



INSIGHT PAPER / UKRAINE, GOVERNANCE & DEMOCRATIC RESILIENCE

Ukraine: The Case for Wartime Democratic Renewal

Why elections are now overdue — and how to hold them without weakening the war effort

Fedorov's challenge, lawful wartime continuity, leadership renewal and the next political mandate

FOCUS

Wartime governance | Elections | Civil-military balance | Corruption | Political succession

Political-security assessment following the 18 August 2026 Reuters report

Executive Summary

Mykhailo Fedorov's 18 August 2026 call for wartime elections is important not because it suddenly makes President Volodymyr Zelenskii's government unlawful, but because it converts a question that has been deferred since 2022 into an explicit contest over democratic succession. Reuters described Fedorov's intervention as the first public demand of this kind by a major Ukrainian political figure since Russia's full-scale invasion. Fedorov, dismissed as defence minister in July after only six months in the post, argued that Ukraine faces a systemic crisis of governance and needs a legal, safe and realistic mechanism to renew the democratic process even if the war remains unresolved. He did not declare himself a presidential candidate. The political significance lies in the fact that a former core member of Zelenskii's own governing project, with a strong public profile and a credible reform record, is now arguing that wartime continuity has reached its institutional limit.[1]

This paper supports the hypothesis that Ukrainian elections are overdue, but with an important qualification. 'Overdue' should be understood as a democratic and institutional judgement, not as an allegation that the current presidency or parliament has no legal authority. Ukraine's constitutional framework deliberately preserves continuity in an emergency. Article 108 provides that the president exercises his powers until a newly elected president assumes office, while Article 83 extends the powers of the Verkhovna Rada when its term expires during martial law until a newly elected parliament meets after martial law is terminated. The legal continuity is therefore strong. The political problem is different: the parliamentary cycle due in 2023, the presidential cycle due in 2024 and the subsequent local electoral cycle have all been displaced by war. A mechanism designed to prevent a constitutional vacuum is increasingly carrying the additional burden of substituting for electoral renewal.[2]

Zelenskii's record must be treated fairly. Ukraine's survival as an independent state after February 2022 is inseparable from his decision to remain in Kyiv, his ability to personify national resistance and his success in mobilising international political, military and financial backing. Under his wartime presidency, Ukraine prevented Russia from achieving its initial objective of decapitating the government, preserved a functioning state, accelerated integration with the European Union, built an international military-support architecture and adapted its armed forces into an increasingly technological force. By August 2026 the European Union and its member states reported EUR 220.3 billion in combined financial, economic, military, humanitarian and refugee-related support, while NATO allies had pledged EUR 70 billion in military equipment, assistance and training for Ukraine in 2026. This is a formidable diplomatic achievement as well as a collective Western decision.[3]

That record, however, is not an argument for indefinite incumbency. In fact, the opposite case is stronger. Wartime leaders can become historically indispensable without remaining politically irreplaceable. Ukraine has already demonstrated that principle in its military command. Contrary to some early descriptions of the July crisis, General Oleksandr Syrskyi did not resign: Zelenskii removed him on 21 July and appointed Major General Mykhailo Drapatskyi after protests and a severe dispute over battlefield losses, force management and military reform. The state did not abandon the war because it changed its commander-in-chief. It concluded that the mission was larger than the individual holding the office. Civilian leadership should ultimately be governed by the same institutional principle, but through a constitutional election rather than removal by executive decision or street pressure.[4]

An immediate nationwide ballot while Russian missiles and drones are striking cities, substantial territory remains occupied, hundreds of thousands of service personnel are deployed and millions of citizens live abroad would be difficult to defend as fully equal or secure. Public opinion reflects that caution. A Kyiv International Institute of Sociology survey conducted from 20 July to 3 August found only 15% in favour of elections immediately, before a ceasefire; 23% supported elections after a ceasefire and reliable security guarantees but before a final peace agreement; and 57% preferred to wait until final peace and the full end of the war. The correct conclusion is not that electoral renewal should again be placed beyond the horizon. It is that Ukraine should now legislate, finance and publish an executable election framework and establish a security trigger that permits voting after a credible ceasefire or sustained reduction in strategic attack, without requiring a final peace treaty.[5]

The recommended endstate is therefore a controlled transition from emergency continuity to competitive legitimacy. Ukraine should complete its electoral legal package, rebuild and verify the voter register, greatly expand overseas voting capacity, create secure procedures for service personnel and internally displaced

persons, establish objective security criteria for polling, guarantee opposition access to media, invite large-scale domestic and international observation and define a transparent rule for when martial law can be lifted or otherwise ended sufficiently for elections to proceed. A presidential election should be the first national vote once those threshold conditions are met, followed by parliamentary and then local elections as security and legal conditions permit. The election would not signal exhaustion. Properly designed, it would demonstrate that Russia has failed to freeze Ukrainian political life indefinitely.

