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Preventing Violence during Ukraine's 2019 Elections

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Far-right militants gather in front of the presidential administration headquarters in Ukraine in November 2018. (Photo by Gleb Garanich/Reuters)

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Summary

- Ukraine has entered a busy election season, with a presidential election slated for March 31, 2019, and parliamentary elections to follow on October 27. Many Ukrainians expect turbulent and “dirty” elections.
- Though the risk of intense, widespread election violence is low, voter and candidate intimidation is likely. Both the presidential and parliamentary elections will likely see interference from Moscow and postelection protests.
- Organizing elections amid an ongoing violent conflict creates unique security challenges as it provides new targets for armed groups aimed at undermining political stability.
- The extensive presence of right-wing extremist groups also poses the threat of physical violence, while collusion among politicians, law enforcement personnel, and criminal networks at a local or regional level may lead to harassment and violent competition.
- The Ukrainian National Police and the Central Election Commission are best positioned to prevent election-related violence and to protect political candidates, civic activists, and voters. Authorities will need additional training on election violence analysis and prevention in order to strengthen their local preparedness and ensure electoral justice.
- Diplomats should coordinate their messaging to encourage a high threshold for election integrity, ensure accountability for corruption and violence, and counter Russian interference.

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**ELECTORAL
VIOLENCE**

ABOUT THE REPORT

Based on an election violence risk assessment conducted between September and December 2018, this report identifies the key conflict dynamics at play in the run-up to Ukraine's March 2019 presidential election and its October 2019 parliamentary elections. The work was supported by the Center for Applied Conflict Transformation at the US Institute of Peace.

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The views expressed in this report are those of the authors alone. They do not necessarily reflect the views of the United States Institute of Peace. An online edition of this and related reports can be found on our website (www.usip.org), together with additional information on the subject.

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A woman votes during leadership elections in rebel-controlled Donetsk. (Photo by Alexander Ermochenko/Reuters)

Introduction

Ukraine has become the epicenter of great power conflict between two parties with a clear interest in the election outcome: Russia and the transatlantic alliance. The 2014 Revolution of Dignity, or Euromaidan, which led to the ousting of President Viktor Yanukovich, triggered protests and sustained opposition in parts of eastern and southern Ukraine. The annexation of Crimea by Russia in March 2014 and ongoing armed conflict with Russia-backed forces in Ukraine's Donbas region amplified an already tense situation.¹

It is in this context of international competition that Ukraine is preparing to hold its presidential election on March 31, 2019, parliamentary elections on October 27, 2019, and local elections on October 25, 2020. Though the risk of severe election violence is minimal, low-intensity forms are likely, particularly in advance of the parliamentary elections. Such election-related violence is expected in the form of voter and candidate suppression, Russian interference, and postelection protests.²

The structural risks are compounded by the lack of a clear front-runner for the presidency. The main contenders include current president Petro Poroshenko; former prime minister and leader of the All-Ukrainian Fatherland Party Yulia Tymoshenko; and the actor-comedian Volodymyr Zelensky. The October elections for the Verkhovna Rada (parliament) pose slightly different problems, since localized competition for power is fierce and more difficult to control. Criminal influences are strong in certain oblasts, and parties that do not win the presidency may resort to violent measures to increase their numbers in parliament as compensation.

From September to December 2018, the US Institute of Peace conducted an election violence risk assessment in Ukraine to determine key conflict dynamics ahead of the country's 2019 presidential and parliamentary elections. The data cover national trends, with a deeper focus on oblast-specific dynamics in Donetsk, Kharkiv, Odesa, and Zakarpattya. Focus group discussions were organized in Kramatorsk (Donetsk), Odesa, and Uzhgorod (Zakarpattya) and were supplemented with seventy-one semi-structured interviews with election and security officials, observers, candidates, and members of civil society across the selected oblasts. This assessment report identifies conflict drivers and scenarios for election-related violence and suggests concrete steps for diplomatic engagement, the provision of technical assistance, and targeted efforts to prevent election violence.

Risks of Election Violence

Election violence is a form of political violence deliberately used to change the election process or outcome. It can happen at any time during the election cycle—before, during, and after election day—and could take many forms, including the destruction of voting materials, cyberattacks, intimidation of candidates and voters, targeted assassinations, and physical attacks by extremists. Election violence is common around the world because it works: it effectively deters voters and candidates, undermines the integrity of the vote, and helps shape the election results. However, carefully selected and timely prevention efforts, assistance, and diplomacy can help reduce the risk of violence.³

In Ukraine, most of the security risks that could drive or trigger violence are internal. The extensive presence of right-wing extremist groups poses the threat of physical violence, while collusion among politicians, law enforcement personnel, and criminal networks at a local or regional level may lead to harassment and violent competition. Many Ukrainians expect turbulent and “dirty” elections.⁴ (In the Ukrainian context, “dirty elections” refers to the perceived use of unfair or illegal tactics by political actors.) Despite voter intimidation and attacks on election infrastructure, observers, and the media in recent elections in Ukraine, only a few NGOs and electoral assistance providers have prioritized the prevention of election-related violence in terms of reporting, dedicated resources, and activities. The risk of intense, widespread election violence is fortunately quite low but merits more attention.

