are limited until 8p.m.
d. No six-month buffer time between the lifting of martial law and the start of the presidential election campaign.

Limited external support (as in Scenario 2)

a. Low funding for equipment, staff, training and accessibility improvements.
b. Limited education of voters on the importance of democracy and how to update the State Register of Voters.
c. Little international assistance in countering Russian FIMI and cybersecurity attacks.
d. Few international programmes supporting the political participation of veterans or military personnel.

Note: The absence of external support does not necessarily mean the absence of international election observation. Consequences for both options are outlined.

Consequences

Significant parts of the electorate are underrepresented. With polling stations concentrated at embassies and consulates as well as limited voting hours abroad, it is unlikely that all eligible citizens abroad would be able to cast their ballots. Ukraine currently has around 4.5 million voters abroad but only 104 overseas polling stations. Furthermore, the short timeframe between the end of martial law and elections could make it difficult to recruit and train sufficient election personnel, particularly without substantial international assistance. Women would be affected disproportionately by the limited access to vote. In Austria, for example, women currently account for around 61% of Ukrainian citizens (including children).

The large amount of **internally displaced persons** combined with the short timeframe for registering or temporarily updating an electoral address could create severe obstacles for **t**hose citizens who have moved during the war or may move after its end. Given Ukraine's size and the potentially substantial population movements following the lifting of martial law, it would be unrealistic to assume that everyone could simply return to their registered electoral address by election day. Persons with disabilities and **war veterans** may face additional barriers if polling stations cannot be adapted to accessibility requirements within the available timeframe and without external financial support. **Active military personnel** would face increased logistical challenges when it comes to voting. Temporary polling stations in areas close to the front, where little infrastructure might be available, would need to be established in a short period of time.

Significant parts of the population are also underrepresented as candidates. For the diaspora, eligibility to stand for election could be affected by restrictions linked to the length of time spent abroad. This would exacerbate a gender gap, as it is predominantly women who have been forced to leave Ukraine due to the war.

Without a six-month buffer time, **political competition may be uneven** due to the short period to prepare the election campaign. This would be particularly relevant for new political actors that do not have large institutional capacities. **Voter education** would be another major challenge. Given the existing funding cycles, there are currently no allocated resources for adequate voter education, despite its particular importance in a post-war election in which many citizens will be voting for the first time. No external support would be available to address these capacity gaps.

The election process would also face increased risks from foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI), as well as potential cyberattacks targeting electoral infrastructure due to the lack of international assistance.

The possibility of limited or no international election observation would further reduce confidence in whether elections are free and fair as irregularities would be difficult to verify/deny.

Results

1. **Weak democratic legitimacy:** The elections may have weak democratic legitimacy due to the severe underrepresentation of parts of the electorate, both in voting and in standing for election. This could undermine public trust in the electoral process and reduce support for the government that emerges from the elections. It could also further weaken confidence in Ukrainian democratic institutions.
2. **Limited international recognition:** The legitimacy and recognition of the elections could be undermined by an untransparent or unequal electoral process, including an uneven campaign environment and limited opportunities for political competition. This could contribute to greater polarisation and internal political divisions. Without international observation, there may also be limited (or in the most severe case: no) international confidence in the credibility of the elections and uncertainty over whether they can be considered free and fair.
3. **Slowed down EU accession process:** A contested or only weakly legitimate outcome could slow down or, in a worst-case scenario, temporarily stall Ukraine's EU accession process. Furthermore, the absence of external assistance during the elections could be perceived as a sign of insufficient international commitment to Ukraine's European integration, which could fuel anti-EU sentiments in the Ukrainian society. Internal political uncertainty could also complicate post-war reconstruction, particularly in combination with limited international support.

The lack of a smooth and broadly accepted political transition could create opportunities for Russia to challenge the credibility of the elections and exploit existing divisions through FIMI or other forms destabilisation. In the most severe scenario, this could contribute to an increased risk of renewed military aggression.

Probability

Given the continued external support for Ukraine since the start of the full-scale invasion, it seems unlikely that this support would cease entirely once the war is over. Furthermore, Ukraine is actively working on a draft law to reform its electoral framework. The Ukrainian Electoral Commission has also emphasised the importance of such reforms, making it less likely that this process will be abandoned.