CENTRAL JUDGEMENT

Ukraine's wartime government remains lawful, but lawful continuity should not become open-ended political succession. Elections are now overdue as an institutional project. The strongest and most defensible course is to prepare them immediately and conduct the first national vote after a credible ceasefire and security guarantees, without waiting for a final peace settlement.

TRIGGER EVENT

Why Fedorov's Intervention Matters

Fedorov's intervention matters because of who is making it and when. He was not a marginal opposition figure. He entered national government with Zelenskiy in 2019, became the country's youngest minister, built his reputation around digitalisation and the Diia state-services ecosystem, and during the full-scale war became closely associated with drones, digital targeting, innovation and the attempt to make a manpower-constrained army more lethal through technology. Parliament appointed him defence minister in January 2026 with a mandate for rapid reform. His removal in July therefore carried a different political meaning from the routine departure of a minister: it exposed a conflict inside the wartime governing coalition over how the state and armed forces should be modernised. [1][6]



Mykhailo Fedorov (photo: facebook.com/mykhailofedorov.com.ua)

The dismissal generated unusual wartime protests. Demonstrators demanded Fedorov's reinstatement and increasingly directed criticism at then commander-in-chief Oleksandr Syrskyi. Zelenskiy said he had removed Fedorov because the minister could not work with Syrskyi; less than a week later the president dismissed Syrskyi as well. Pro-Fedorov rallies continued through late July, including a march of several thousand people through central Kyiv. The resulting sequence is politically revealing. Public dissent remained possible under martial law; the executive changed course on military leadership under public pressure; and a previously loyal technocratic figure emerged as a potential political alternative without yet declaring a candidacy.[4][7]

The 18 August statement also coincided with a renewed Russian air campaign and expanding Ukrainian deep-strike operations. On the same day, a Russian missile attack in Pechenihiy in Kharkiv region killed ten people and wounded at least eighteen, while Ukraine continued long-range attacks intended to impose costs on Russian logistics and energy infrastructure. The election argument is therefore not occurring after the war has faded into the background. It is being made during an active high-intensity conflict. That increases the security risk of voting but also sharpens Fedorov's underlying strategic proposition: if the war becomes prolonged rather than temporary, the emergency political model cannot simply assume that normal democratic succession can wait for an undefined endpoint.[8]

CONSTITUTIONAL CONTINUITY

Why Governance Remains Lawful - and Why Lawful Is Not the Same as Renewable

Ukraine is not in a constitutional vacuum. The Constitution makes continuity explicit. The Verkhovna Rada is the country's sole legislative body and is constitutionally composed of 450 People's Deputies serving five-year terms. Article 83 provides that if the term of the Rada expires during martial law or a state of emergency, its powers continue until the first meeting of the parliament elected after the emergency ends. Article 108 similarly provides that the President continues to exercise presidential powers until a newly elected President assumes office. These provisions are intended to prevent an enemy from creating state paralysis simply by making an election impossible.[2]

The regular calendar nevertheless matters. The current Rada was elected in July 2019 after Zelenskiy dissolved the previous parliament and called a snap vote. In normal circumstances a new parliamentary election would therefore have occurred in 2023. The presidential election that would normally have been held on the last Sunday of March in the fifth year of the presidential term did not take place in March 2024, and Zelenskiy's original five-year term reached its normal endpoint in May 2024. Russia's invasion and the continuation of martial law provide the legal reason for both postponements. They do not erase the democratic significance of the elapsed time.[2][9]

This distinction is essential because the word 'legitimacy' is easily weaponised. Moscow has repeatedly sought to portray Zelenskiy as illegitimate. That argument should be rejected: constitutional continuity is a legal mechanism created precisely for emergencies. But Ukraine does not need to accept the opposite proposition - that because continuity is lawful, renewal can be deferred indefinitely. Emergency clauses protect the state from a vacuum; they are not designed to create a permanent political settlement. By 2026, the question has shifted from whether postponement was justified in 2022-24 to how a democratic state should exit a prolonged emergency without surrendering military effectiveness.

Current Ukrainian law is also a real constraint, not a technicality. The legal regime of martial law prohibits presidential, parliamentary and local elections while martial law is in force, and the Constitution itself cannot be amended during martial law. The Verkhovna Rada's cross-party electoral working group reaffirmed in March and May 2026 that elections under martial law are impossible under the present framework. Parliamentary factions had already reached a cross-party understanding in the Jean Monnet Dialogue that free and fair elections should take place after martial law ends with at least six months for preparation. Any proposal for a 2026-27 vote must therefore start from lawful transition out of martial law or another constitutionally valid route; it cannot simply announce an election and ignore the legal regime.[10]

LEGAL POSITION

The paper does not argue that Zelenskiy has 'overstayed' unlawfully. It argues that Ukraine should now convert constitutional emergency continuity into a time-bound plan for renewed electoral authority. That is a materially different proposition - and a stronger one.

