



Parliamentary Conference **Elections in times of crisis**
Conférence parlementaire **Les élections en temps de crise**
Parlamentarische Konferenz **Wahlen in Krisenzeiten**
Bern/Berne 9-10.05.2023



SESSION 3: How to be fair in warfare? – the impact of armed conflict on elections

Elections held amid ongoing armed conflicts are rare as it is nearly impossible to meet international democratic standards in such circumstances. Authorities generally prefer or are legally bound to postpone elections. Even in post-conflict situations, many challenges remain.

Similar to natural disasters, armed conflicts generate population displacement, both within and outside the country. Large-scale displacement of people, voter intimidation and limited access to voting are major issues. Mitigation measures need to address lacking documentation, restrictive residency requirements, limited physical access to voting and voter education. These measures can curtail civic and political rights, which is incompatible with democratic elections.

Security considerations and measures to protect the rights to life, health and security thus need careful balancing against the right to political participation and the integrity of electoral process.

What concrete measures are needed to uphold the integrity of elections while facing major security threats? And once the cannons fall silent, how can we instate a functional electoral system that truly represents the will of the people? These two matters will be in focus during the two panels of this session.

PANEL 1: Upholding the integrity of elections in times of major security crisis

Panel 1 will look from a broader angle at the question of maintaining democratic values in times of major security crisis. Can a state still ensure free, fair, and transparent elections in the face of armed conflicts, terrorist acts or political instability? What does international law require, and how can we safeguard voting arrangements in areas of major security crises? It will also consider the minimum conditions that need to be upheld at any time of elections at all levels to enjoy public trust even in situations of general instability; explore how neighbouring countries can be impacted by war and conflicts and what measures are necessary to ensure a smooth electoral process.

The electoral system is not only threatened by physical warfare but also by hybrid wars in the digital age. Changes made due to COVID-19, such as online voting and new technology, have increased cyber threats against democratic processes. Cyber threat actors target voters as an easy way to interfere with elections. In parallel, falsehoods on social media and domestic information systems provide ample opportunities for foreign actors to disseminate disinformation and propaganda. This panel will discuss the impact of propaganda and subversion on democracy and what steps to take to secure elections in a digitally dominant world.



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PANEL 2: Suffrage after the canons fall silent – preparing Ukraine for its post-war elections

Panel 2 will focus on Ukraine where post-war elections loom on the horizon. Elections in Ukraine have been conditioned by armed aggression since 2014. The full-scale war since February 2022 has led to a plethora of new challenges that threaten the functioning of democratic institutions in Ukraine.

The legal regime of martial law provides for the prohibition of national and local elections and referenda in Ukraine. However, once lifted, the issue of organising and holding elections will become critical. Preparations need to start today for rebuilding the country's capacity to hold elections, developing criteria to assess conditions for post-war elections, adopting a complex legislative framework and practical preparatory measures.

What are the key considerations for holding the first post-martial-law national and local elections? What would be the right time frame and minimum conditions to consider between ceasefire and elections, necessitating prior disarmament and demilitarisation, neutralisation of political environment, ensuring physical safety for all election procedures and candidates' activities, and involvement of independent international organisations?

Given the magnitude of demographic changes caused by massive displacement and exodus of the population, significant number of lost lives and the lack of reliable, the lack of accurate and up-to-date information on population moves, how to ensure that the millions of displaced persons can exercise their right to vote, scattered as they are across the globe? And what measures can be taken to counteract fraudulent registration and ensure a viable electoral procedure in the wake of destroyed infrastructure?

Restoring proper conditions for the political parties to operate and establishing equal opportunities of access to information resources will require considerable time. Furthermore, limitations of active and passive suffrage of the persons having committed crimes against foundations of national security of Ukraine would require complementary legislation and strict respect of fairness and transparency.

This panel will also explore the role of social media in electoral campaigns and the need to develop and promptly implement effective tools of information security countering cyberattacks, propaganda and various form of voter manipulation. National authorities will also have to plan for the material and technical support they will need, given that much of the existing equipment has been destroyed or lost. Thus, what means are at the disposal of national authorities, which seek to tackle those challenges?

Distinguished national and international experts, Ukrainian and European politicians and the audience will together map the key issues that could help national authorities prepare for future challenges of organising genuinely fair and democratic elections. The future of democracy in Ukraine hangs in the balance – will we rise to the occasion?