Grey Swan Scenario – Democracy in the Line of Fire

This scenario examines the exceptional case in which significant political pressure develops to hold presidential and parliamentary elections before there is a meaningful cessation of large-scale hostilities. It is a low-probability but plausible development with potentially systemic consequences that falls outside the assumptions underlying the core scenarios. The current legal framework prohibits national elections during martial law, while the Constitution cannot be amended while martial law is in force. The scenario is therefore not a normal policy pathway but a legal and political stress test: what exceptional sequence of legal decisions would be required if elections were pursued before security conditions resemble a post-war environment?

Legal and institutional requirements

a. Martial law would have to be terminated or otherwise cease to apply for the relevant election process. A short election-day-only suspension would not solve the problem because an election includes nomination, campaigning, media activity, administration, voting, counting and dispute resolution over an extended period.
b. A special wartime election law would have to define how the process operates if attacks continue after martial law is lifted, including security-triggered suspension or relocation of polling and procedures for disrupted counting.
c. Territorial security assessments would need to determine where voting can and cannot occur. Citizens in unsafe areas would need realistic alternative means of voting elsewhere rather than being legally excluded as a category.
d. The law would need specific arrangements for military voting, frontline communities, internally displaced persons, voters abroad, election commissioners, observers and campaign events under continuing security threats.
e. Campaign freedoms, media access and judicial remedies would need protection despite restrictions that may remain necessary for national security.

Consequences

Participation is **structurally unequal**. Voters abroad might be reached through additional polling, but citizens in frontline areas and military service would face much greater constraints. Attacks could also change access conditions during the campaign itself.

Voting and candidacy become especially difficult for **military personnel**. Operational demands may prevent voting; military candidates would face unresolved questions about service, campaigning, command structures and the use of status or resources. Ballot secrecy and observation would require exceptional safeguards.

Continuing security restrictions affect the **campaign and media environment,** including public meetings, movement, media operations and candidates' ability to campaign across the country. Incumbents and actors with privileged access to state security or communications could have structural advantages even without deliberate abuse.

Election administration such as polling stations, election workers and voters could become targets. Local voting might need to be postponed, relocated or halted after attacks, raising difficult questions about equality, deadlines, aggregation of results and legal challenges.

Russia would retain both kinetic and non-kinetic means to **disrupt the process**, including attacks on infrastructure, cyber operations and information manipulation. These risks are higher than in the four post-ceasefire scenarios.

Holding national elections while large-scale hostilities continue could furthermore establish a precedent for how elections are conducted under emergency conditions. Domestically, it could reshape expectations about the relationship between emergency powers and democratic competition. At European level, the way the EU assesses and supports such an election could influence future debates about how far exceptional security circumstances can justify departures from normal electoral practice. This would be politically relevant beyond Ukraine, even though electoral and emergency-law frameworks differ between states. European Parliament elections themselves are governed through a combination of common EU principles and national electoral rules.

Results

1. **Weak democratic legitimacy:** Elections could demonstrate democratic continuity, but serious inequalities in participation and competition would weaken substantive legitimacy. The decisive issue would be whether the process still permits meaningful choice and reasonably equal political rights under conditions of continuing war.
2. **Contested international recognition:** International observation would be essential but could itself be constrained by security. External actors might accept constitutional continuity while simultaneously judging important parts of the process to fall short of normal standards. 'Recognition' should therefore be treated as a spectrum of confidence and political acceptance, not a binary certificate.
3. **Risks for EU accession:** The EU would assess the process against the functioning of democratic institutions, fundamental rights and rule-of-law criteria while also taking the wartime context into account. A wartime election would not automatically advance or derail accession; the quality of the process and the legal means used to enable it would matter. At the same time, the EU's response would have implications beyond Ukraine: accepting exceptional electoral arrangements here would require a clear explanation of why they remain necessary, proportionate and temporary rather than becoming a broader precedent for lowering democratic standards during emergencies.

Probability

This scenario would need to overcome major legal and political barriers, including the prohibition of national elections under martial law. Current institutional preparations are focused on elections after martial law is lifted, with substantial preparation time. It therefore remains conceivable as a stress-test scenario, but significantly less likely than the four post-ceasefire pathways.

Conclusion

The five scenarios illustrate that Ukraine's return to national elections is not simply a question of timing. The timing of elections is itself a political choice rather than a legal fixed date. While the termination or lifting of martial law would remove the legal prohibition on holding elections, it would not automatically resolve the challenges created by years of full-scale war. The displacement of millions of citizens, the continued mobilisation of military personnel, damaged or destroyed electoral infrastructure and an uncertain security environment – including the unresolved status of temporarily occupied territories – will shape the conditions under which Ukrainians can exercise their democratic rights.