ZELENSKIY'S RECORD

Credit Before Change

Any serious argument for civilian leadership renewal must begin by acknowledging the scale of Zelenskiy's achievement. In February 2022 Ukraine faced not merely a territorial offensive but an attempted destruction of its political centre. Zelenskiy's decision to remain in Kyiv gave the state a visible centre of gravity at a moment when Russia expected political collapse. His communication style translated the war into an international political cause, helped maintain domestic cohesion and allowed Ukraine to build sustained relationships with governments whose support became decisive to its survival.

The external architecture created since 2022 is now institutional rather than symbolic. The European Union and its member states describe themselves as Ukraine's largest collective provider of support and reported EUR 220.3 billion committed across financial, economic, military, humanitarian and refugee-related assistance by August 2026. In April 2026 the EU agreed a EUR 90 billion loan package for 2026-27, with an indicative EUR 60 billion directed toward defence investment and procurement. NATO's July Ankara summit added a pledge of EUR 70 billion in military equipment, assistance and training for Ukraine in 2026 and at least equivalent support in 2027. Ukraine has also continued to deepen European integration while fighting the war, with EU institutions repeatedly linking accession to rule-of-law, anti-corruption and administrative reforms.[3][11]



Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelenskiy visits the frontline, amid Russia's attack on Ukraine. (Source: Ukrainian Presidential Press Service)

Zelenskiy has also shown an ability to adapt when political pressure becomes overwhelming. In July 2025, his ruling majority pushed through legislation that weakened the independence of the National Anti-Corruption Bureau of Ukraine and the Specialised Anti-Corruption Prosecutor's Office. The move triggered the first major nationwide protests of the full-scale war and unusually sharp criticism from European partners. Within days Zelenskiy submitted corrective legislation and parliament restored the agencies' independence by a 331-0 vote. The episode was damaging because it suggested an attempt to concentrate control; it was also evidence that civil society, parliament, international conditionality and the presidency could still force and absorb correction.[12]

This record is precisely why leadership renewal need not be framed as repudiation. Democracies are strongest when a successful leader can leave office without the achievements of his tenure leaving with him. If Ukraine can transfer presidential authority while preserving military policy, international alliances and the European trajectory, that would convert Zelenskiy's personal wartime legitimacy into durable institutional legitimacy. It would be a final proof that the state he helped preserve is not dependent on one individual.

POLITICAL BACKGROUND

The Pre-War Political Alignment and the 2019 Mandate

The political system Zelenskiy inherited in 2019 was highly competitive but also unusually personalist. Parties tended to be organised around leaders, media networks, regional constituencies and attitudes toward Europe and Russia more than around stable left-right ideological programmes. The 2014 Revolution of Dignity and Russia's seizure of Crimea had already shifted the national centre of gravity toward European integration, but significant eastern and southern constituencies still supported parties advocating accommodation with Moscow. The 2019 election disrupted this structure.

Zelenskiy won the presidential runoff with 73.22% of votes cast against Petro Poroshenko's 24.45%, a landslide built on dissatisfaction with the old political class, demand for anti-corruption reform and hope that a new president could end the Donbas conflict. In the July parliamentary election, Servant of the People won roughly 43.16% of the party-list vote and 254 seats, becoming the first party since independence to secure a single-party parliamentary majority. The Opposition Platform - For Life (OPFL) came second, while Batkivshchyna, European Solidarity and Holos crossed the national threshold. Elections could not be held in Crimea and parts of Donetsk and Luhansk already outside government control.[9][13]

Political force (2019)	Party-list vote	Seats won	Pre-war political character
Servant of the People	43.16%	254	Broad anti-establishment / centrist catch-all around Zelenskiy; reform, digitalisation, anti-corruption and an early emphasis on ending the Donbas war.
Opposition Platform - For Life	13.05%	43	Pro-Russian / accommodation-oriented; strongest support in parts of the south and east. Its parliamentary faction ended in April 2022.
Batkivshchyna	8.18%	26	Yulia Tymoshenko-led personalist and populist party; pro-European with strong social-economic messaging.
European Solidarity	8.10%	25	Petro Poroshenko-led pro-European and Euro-Atlantic opposition; strong emphasis on security, language, identity and Western integration.
Holos (Voice)	5.82%	20	Reformist, liberal and pro-European; initially associated with younger urban voters and anti-establishment politics.

The full-scale invasion transformed the party system more fundamentally than any normal election would have done. OPFL's faction ceased to exist in April 2022, and deputies from parts of the former pro-Russian political milieu later appeared in parliamentary groups including Platform for Life and Peace and Restoration of Ukraine. At the same time, the war elevated actors whose legitimacy came not from pre-war party machines but from military command, intelligence, technology, local government and wartime service. That is why the next election is unlikely to recreate the 2019 contest. The political market has been reset by war.