The most important risks in Ukraine either are specific to the upcoming 2019 elections or highlight the vulnerable context in which they are organized. In addition, several conflict dynamics are particularly prominent in certain oblasts.

SPILOVER FROM THE DONBAS WAR

The armed conflict with Russia-backed forces in Ukraine's Donbas region that broke out in 2014 had entered a low-intensity stalemate in recent years with occasional flare-ups. The Russian seizure of Ukrainian vessels in the Sea of Azov in November 2018, and the resultant declaration of temporary martial law by Ukrainian President Poroshenko, marked a notable escalation of hostilities. Russia maintains a large military presence along its border with Ukraine and inside eastern

The presence of heavy weaponry and illicit unregistered small arms increases the severity of possible violence. The ongoing war also effectively prevents around five million Ukrainian voters in Crimea, Luhansk, and Donetsk from voting.

Ukraine through proxy forces. In response to recent hostilities, the United States and European partners have further supported Ukraine's defensive capacity through military assistance and cyber-defense capabilities.⁵

Organizing elections amid an ongoing violent conflict creates unique security challenges as it provides new targets for armed

groups aimed at undermining political stability. Additionally, the conflict limits access for civil society and election observers. The presence of heavy weaponry and illicit unregistered small arms—especially in the oblasts bordering the conflict area, Donetsk, Luhansk, and Kharkiv—increases the severity of possible violence.⁶ The ongoing war also effectively prevents around five million Ukrainian voters in the annexed Crimea region and the non-government-controlled areas (NGCAs) of Luhansk and Donetsk from voting.⁷ While people in Crimea and the NGCAs are able to register and vote in government-controlled territory, the related security risks, as well as the financial and administrative burdens, are expected to significantly suppress voter turnout. In addition, an estimated 1.6 million internally displaced persons face tough hurdles to participation in the electoral processes, owing to complex registration and voting procedures.⁸

The declaration of martial law by President Poroshenko on November 26, 2018, in response to Russian aggression in the Sea of Azov, led to concerns that voter rights and civil liberties would be curtailed, but so far these fears appear unrealized. In the context of the upcoming elections, the most important implications of martial law could be restrictions on protests, marches, and gatherings, and the ban on political activities deemed detrimental to state security. However, the official campaign season started early in 2019 and was not affected by the thirty-day martial law period, which ended in late December. The most direct impact was the cancellation of forty-seven local elections in communities where martial law was imposed, out of 151 elections that were originally scheduled for December 23.

A concerning development is the increased tolerance for violence in Ukrainian society as a legitimate method of conflict resolution. Though overall acceptance of violent tactics remains low, it is on the rise, as manifested especially in the willingness to participate in violent street protests.⁹ Both the Orange Revolution in the winter of 2004–5 and Ukraine's Revolution of Dignity in the winter of 2013–14 resulted in some political change, enhancing the appeal of protest as an effective tool for change. However, there is little public discussion of the cost of violent protest or the use of nonviolent alternatives to address societal grievances. Violent historical figures and those killed during the Euromaidan protests are often glorified, while nonviolent conflict resolution methods are perceived as tools of the weak. At the same time, several countervailing trends can be identified. For instance, the conflict in the Donbas region has created war fatigue and a broad desire for peace.

POLITICAL-CRIMINAL NEXUS

Election violence presents an effective and low-risk tool for organized criminal groups aimed at securing cooperation from and complicity with political and security authorities. Connections between local officials and criminal organizations present a serious risk of localized intimidat-

tion and physical attacks. Much of the violence is expected to occur out of the spotlight, with competing criminal networks acting as conflict entrepreneurs, threatening political challengers to guarantee their access to power and resources. Victims and locations are strategically selected to ensure that criminal activity and the influence over local authorities can be sustained, creating relationships of mutual dependence and protection. Competition over access to power and property between different groups usually escalates in the run-up to elections.

The western oblasts of Rivne and Zhytomyr, where illegal amber mining is prevalent, were often mentioned as examples of regions where criminal groups maintain a strong grip on authorities. Political-criminal networks and patronage systems are also well established in Zakarpattia and across the eastern and southern parts of Ukraine.