The comparison of the four core scenarios demonstrates that adapting the electoral framework and securing sufficient international support are complementary rather than interchangeable. Legal reforms can facilitate broader participation, but their effective implementation depends on adequate financial, technical and logistical resources. Meanwhile, international assistance can strengthen election administration, improve accessibility and help counter foreign information manipulation and interference, but cannot fully compensate for a legal framework that does not reflect post-war realities. The most favourable conditions emerge when both factors are present. Their absence increases the risk of unequal participation, contested results and political instability.

A central finding concerns the distinction between electoral legality, democratic legitimacy and international recognition. Elections may comply with existing legislation while significant parts of the population face practical barriers to voting or standing for office. International observation and recognition can strengthen confidence in the electoral process, but cannot substitute for meaningful participation and fair political competition – and recognition itself should be understood as a spectrum of confidence and political acceptance rather than a binary certificate. This tension is particularly evident in the Paradox of Recognition scenario, where considerable external support may produce internationally accepted elections without fully resolving questions of democratic representation. These barriers are not gender-neutral: since most Ukrainians who have left the country since 2022 are women, restrictions on out-of-country voting and residency-based candidacy rules would disproportionately affect women, both as voters and as candidates.

The exceptional Grey Swan scenario further highlights the limits of holding elections under continuing large-scale hostilities. Even if the necessary legal conditions could be established, ongoing attacks, restrictions on campaigning and unequal opportunities for participation would pose fundamental challenges to electoral integrity. Its significance would also extend beyond Ukraine: how the European Union and other partners assessed and responded to such an election would shape future debates about how far exceptional security circumstances can justify departures from normal electoral practice. The pressure to restore the electoral calendar must therefore be weighed against the risk of organising elections under circumstances that could undermine the democratic legitimacy they are intended to renew.

These findings also matter for Ukraine's European integration. Credible elections can reinforce confidence in the country's democratic institutions and contribute positively to the EU accession process. However, holding elections is not in itself a guarantee of democratic consolidation or a pathway to accession. The quality of the electoral process, the protection of political rights and the acceptance of the results will be more consequential than the mere fact that elections have taken place.

International partners, particularly the European Union and its Member States, have an important role to play in supporting Ukraine's electoral preparations. Financial and technical assistance, cooperation against foreign information manipulation and interference, and international election observation can help create more favourable conditions for credible elections. Ukrainian ownership, however, is not an abstract principle. The legislative proposals prepared by the Central Election Commission and the working group of the Verkhovna Rada on the participation of citizens abroad show that Ukrainian institutions are already actively preparing these decisions. Decisions concerning the timing, legal framework and conduct of elections must therefore remain with Ukrainian institutions, in accordance with Ukraine's constitutional order.

None of the five scenarios represents a predetermined outcome. Different elements may emerge simultaneously, and political, legal and security conditions may change considerably before elections become possible. The current trajectory – advanced reform work by Ukrainian institutions combined with sustained international commitment – points towards the more favourable pathways, such as the Diaspora for Democracy scenario, but this is a direction that must be secured rather than an outcome that can be assumed. The purpose of this foresight exercise is to make these uncertainties visible and encourage early consideration of the decisions that will shape Ukraine's democratic future.

Ultimately, the success of Ukraine's next elections should not be measured by how quickly they take place, but by the extent to which they allow all Ukrainians – women and men, at home and abroad, in and out of uniform – to make a free, informed and meaningful choice about their country's future.

Five Possible Futures

Russia's full-scale invasion has interrupted Ukraine's electoral cycle. When and under what conditions can elections take place again? This IDM foresight exercise explores five scenarios based on different electoral frameworks and levels of international support, examining their implications for democratic legitimacy, international recognition and EU accession.

Diaspora for Democracy

An adapted electoral framework and strong international support enable broad electoral participation, including displaced Ukrainians. Democratic legitimacy and international confidence are strengthened, creating favourable conditions for EU integration.

Ambition without Resources

Ukraine adapts its electoral framework but lacks sufficient international support. Financial and logistical constraints limit participation, potentially undermining electoral legitimacy and political stability.

The Paradox of Recognition

Strong international support facilitates elections under the existing electoral framework. International recognition is secured, but unequal participation and representation raise questions about democratic legitimacy.

Legitimacy under Pressure

Without substantial electoral reforms or international support, elections face serious organisational and democratic challenges. Contested legitimacy and limited international confidence risk political instability and slower EU integration.

Democracy in the Line of Fire

Elections are pursued while large-scale hostilities continue. Severe security threats, legal obstacles and unequal participation put democratic legitimacy and electoral integrity at risk.