GOVERNMENT AND PARLIAMENT

How the State Is Structured in August 2026

Ukraine is a semi-presidential or parliamentary-presidential republic in which authority is divided between a directly elected president, a unicameral parliament and a Cabinet of Ministers headed by the prime minister. The President is commander-in-chief, leads foreign and national-security policy in important respects and nominates the defence and foreign ministers for parliamentary appointment. The Cabinet is the highest body in the executive branch and is accountable within the constitutional framework to both the President and the Verkhovna Rada. The prime minister is appointed by parliament following the constitutional nomination process, and most ministers are appointed by parliament on the prime minister's submission.[2]

As of August 2026, Sergii Korytskiy is prime minister after parliament approved his appointment on 16 July by 289 votes; he is the third wartime prime minister since the full-scale invasion. Kyrylo Budanov, the former head of military intelligence, has served as head of the Presidential Office since January 2026 and has become a central figure in security and peace diplomacy. Mykhailo Drapachy has served as commander-in-chief since 21 July. On 18 August Zelenskiy formally moved to secure parliamentary confirmation of Yevhenii Khmara, who had been serving as acting defence minister following Fedorov's removal. Khmara's permanent appointment also raised a civil-military governance issue because Ukrainian law defines the defence minister as a civilian office, while Khmara had been serving as acting head of the SBU domestic security service.[4][14]

The ninth-convocation Verkhovna Rada remains dominated by Servant of the People, but the original 254-seat majority has eroded. The Rada's official faction and group page on 19 August listed the following affiliations. The same-day Rada members page separately displayed 390 sitting deputies, while the faction/group listings summed to 392; this appears to be an administrative timing discrepancy in the live database and is noted here rather than silently reconciled.[15]

Faction / group	Members listed 19 Aug 2026	Political note
Servant of the People	229	Still the dominant governing faction, but below its 254-seat 2019 starting strength.
European Solidarity	26	Main established pro-European opposition associated with former president Petro Poroshenko.
Batkivshchyna	24	Yulia Tymoshenko-led opposition faction.
Holos	19	Pro-reform / liberal opposition faction, reduced and reorganised since 2019.
Dovira	19	Deputy group built largely around constituency and regional networks.
For the Future	18	Deputy group with regional and constituency-based interests.
Platform for Life and Peace	21	Parliamentary group created in April 2022; includes deputies from the former OPFL milieu.
Restoration of Ukraine	17	Parliamentary group created in May 2022; includes deputies from several former alignments.
Non-affiliated	19	Deputies not belonging to a faction or group.

The structure matters to the election argument because the parliament is now both legally prolonged and politically different from the chamber elected in 2019. It continues to pass budgets, mobilisation laws, appointments, European-integration legislation and emergency measures. There is no evidence that it has ceased to function. But its composition increasingly reflects attrition, defections, deaths, resignations, occupation-related vacancies and wartime political regrouping rather than a fresh national choice. A future parliamentary election is therefore not merely about party competition; it is about reconstructing a representative legislature after years of demographic displacement and war.



CORRUPTION AND ACCOUNTABILITY

The Governance Vulnerability That War Did Not Remove

Corruption is the strongest substantive argument against treating wartime political continuity as self-justifying. Ukraine entered the full-scale invasion with a long-standing problem of oligarchic influence, procurement abuse, patronage and weak enforcement. Since 2014 it has also built increasingly capable anti-corruption institutions under pressure from civil society, the European Union and other international partners. The result is not a simple story of either failure or success. It is a state in which serious corruption persists while the institutions designed to detect it are demonstrably capable of reaching senior officials.

The July 2025 NABU-SAPO crisis remains the clearest governance warning. Parliament, led by Zelenskiy's majority, rapidly adopted changes that placed the two bodies under greater control of a politically appointed prosecutor general. The move provoked major protests and concern from European officials because independence of the anti-corruption architecture is directly connected to EU accession and external financial

support. Zelenskiy reversed course and restored independence within days. That reversal was important, but the episode showed how wartime concentration of executive power can collide with institutions designed to constrain it.[12]

The later 'Midas' investigation brought the issue closer to the presidential circle. In May 2026 former presidential chief of staff Andriy Yermak was named a suspect in an alleged USD 10.5 million money-laundering scheme connected to an elite housing development. Reuters reported that Zelenskiy himself had not been named in the investigation and NABU's chief said the president was not the subject of its probes. Earlier parts of the wider scandal involved allegations of a roughly USD 100 million kickback scheme in the energy sector. The fact that investigators could pursue figures so close to the presidency is evidence that anti-corruption institutions have real capacity; the proximity of the cases to the governing elite is also a reminder that electoral accountability cannot be indefinitely replaced by criminal investigation alone.[16]