In addition, political candidates across the spectrum are known to use intimidation as a tactic, either through their own covert armed groups or by hiring thugs (*titushki*). In large cities such as Kharkiv, Odesa, and Kyiv, municipal guards occasionally operate as private security providers for local officials, and at times compete or collude with police officials.¹⁰ Individuals interviewed in Odesa, Donetsk, and Zakarpattia oblasts referred to the internal struggle between political candidates and parties—when business and criminal interests coincide—as the primary driver of violence. As one civil society representative said, “The municipal guard decides whether or not the police can enter the premise of the city council. This private army may give them permission or decline it.”¹¹

MILITARIZATION OF FAR-RIGHT GROUPS

Since the 2013–14 Revolution of Dignity, veterans and far-right extremist organizations have become more visible perpetrators of violence.¹² Far-right groups present a physical threat to voters and candidates, ethnic or religious minorities, and left-wing, LGBTQ, and human rights activists.¹³ Groups like the OUN Volunteer Movement, the Brotherhood, C14, or Karpatska Sich (Carpathian Sich) operate independently but can be recruited to intimidate or provoke violence for political purposes. In response to the proliferation of Russian-backed proxy forces, several military formations were established by nationalists at the start of the war in the Donbas. The far-right Azov Battalion was integrated into the National Guard of Ukraine after the battalion recaptured Mariupol from Russia-backed separatist forces in June 2014.

Several far-right groups maintain ties with law enforcement and government officials, leading to an unacceptable leniency toward some of the violence they perpetrate and a severe lack of accountability. Even when such groups boast of their assaults and claim responsibility on social media, the response from the government and law enforcement is often muted or nonexistent.¹⁴ Wide swaths of Ukrainian society either tolerate or ignore the violence and hate speech perpetrated by veterans and far-right extremists. As one focus group participant in Uzhgorod said, “Groups like Karpatska Sich are good boys, very patriotic, but sometimes they go a bit too far.”¹⁵ In elections, however, far-right parties such as Svoboda, the National Corpus, or the Right Sector perform quite poorly.¹⁶

The threats posed by domestic violent actors are particularly concerning in the run-up to the parliamentary elections, which feature more localized competition.

Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko arrives at St. George's Cathedral, the seat of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, in Istanbul in January 2019. (Photo by Murad Sezer/Reuters)

LIMITED SPACE FOR CIVIL SOCIETY AND LOCAL OPPOSITION

Despite incremental progress, Ukraine remains an unconsolidated (partly free) democracy with limited space for civil society or local opposition and mutual distrust between political officials and civic activists.¹⁷ Recent months have seen a record number of physical attacks on civil society activists, on the one

hand, followed by criticism of the subsequent investigation and inadequate prosecution of those responsible on the other.¹⁸ The death of Katerina Handziuk in November 2018 after an acid attack is the most publicized of the more than fifty incidents in which activists and human rights defenders were attacked in 2018. The head of Kherson's regional council was charged with organizing the murder. Civic activists are important election stakeholders because of their role in ensuring transparency and holding officials accountable. Activists also hesitate to run for elected office themselves because of the risk of smear campaigns. Presumptive candidates, particularly those facing a strong incumbent, often delay the announcement of their candidacy out of concern for negative campaigning.¹⁹

RELIGIOUS POLARIZATION

Ukraine has not recently experienced violence connected to religious cleavages. However, the creation of a unified Orthodox Church of Ukraine, independent from Moscow, has deepened religious divisions that could escalate into violence.²⁰ This momentous split within the Eastern Orthodox Church has evolved into a significant conflict dynamic, deepening geopolitical tensions by reducing Russia's influence in Ukraine.

In October 2018, the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople, who leads the Eastern Orthodox churches, backed the establishment of an independent Orthodox Church of Ukraine. For centuries, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church had operated under the authority of the Russian Orthodox Church, which maintains a large following throughout Ukraine. President Poroshenko celebrated the decision by Constantinople as a signature achievement, allowing Ukraine to ensure spiritual independence from Russia. The Russian Orthodox Church still considers itself the sole canonic body of Orthodox Christians in the country.

Church leaders have traditionally steered away from politics and refrained from divisive messag-



Because of the general distrust of state institutions, the performance of the newly constituted Central Election Commission will be key to ensuring credible and peaceful elections whose results are widely accepted the public.

ing. But their control over powerful institutions makes them vulnerable to political influence. Any form of diversity—whether ethnic, religious, cultural, or economic—can be exploited by politicians, who invoke a threat narrative to unify their constituencies. President Poroshenko, Russian President Vladimir Putin, and Rus-

sia-backed political forces have instrumentalized the autocephaly process as a key political strategy to swing the electorate, deepen the split between parishioners, and gin up fears over security. Parish churches in Ukraine are increasingly being used by political actors as propaganda platforms to shape voter preferences during campaigning. The divisive nature of the precampaign period could escalate hate speech while radicalizing the electorate along religious lines. In its long-term observation report, the Committee of Voters of Ukraine, a nongovernmental organization, encouraged candidates “not to promote war, violence, or inflame ethnic, racial or religious hatred.”²¹

STRONG BUT VULNERABLE INSTITUTIONS

Ukraine’s Central Election Commission (CEC), law enforcement agencies, and local election authorities all have critical roles to play in ensuring peaceful elections. Ukraine’s electoral institutions have the necessary capacity and professionalism to organize peaceful and credible elections. However, a promising police reform, the installation of new election commissioners, and stalled electoral reform efforts have done little to address the crisis of confidence in Ukrainian authorities.²²

On September 20, 2018, the Verkhovna Rada replaced thirteen CEC members who had been serving on expired terms, an important step that added some credibility to the CEC. However, the inexperienced commission has little time left to adequately prepare and gain the trust of voters. The quality of the CEC’s interaction with the electorate and civil society, along with the transparency and perceived impartiality of its decision making, will shape the CEC’s ability to effectively deal with any procedural irregularities or delays that may occur, as these could fuel the perception that the contest was fraudulent or mismanaged. Because of the general distrust of state institutions, the performance of the newly constituted CEC will be key to ensuring credible and peaceful elections whose results are widely accepted by the public. A civil society representative interviewed in October expressed hope that the CEC could be consequential: “In the future, popular trust in the CEC can be converted into a violence-mitigating resource.”²³

The election authorities operate in a highly decentralized fashion, with several coordination mechanisms but little CEC oversight over lower-level commission structures. The central headquarters on election security, which was created by the Ministry of Internal Affairs, produced a national plan at the start of the campaign season for maintaining law and order and public safety during the election period. The minister of internal affairs coordinates representatives from the ministry, the CEC, other government agencies, the Secret Service of Ukraine (SBU), and the National Guard. Coordinating bodies at the oblast level, with representatives of the regional electoral commissions, the national police, the regional administration, and the National Guard, produce joint security plans and maintain operational authority during the election process. Several respondents expressed concern about the important role played by the regional administrations in drawing up election

security plans, fearing that their influence could be misused to harass opposition candidates and even shape the election outcome. Other institutional vulnerabilities that may drive voter distrust and apathy relate to the need for electoral justice, reform, and adequate police presence.

Electoral Justice Challenges

Citizens may file complaints with the election commission at any level, as well as with the courts directly, in a process regulated by the electoral law. The relevant election authority immediately transfers electoral complaints or reports violations to the appropriate law enforcement agency for follow-up investigation or handles them itself, as appropriate. The results of the investigation and any measures undertaken by law enforcement must be communicated within three days of the conclusion of the investigation. However, courts may become overwhelmed with complaints and unable to process them in a timely fashion. Police may also take too long to investigate complaints. Despite existing plans or commitments, the relevant institutions remain unable to ensure electoral justice and adequately combat offenses related to vote buying and the abuse of state resources. Gross mismanagement, real or perceived, and delays in processing and investigating election-related complaints are possible triggers of violent protest.

Stalled Electoral Reform Efforts

The pending electoral reform commitments that date back to the early 2000s, and passed on their first reading in the Rada in November 2017, include a shift from a mixed system with nationwide party lists to a proportional system of open regional party lists for the parliamentary elections. The single-member districts used in the current system are considered vulnerable to vote buying and corruption. Under the new system, voter turnout would determine seat allocation, which would create new incentives for parties to suppress participation in areas where they expect to perform poorly and try to boost turnout in their strongholds. The reform effort must be carefully timed and comprehensive support provided for implementation. Particularly in an election year, one-sided reforms should be discouraged.

The ensuing anxiety of perceived new winners and losers late in the election cycle could trigger conflict between competing parties and their supporters. In the absence of the necessary political appetite to push forward a comprehensive or “omnibus” electoral reform package, no major changes are anticipated ahead of the October parliamentary elections. An incremental approach could offer a more realistic alternative to address the most urgent reforms—by creating a new framework for local elections, greater inclusion of internally displaced people, and a stronger enforcement mechanism to counter electoral offenses.

Election Security and Training of Law Enforcement Personnel

The National Police force ensures general election security within the reformed agencies and is responsible for patrolling polling stations and for the transport and safety of voting materials. For the March presidential election, fifty-eight thousand police officers will deploy near polling stations and other sensitive infrastructure. On election day, and during the vote counting, police must remain outside polling stations unless election officials summon them inside to restore law and order. Registered presidential candidates receive state protection, but adequate measures to protect local

and parliamentary candidates are not in place, which may deter would-be candidates from running. The National Police exchanges information with the SBU. Both organizations monitor social networks in advance of political demonstrations and meet with potential spoilers to prevent violence.