Public attitudes reinforce the risk. In May 2026 KIIS reported that 54% of respondents, when given a binary choice, considered corruption a greater threat to Ukraine's development than the war with Russia. That does not mean Ukrainians believe corruption is literally more dangerous to national survival than Russian military power. It does show that after more than four years of full-scale war, citizens continue to see internal governance as a strategic problem rather than a peacetime luxury. A competitive election would not solve corruption. It would, however, force incumbents and challengers to submit competing claims about appointments, procurement, judicial reform, institutional independence and state performance to voters.[16]

ASSESSMENT

Ukraine's anti-corruption system is neither a failure nor a completed reform. Its most important wartime characteristic is that it still generates political consequences. Elections would strengthen that accountability loop, provided the campaign itself is not distorted by emergency media controls, oligarchic money or Russian interference.

CIVIL-MILITARY RENEWAL

The Syrskyi Precedent - Leadership Can Change Without Changing the War

The July 2026 military crisis offers a useful but limited analogy. Syrskyi was a highly experienced commander who had played major roles in the defence of Kyiv and the 2022 Kharkiv counteroffensive. By 2026, however, criticism had accumulated over casualties, command culture and the pace of adaptation. Fedorov's defence-modernisation agenda brought those tensions into public view. After protests escalated, Zelenskiy removed Syrskyi and appointed Drapatyi, 43, a commander associated with a younger generation and a more adaptive approach. Reuters described it as the largest shake-up in Ukraine's military leadership since the full-scale invasion.[4]

The lesson is institutional rather than personal. Replacing a commander during war is risky: knowledge is lost, relationships change and adversaries may interpret transition as weakness. Yet militaries change commanders precisely because continuity is not automatically the same as effectiveness. The war aim, chain of command, alliances and state authority remained intact after Syrskyi left. Ukraine accepted transition because the office belonged to the state.

The presidency is different because it is an elected civilian office and therefore cannot be renewed by administrative appointment. But the same principle applies at a higher level: national survival must not become identified permanently with one office-holder. Zelenskiy's wartime legitimacy is substantial, but it would be strengthened historically if the system he leads can produce a secure, constitutional competition for succession. The democratic version of command renewal is not a purge. It is a ballot followed by an orderly transfer - or, if Zelenskiy wins, a newly confirmed mandate.

OBSTACLES

Why an Election Cannot Simply Be Announced

The practical obstacles are severe enough that an immediate election would risk producing exactly the legitimacy dispute that proponents seek to resolve. Ukraine's Central Election Commission (CEC) has repeatedly stressed that a ceasefire and safe conditions are prerequisites for credible voting. Election

authorities face the need to rebuild or verify a voter register altered by death, displacement, military service, occupation and migration; restore damaged polling infrastructure; create adequate overseas capacity; and protect both physical polling and information systems.[17]

The electorate is dispersed on a continental scale. In January 2026 the CEC estimated that about 5.8 million Ukrainian refugees were abroad. Pre-war overseas voting relied on only about 102 embassy and consular polling stations, a system plainly incapable of serving the present diaspora without major expansion. Millions more citizens are internally displaced. Voters from occupied areas cannot be asked to participate through Russian-controlled institutions, but their right to vote must be preserved if they reach government-controlled territory or a recognised overseas polling location. The CEC has favoured additional external polling stations while warning that online and postal voting can create vulnerabilities to interference and efforts to discredit results.[17]

Military participation is equally difficult. About 800,000 personnel were serving in Ukraine's armed forces according to the Central Election Commission's January 2026 estimate, many in or near combat areas. A vote that materially suppresses soldier participation would be politically unacceptable; a system that places ballots inside military chains of command could compromise secrecy and create coercion concerns. Polling needs to be civilian-administered, geographically dispersed and adapted to operational rotations. No commander should be able to identify how a unit voted, and frontline units should not be forced to choose between tactical safety and electoral participation.

Physical security is the decisive constraint. Russia can strike throughout Ukraine with ballistic missiles, cruise missiles and drones. Polling stations create predictable civilian concentrations; counting centres, electoral commissions and communications nodes create additional targets. The state therefore needs objective security criteria rather than a political judgement that conditions are 'good enough'. The most credible threshold is a sustained ceasefire that includes strategic air attack, backed by external security guarantees and monitored sufficiently to allow a predictable election period. This is consistent with the Rada working group's existing focus on security criteria and with the six-month preparation benchmark agreed across factions.[10][17]

Finally, campaign conditions matter as much as election day. Wartime restrictions have reduced parliamentary broadcasting, concentrated national communications and increased the state role in information management. Some restrictions are defensible for operational security; others create an incumbent advantage if left unchanged during a campaign. A credible election requires equal access to major broadcast platforms, transparent rules for campaign finance, protection for opposition speech that does not disclose operational information, independent election administration and extensive domestic and international observation. Without those conditions, a technically successful vote could still leave a political legitimacy deficit.



*Key Ukrainian military successes: Ukrainian military vehicles stand behind a damaged sign near a border post in Sudzha, Kursk region.
Photo: David Guttenfelder/The New York Times*

A Credible Election While the War Remains Unresolved

The strongest route is not an election 'under missiles' and not a promise to wait for an unknowable final peace. It is a staged transition in which preparation begins under martial law, but voting occurs after a legally and operationally defined security trigger. The war with Russia can remain unresolved - borders can remain disputed, negotiations can continue and Russian forces can remain on occupied territory - while the active security environment becomes sufficiently stable for a national vote. This distinguishes an armistice or sustained ceasefire from a final peace treaty.

Phase One: Build the mechanism now

The Verkhovna Rada should convert the existing working group into an implementation process with a published election-readiness plan. That plan should identify legislation required for voter registration, external polling, military voting, IDPs, campaign regulation, observation, electoral security and dispute resolution. The CEC should be funded to restore damaged infrastructure and run national-scale simulations. The six-month preparation period already identified in the cross-party dialogue should become a planning standard rather than an abstract aspiration.[10]

Phase Two: Define the security and legal trigger

The trigger should be narrower than 'the war is over' but stronger than a political announcement. At minimum it should include a verifiable nationwide ceasefire or sustained suspension of Russian strategic strikes; reliable air-defence and external security guarantees; an assessment by the CEC and national security authorities that polling can be conducted across most government-controlled territory; and a legally valid termination or lifting of martial law that permits the election statutes to operate. Parliament should specify the decision process in advance so the incumbent cannot unilaterally choose the most politically favourable election moment.

Phase Three: Hold the presidential election first

A presidential election is the most practical first national contest. The office is a single nationwide mandate; its renewal addresses the most visible question of wartime executive authority; and the July-August KIIS polling found that 44% of respondents preferred presidential elections first, compared with 32% for parliamentary elections and 11% for local elections. Holding the presidential vote first would also avoid trying to solve every constituency, party-list and de-occupied-territory problem simultaneously.[5]

Phase Four: Follow with parliamentary and local elections

Parliamentary renewal should follow once the presidential transition is complete and the legal framework for representation has been settled. The 2019 mixed electoral inheritance, the unfilled constituencies in occupied areas and the enormous movement of population mean that parliamentary design requires more technical preparation than a presidential ballot. Local elections should then be sequenced by security conditions, with special arrangements for frontline and newly de-occupied communities. Not every municipality needs to vote on the same day if objective security criteria make that impossible; legitimacy is better served by transparent postponement in a defined high-risk area than by pretending equal conditions exist everywhere.

Core safeguards

- Voter register: complete a national verification and correction campaign before the election period, using secure digital tools for registration updates but retaining auditable voting and counting procedures.
- Citizens abroad: create temporary polling centres beyond embassies and consulates through agreements with host governments, with pre-registration, multiple voting days where legally permissible, and sufficient staffing for the largest refugee communities.
- Military voters: establish civilian-administered voting at rotation hubs, rear-area bases and secure deployment locations; permit carefully controlled early voting for units whose missions make election-day access impossible; prohibit command access to individual ballots.
- Occupied territories: no polling administered by or through Russian occupation authorities. Citizens from occupied areas should retain voting rights through government-controlled Ukraine or recognised foreign polling centres.

- Physical protection: disperse polling stations, use shelters where necessary, provide backup power and communications, create rapid suspension criteria for local attacks and build redundant counting centres rather than a small number of obvious high-value nodes.
- Campaign fairness: restore broad parliamentary and political broadcasting, provide equal access to national public media, separate legitimate operational-security restrictions from political censorship and require transparent campaign finance.
- Cyber and influence protection: establish a joint electoral-security cell for cyber defence, foreign funding, deepfakes, bot networks and Russian information operations, with public attribution procedures and judicial review rather than opaque administrative censorship.
- Candidate neutrality: senior serving military and security commanders who become candidates should leave operational command before campaigning, preserving the boundary between armed authority and electoral competition.
- Observation and disputes: invite OSCE/ODIHR, Council of Europe and credible domestic monitoring organisations; strengthen fast judicial resolution of electoral complaints and publish precinct-level results in auditable form.

PREFERRED SEQUENCE

Prepare now → verifiable ceasefire and security guarantees → lawful end/lifting of martial law → approximately six months of final electoral preparation → presidential election → parliamentary election → phased local elections. The peace treaty can come later.