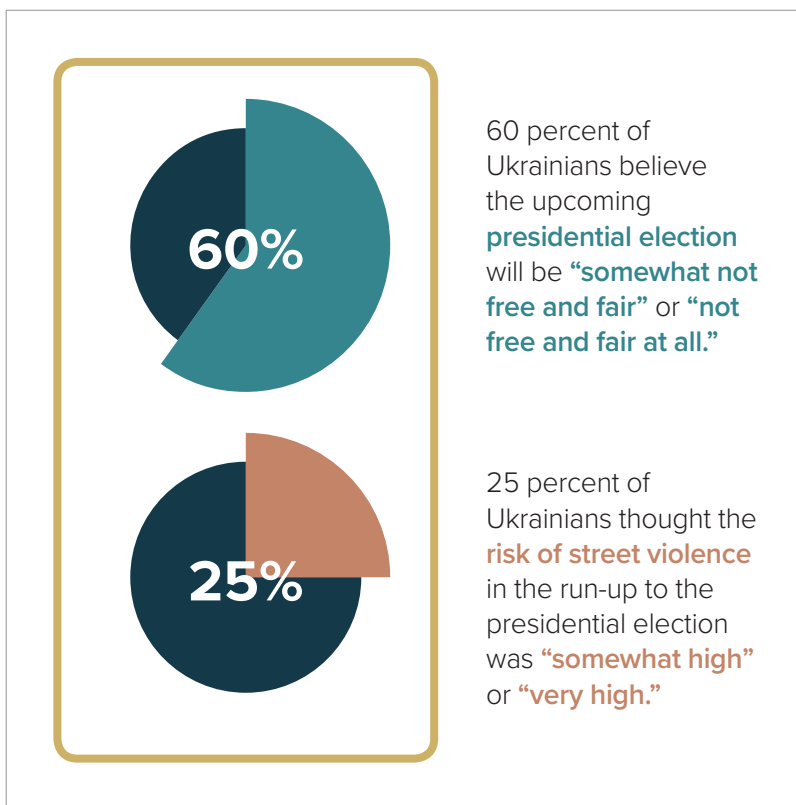
The National Guard covers security during announced demonstrations and serves as a backup for patrols near polling stations. Despite the added capacity, law enforcement agencies suffer from a chronic personnel shortage. An inadequate police presence during key stages of the election process will undermine the integrity and safety of the vote, especially in Luhansk and Donetsk oblasts.

Police officers seem poorly prepared to deal with election-related incidents. General training has been provided on crowd control, de-escalation, and the use of force, but police officers still lack critical knowledge about election-specific procedures and relevant policing strategy.²⁴ In previous elections, effective collaboration between polling staff and police officers was hampered on election day by limited familiarity with each other's responsibilities. Poor understanding of electoral legislation and security mandates also resulted in the excessive use of force or even in the escalation of violence when police were called to respond to minor electoral violations. Deliberate inaction is even more commonly reported, particularly when powerful political or criminal interests are at stake. Recent police reforms have reduced the risk of election violence, but the lack of police independence and inadequate election-specific security training remain significant concerns.

Voter Dissatisfaction and Distrust

Despite significant institutional and legal improvements, entrenched corruption, collusion, and impunity create a growing sense of injustice and voter apathy.²⁵ According to a poll conducted for the International Republican Institute in late December 2018, 38 percent of Ukrainians believe that the upcoming presidential election will be “somewhat not free and fair,” while another 22 percent believe they will be “not free and fair at all.”²⁶ Particularly in eastern Ukraine and the NGCAs, there is little trust in central government institutions.

Voter frustration is compounded by perceptions of long-term economic decline (though GDP growth has returned to 2.5 percent annually, following its decline after the 2014 revolution) and by the recent hike in gas prices, part of the government's efforts to meet International Monetary Fund requirements for additional



PUBLIC EXPECTATIONS FOR THE ELECTIONS

Source: International Republican Institute

monetary support. Dissatisfaction with the economic situation is widely shared, but few respondents in this study seemed concerned about nationwide violent protests. This evidence correlates with survey data from the International Republican Institute, which found that only 20 percent of Ukrainians thought the risk of street violence in the run-up to the presidential election was “somewhat high,” with just 5 percent indicating the risk was “very high.” In the absence of a unifying political leader in Ukraine, a new Euromaidan seems unlikely unless an unexpected catalytic event occurs.²⁷

AN UNPREDICTABLE AND COMPETITIVE RACE

The outcome of the presidential election remains unpredictable, with no candidate likely to receive a majority and many undecided voters. (If no candidate receives more than 50 percent of the valid votes cast in the March 31 vote, a second round of voting will occur on April 21.) This uncertainty may create fear of defeat or exclusion, raising the appeal of violence as a means to tip the balance. The presidential campaign will focus more on the personalities of candidates than on ideologies and government policy. In this context, presidential elections in Ukraine assume a winner-takes-all character, with a high cost of losing in the eyes of the front-runners. The parliamentary elections face a higher risk of localized violence owing to intense competition for seats in the Verkhovna Rada, reduced coverage by monitors and media, and efforts by parties to compensate for possible losses in the presidential vote. The lower scrutiny of parliamentary elections also lowers the cost of using violent actors and far-right groups to intimidate voters or eliminate competitors.

The outcome of the March presidential election will to some extent determine the risk of violence during the October parliamentary elections, as losing parties and candidates will be motivated to compensate for their losses. Several respondents predicted that informal negotiations involving prospective candidates in the parliamentary elections, local authorities, and criminal groups could lead to a redistribution of spheres of influence in the oblasts once the results of the presidential election are announced. Failure to reach new agreements would increase the risk of violence during the parliamentary elections.

Oblast Risk Dynamics

While most dynamics listed above shape the level of risk across the country, several oblasts face specific challenges that tailored prevention efforts may help mitigate.

Kyiv presents a likely target of election violence by nonstate actors because of its voter density, the concentration of government offices and critical infrastructure, and the symbolic and historical significance of places like Maidan Nezalezhnosti (Independence Square) as the preferred location for protest movements. Factors lowering the risk of violence perpetrated by police or intimidation by authorities include the strong presence in the capital of civil society, international organizations, and media.

Donetsk and other oblasts in eastern and southern Ukraine are particularly vulnerable to election-related violence because of the ongoing military conflict, the popularity of opposition candidates, and exposure to disinformation propagated by Russia. New military maneuvers by the Kremlin and its proxies in the NGCAs may further complicate the electoral process in government-controlled areas, which could effectively tarnish the legitimacy of the government in Kyiv. The popularity of opposition candidates increases the risk of voter and candidate suppression. The strong presence

Oblast Risk Dynamics

The oblasts selected face distinct risks of violence ahead of the presidential and parliamentary elections.



Adapted from artwork by Rainer Lesniewski/Shutterstock

of the SBU and the military is perceived as both a protective measure and a possible source of intimidation. Voters in Donetsk oblast are particularly anxious about patriotic and nationalist rhetoric and the presence of far-right and paramilitary organizations. These fears intensified following recent attacks on the offices of “pro-Russian” political parties and various forms of voter obstruction. Respondents in Donetsk also raised concern about the disproportionate effect of reduced economic ties with Russia on eastern Ukraine. Rumors about job losses and factory shutdowns are pushed by Russian TV channels and radio stations, which often serve as propaganda platforms.

Kharkiv is vulnerable to voter and candidate suppression as a result of the reduced popularity of President Poroshenko’s party, BPP “Solidarity.” The existence of long-standing patronage networks, combined with the availability of weapons on local black markets, raises significant concern about violent clashes, especially during the parliamentary elections. The iron grip of these patronage networks should not be underestimated. As one local opposition politician told us, “There are districts where the same people have been deputies for years, for decades even. They managed to create their own fiefdoms, appointed their own people as heads of village councils or heads of other local institutions. Besides financial resources, they have their own administrative resources.”²⁸

Odesa is a port city in southern Ukraine, located near Crimea and Transnistria. The region

is characterized by high levels of support for “pro-Russian” candidates on the part of both the civilian population and the political authorities. The city suffers from high levels of corruption and entrenched political-criminal networks. Frequent attacks and smear campaigns conducted against activists have reduced the presence of civil society. The citizens of Odesa distrust law enforcement and the justice sector, which is deemed unwilling to prevent violence or ensure accountability. Authorities are considered responsible for much of the election-related violence.

Zakarpattya is a multi-ethnic region bordering Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, and Romania. The oblast has a history of election-related violence in the form of police intimidation and the destruction of election materials. In the past, local officials and police have done little to hold perpetrators of violence accountable. Respondents also noted the connections between political parties, local authorities, and criminal groups. Zakarpattya is home to the largest Hungarian and Roma communities in Ukraine. The Roma find themselves in a particularly vulnerable position, with little legal protection and regularly facing attacks from far-right extremist groups. The arson attacks in February 2018 against a Hungarian cultural center suggest that interethnic violence remains a possibility. Nevertheless, concerns about the Roma and Hungarian communities as either instigators or victims of widespread election-related violence seem overstated. In the short term, tensions in Zakarpattya are unlikely to escalate beyond isolated incidents. However, social cleavages might be manipulated for political purposes in future elections.

Despite these challenges, the overall risk of intense, widespread election-related violence remains low. Civil society organizations, election authorities, and the police have their limitations but generally exercise a conflict-mitigating influence. Respondents also expected the widespread deployment of international election observers to reduce levels of fraud and violence.

Scenarios for Violence in 2019

Scenarios of election-related violence are multifaceted, drawing on the capabilities of the manifold violent actors. While most of the security risks that could lead to violence are internal, serious external risks—primarily emanating from Russia—are also present.

VOTER AND CANDIDATE SUPPRESSION

Voter and candidate suppression is a common yet underreported form of violence in Ukraine with a notable impact on the election process and outcome. Systematic efforts to instill fear and intimidate parts of the electorate to reduce voter turnout and eliminate political opposition in specific precincts need to be anticipated, particularly in the run-up to the parliamentary elections. Smear campaigns, physical attacks, and even assassination attempts against candidates and local party activists are expected to increase during the campaign season and may extend to election officials at the precinct level as election day approaches.