CANDIDATES AND OUTCOME

A Political Field Created by the War

The likely presidential field is unusually fluid because several of the strongest figures have not declared candidacies. Polling should therefore be read as an indicator of political demand rather than a forecast. Two recent surveys illustrate both the emerging hierarchy and the uncertainty. A Rating Group poll published in July placed Zelenskiy first on 22.3%, followed by Valerii Zaluzhnyi on 14.9% and Fedorov on 13.4%, with Budanov on 7.2%. A separate SOCIS survey conducted from 28 July to 2 August placed Zelenskiy and Zaluzhnyi almost level in the first round - 22.3% and 21.4% - with Fedorov on 13.1%. Hypothetical SOCIS runoffs showed Zaluzhnyi, Budanov and Fedorov each defeating Zelenskiy. These figures come from different methodologies and populations and should not be combined into a single prediction.[18]

Potential candidate	Current status / base	Political strengths	Principal constraints
Volodymyr Zelenskiy	Incumbent president; Servant of the People and wartime executive network.	Unmatched wartime recognition; diplomatic record; incumbency; continued trust around a majority in major surveys.	Change fatigue; corruption and centralisation concerns; responsibility for unpopular appointments and mobilisation; runoff polling vulnerability.
Valerii Zaluzhnyi	Former commander-in-chief; ambassador to the United Kingdom; not declared.	Very high trust; military stature; can embody continuity of resistance without being the incumbent political administration.	Untested as a civilian politician; policy platform unclear; has said he will not discuss political future while martial law continues.
Mykhailo Fedorov	Former digitalisation and defence minister; has called for elections but has not declared.	Reform/technology identity; strong youth and innovation brand; visible anti-establishment momentum after July protests.	Short defence tenure; campaign organisation not yet demonstrated; relationship with wartime establishment may polarise support.
Kyrylo Budanov	Head of Presidential Office; former military intelligence chief; not declared.	Security credibility; negotiation experience; high public trust; younger leadership profile.	Close association with current presidency; intelligence background raises civil-military and transparency questions in an electoral role.
Petro Poroshenko	Former president; European Solidarity leader.	Established party structure; clear pro-European / pro-NATO identity; experienced opposition electorate.	High negative ratings and polarisation; recent hypothetical runoffs show difficulty expanding beyond core support.

The most likely structural outcome is not simply a Zelenskiy-versus-opposition replay. The war has created a new political class: military commanders, intelligence figures, technocrats, veteran networks, volunteers and mayors have accumulated public legitimacy outside the pre-war party hierarchy. A first-round field could therefore fragment heavily, with the eventual president decided by a runoff built around the question of continuity versus renewal rather than the old east-west or pro-Russian/pro-European divide.

Zelenskiy could still win. His trust remains materially stronger than a conventional late-term incumbent would normally expect after seven years in office and more than four years of full-scale war. A ceasefire that is perceived as favourable, a successful military campaign, or a credible anti-corruption reset could strengthen him sharply. Conversely, a prolonged governance crisis could consolidate voters behind Zaluzhnyi or Fedorov. Fedorov's current advantage is momentum; Zaluzhnyi's is breadth of trust; Budanov's is a hybrid of security stature and proximity to state power. None has yet demonstrated a full national political programme.

The parliamentary outcome is even less predictable. Servant of the People's 2019 majority is unlikely to be reproduced in its original form because the social coalition that created it has fractured and several plausible leaders could create new electoral vehicles. Current polling that asks respondents about hypothetical 'parties' of Zaluzhnyi, Fedorov, Zelenskiy or Budanov should be treated cautiously because those organisations do not yet necessarily exist as mature parties. The more defensible assessment is that the next Rada is likely to be coalition-based, more fragmented than 2019 and more heavily populated by veterans, security figures, technocrats and local leaders.

PROS AND CONS

The Strategic Case For and Against an Election

Advantages

- Renewed mandate for war and peace: the next president would have explicit authority to negotiate, reject or implement any ceasefire or settlement and to make decisions on mobilisation, reconstruction and long-term security guarantees.
- Institutionalises elite competition: conflict between the presidency, ministers, commanders and reform networks would move from protests and personnel battles into a constitutional process with a defined outcome.
- Strengthens anti-corruption accountability: incumbents and challengers would have to defend records and reform programmes before voters rather than relying solely on internal appointment and prosecutorial mechanisms.
- Demonstrates national resilience: a secure election held before a final peace treaty would show that Russian aggression cannot permanently suspend Ukrainian political succession.
- Reinforces European integration: competitive elections, media pluralism and institutional transfer would strengthen the political case that Ukraine can sustain democratic standards under severe security pressure.
- Allows leadership renewal without strategic rupture: a change of president need not change the pro-European orientation, military effort or Western security partnerships if those commitments are institutionalised before the vote.