Across the political spectrum, smear campaigns are used to discredit opponents and damage their reputation. False information and hate speech are distributed through traditional and internet-based media. Thugs are hired to intimidate and attack candidates and voters during the nomination and campaign process.²⁹ Physical attacks on civilian activists have reached record numbers and rarely



Head of the Kherson Regional Council Vladyslav Manher (R), who is a suspect in an investigation of the murder of Ukrainian anti-corruption campaigner Katerina Handzyuk, attends a court hearing in Kyiv in February 2019. (Photo by Valentyn Ogirenko/Reuters)

lead to a proper investigation. Impunity for these acts reduces the perceived cost of more extreme forms of violence. Political assassinations, terrorist attacks, or widespread killings during public rallies are unlikely but cannot be excluded entirely as tactics to eliminate opponents, create instability, and delegitimize the electoral process.

There have also been allegations that law enforcement and state proxies are involved in intimidation tactics. The misuse of state resources and the application of “administrative pressure” to local opposition candidates gives incumbent party candidates an electoral advantage. Potential opposition party candidates are pressured to reconsider their candidacy or change party affiliation. These violent tactics are common where the ruling parties have less electoral power, such as in the eastern and southern oblasts of Ukraine. In Kharkiv and Odesa, workers have also experienced intimidation by their managers.

HYBRID RUSSIAN INTERFERENCE

Hybrid Russian interference in Ukraine’s election processes has been ongoing since 2014. In the run-up to the 2019 elections, the Kremlin is expected to stoke opposition against President Poroshenko’s government and so-called “pro-EU” candidates through cyberattacks, disinformation campaigns, and other forms of hybrid warfare. Opposition parties, covert agents, biased media outlets, the Russian Orthodox Church, and social media bots will be instrumentalized in an effort to spread rumors and conspiracy theories, and to undermine trust in Ukrainian institutions. Low media literacy rates among the electorate will ensure that these techniques remain effective.³⁰

Russia already exploits the split in the Eastern Orthodox Church to instill fear among parishioners who attend the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate (now to be officially renamed the Russian Orthodox Church).³¹ The autocephaly process could also lead to the vandalism or destruction of church property and escalate to intimidation or violence against parishioners if election candidates seek to exploit religious tensions for electoral gain. Although church followers are easily mobilized, it seems unlikely that they will perpetrate large-scale violence.

Russian efforts to shape voter turnout and the election result could escalate to the sabotaging of key industrial or military targets and major cyberattacks that cripple the various levels of election administration. Large attacks could break security systems and compromise the perceived

integrity of the election process. In response to these potential threats, the National Council for Security and Defense, headed by President Poroshenko, has established a special group to stop any attempt by Russia to influence the elections. A special department has also been created within the SBU to counter cyber threats, with technical support from international experts. The Central Election Commission has upgraded its information technology infrastructure to better ensure cybersecurity, but significant vulnerabilities remain.³²

Like Russia, Hungary might try to use its media channels to deepen tensions between the Hungarian and Ukrainian communities in western Ukraine, but it is unlikely that these tensions will escalate to violent conflict.

RUSSIAN MILITARY AGGRESSION

Open military aggression by the Kremlin targeting the election process is unlikely but must be anticipated. Open aggression may include the additional concentration of conventional forces on Ukraine's border, interference with Ukrainian shipping, increased firing across the Line of Contact, or the launch of an entirely new offensive by Russian forces or their proxies. Moscow could justify expanded military operations by claiming a need to protect ethnic or religious minorities. An escalation of military aggression would further complicate the election process. Despite the apparent appeal of election-related chaos, however, overt Russian aggression would also strengthen anti-Russian sentiments in the rest of Ukraine, lower the electoral chances of those open to engagement with Russia, and trigger additional international condemnation and sanctions against Russia.

ELECTION DAY DISRUPTIONS

Past elections in Ukraine have experienced several disruptions on election day aimed at intimidating voters and obstructing polling day procedures. On March 31, there will likely be isolated attempts to block access to polling stations, steal or destroy voting materials, and attack election officials, poll workers, and observers. Candidates' representatives may show up at polling stations disguised as journalists or observers in an attempt to disrupt the election process or intimidate voters and poll workers.³³

In the areas of Donetsk and Luhansk still controlled by the government, voter turnout may be further reduced, or polling may be cancelled altogether, under the pretext of a new state of emergency, the threat of terrorist attacks, or general insecurity. Previous elections in Donetsk were marked by reduced voter turnout, as people were scared off by explosions and the escalation of hostilities near the border, a tactic that could again be used to reduce voter turnout or create chaos.