Risks

- Russian attack risk: polling stations, campaigns and counting infrastructure could be targeted physically, creating casualties and questions about whether participation was coerced by security conditions.
- Unequal participation: refugees, soldiers, IDPs and citizens from occupied territories will not have identical access; badly designed procedures could systematically under-represent the groups most affected by the war.
- Foreign interference: Russia would have a strong incentive to amplify divisions, falsify documents and video, finance proxies, attack election systems and dispute the result regardless of who wins.
- Campaign distraction: a bitter contest could consume senior leadership time, damage military cohesion or produce policy bidding on mobilisation and battlefield strategy.
- Incumbency advantage: the presidency controls more visibility and national communication during wartime; emergency restrictions could make an election formally competitive but substantively unbalanced.
- Transition risk: a new president would need to inherit relationships with commanders, allies, intelligence agencies and negotiators without interrupting the war effort or external support.

These risks are substantial but they are not all arguments for indefinite delay. Most are design problems whose cost can be reduced by preparation. The one risk that cannot be engineered away is sustained nationwide Russian attack. That is why the security trigger is central. If strategic strikes continue at current intensity and there is no credible ceasefire, the election should not proceed merely to satisfy a date. But if a ceasefire and security guarantees create a usable national window, delaying until a final treaty would increasingly look like a political choice rather than an operational necessity.

SCENARIO OUTLOOK

Three Paths from August 2026

Scenario	Assessment	Political-security effect
A. Wait for final peace	Legally simple and currently preferred by a majority in KIIS polling, but the timetable is controlled indirectly by the duration of the war and therefore potentially by Russia.	Lowest short-term election risk; highest risk of open-ended emergency politics, institutional fatigue and recurring legitimacy arguments.
B. Ceasefire-triggered election before final peace	Preferred in this paper. Prepare now; vote after verifiable ceasefire, security guarantees and lawful termination/lifting of martial law, without requiring settlement of every territorial issue.	Balances security with renewal; preserves the option to remain at war politically and strategically while restoring democratic succession.
C. Immediate vote during active bombardment	Would satisfy the strongest reading of Fedorov's call but conflicts with current law, existing cross-party consensus and majority public opinion.	Highest risk of casualties, unequal voting, Russian disruption and a result that opponents can challenge as unrepresentative.

Scenario B is the strongest because it removes the false binary between 'elections now' and 'elections only after peace'. Ukraine does not need to reward Russia with a veto over democratic succession, but it also does not need to pretend that a fair national election can be conducted under any level of kinetic pressure. A ceasefire-linked model places the trigger in security conditions that Ukraine and its partners can help create, while preserving the principle that final territorial and political settlement may take much longer.

CONCLUSION

Conclusion

Ukraine's elections are overdue in the political and institutional sense. That does not invalidate the wartime continuity of President Zelenskiy or the Verkhovna Rada; both remain grounded in Ukraine's constitutional emergency framework. It does mean that a temporary mechanism created to protect the state should no longer be treated as an adequate long-term substitute for electoral succession.

Zelenskiy deserves substantial credit for leading Ukraine through the most dangerous period in its modern history, preserving the state and assembling a level of international support that few Ukrainian leaders could have imagined before 2022. That achievement should be part of the historical record regardless of the next election result. But the defence of a democratic state ultimately requires the institutions of that state to become larger than the leader who defended them.

The removal of Syrskyi in July showed that wartime leadership can change while the strategic mission continues. Civilian leadership should now be placed on a similarly renewable footing through law rather than executive appointment. Ukraine should therefore begin the final election-preparation process immediately and commit publicly to holding a presidential election once a credible ceasefire, security guarantees and a lawful end to martial-law election restrictions create minimum viable conditions. Parliament and local government should then follow. Waiting for a final peace treaty is no longer necessary as a matter of democratic principle and could give Russia an indirect veto over Ukrainian political succession. The election should not be rushed. It should no longer be indefinite.

BOTTOM LINE

Ukraine needs an election, and the democratic renewal is overdue. The defensible objective is not an unsafe vote under active nationwide attack; it is a prepared, secure and constitutionally valid election triggered by a ceasefire and guarantees, held before the final peace settlement if the war remains unresolved.

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- [15] Verkhovna Rada official "Deputy factions and groups" page, 19 August 2026. Faction/group counts are reproduced directly. The separate official members page showed 390 current deputies the same day; the paper flags this live-data discrepancy.
- [16] Reuters, 12 May 2026, on the Midas investigation, charges against former chief of staff Andriy Yermak and public corruption attitudes; Reuters reporting on the wider 2025-26 energy-sector corruption investigation.
- [17] Reuters, 10 December 2025 and 19 January 2026, on the CEC's assessment of wartime/post-war election logistics, voter-register challenges, overseas voters, military voters, damaged polling stations and security requirements.
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- Research cutoff: 19 August 2026. Current-office, parliamentary and polling data were checked against the latest available official or contemporaneous sources. Where same-day official data conflicted, the discrepancy is disclosed rather than resolved by inference.*