POSTELECTION PROTESTS

There is a risk that postelection protests could turn violent as supporters of a losing candidate express their anger over real or perceived election fraud. Popular protests would most likely follow any case of gross election mismanagement and vote tampering, or the clear misuse of state resources for electoral gain. Protests against the results of the presidential election are also likely if a candidate who is perceived to be sympathetic to Russia makes it to the runoff. The risk of violence after the results of the presidential vote are announced is particularly high in strongholds of losing candidates with a high voter density.

Recommendations for Mitigating Election Violence in Ukraine

Civil society, law enforcement bodies, government agencies, and international diplomats all have roles to play in preventing and mitigating election-related violence in Ukraine's 2019 elections.

The Central Election Commission and law enforcement agencies are best positioned to prevent election violence in Ukraine by enhancing election integrity, security, and justice. The CEC and security authorities need to put adequate protection measures in place to ensure equal access and safe participation in the political process for all political candidates, activists, poll workers, and observers. Election authorities, law enforcement agencies, and the courts need to prioritize electoral justice through the impartial and thorough investigation and prosecution of electoral offenses and attacks against activists, candidates, voters, and materials. Complementing these efforts, the coordination headquarters, led by the minister of internal affairs, should engage law enforcement agencies and the CEC in a joint hot spot analysis to identify windows of risks and violence prevention measures throughout the election cycle. Joint election security training for police, domestic observers, and poll workers would strengthen the preventive capacity of law enforcement and improve the collaboration with election officials.

Election security planning should also include representatives from civil society, empowering them to hold both central and local government authorities accountable. An expanded, independent program of civic and voter education by civil society and the CEC would help strengthen the electorate's ability to flag integrity challenges and counter disinformation.

Incremental or comprehensive electoral reform is required to ensure the integrity of the election process, improve the inclusiveness of the process, and handle electoral crimes more effectively. Electoral and financial transparency reforms are needed to ensure that election officials, political candidates, and security authorities function independently of criminal or business interests.

Diplomats should coordinate their public and private messaging to encourage a high threshold for integrity, ensure accountability for corruption and violence, and counter Russian interference.

Notes

1. Ukraine has now lost control over approximately 16,350 square miles of territory, an area roughly the size of Denmark, including Crimea and the non-government-controlled areas of Luhansk and Donetsk.
2. The risk assessment is based on an analytical process that reviews several risk indicators using open source data, together with the opinions and perceptions of key informants drawn from semi-structured interviews and focus groups.
3. Jonas Claes, ed., *Electing Peace* (Washington, DC: US Institute of Peace Press, 2016).
4. “Dirty” was the most popular descriptor offered by interview subjects when asked about their expectations for the upcoming elections.
5. North American Treaty Organization, “NATO’s Support to Ukraine: Factsheet,” November 2018, www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/pdf_2018_11/20181106_1811-factsheet-nato-ukraine-support-eng.pdf.
6. Anton Martyniuk, “Measuring Illicit Arms Flows in Ukraine,” Small Arms Survey, April 2017, www.smallarmssurvey.org/fileadmin/docs/T-Briefing-Papers/SAS-BP3-Ukraine.pdf.
7. This represents 20 percent of the voting population, based on data from the last presidential election.
8. A civil society representative interviewed in Donetsk oblast, November 9, 2018, noted that “political forces may politicize the procedure of voting for IDPs.”
9. According to different national surveys, from 4 percent to 15 percent of the population are ready to use weapons in protests. Ukrainian Independent Information Agency, “Results of the Social Survey by the Alexander Yaremenko Ukrainian Institute of Social Research” [in Ukrainian], July 17, 2018, www.unian.ua/society/10191300-ponad-60-gromadyan-vvazhayut-politichnu-situaciyu-v-ukrajini-napruzhenoyu-opituvannya.html; Yuri Romanenko, “How Ukrainians See the Prospect of a Social Explosion and Dictatorship” [in Russian], *Wave*, August 25, 2016, <http://hvylya.net/analytics/politics/yuriy-romanenko-kak-ukraintsyi-vidyat-perspektiviyi-sotsialnogo-vzryiva-i-diktaturyi.html>; “Socio-Political Situation in Ukraine: Presentation of Survey Findings” [in Ukrainian], presentation, Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, SOCIS, and the Razumkov Center, September 13, 2018, www.kiis.com.ua/?lang=ukr&cat=reports&id=783&page=3&t=3.
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11. Civil society representative interviewed in Odesa, October 30, 2018.
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15. Focus group participant, Uzhgorod, n.d.
16. Anton Hrushetskyi, “Social and Political Attitudes of the Population: November-December 2018” [in Ukrainian], Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, December 11, 2018, www.kiis.com.ua/?lang=ukr&cat=reports&id=806&page=1.
17. Freedom House, “Ukraine,” accessed on January 29, 2019, www.freedomhouse.org/country/ukraine.
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