

# RESILIENCE OF UKRAINE ELECTIONS DURING CONFLICT (2014–2020)

Case Study, December 2025

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This case study analyses how Ukraine maintained electoral continuity and integrity between 2014 and 2020 while facing unprecedented challenges caused by Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea and the armed conflict in Donetsk and Luhansk. Confronted with severe security threats, large-scale internal displacement, cyberattacks and targeted disinformation aimed at delegitimizing elections, Ukraine developed a series of adaptive mechanisms to protect election administration, ensure voter participation where possible and preserve the credibility of democratic processes despite crisis conditions.

The study outlines how national authorities, particularly the Central Election Commission (CEC), responded to disruptions by establishing emergency procedures, relocating election infrastructure, introducing flexible administrative solutions, and strengthening institutional cooperation with security institutions, regional administrations and civil society. It highlights how the CEC safeguarded critical operations such as voter registration, polling-station management and results tabulation, while mitigating risks stemming from armed attacks, loss of territorial control and failures of local law enforcement. Key measures included enabling temporary change of voting location, supporting voting for military personnel, establishing contingency mechanisms for commission staffing and developing secure protocols for storing and transmitting sensitive materials.

The case study also examines efforts to build resilience across the electoral cycle by improving cybersecurity, enhancing information-sharing channels, expanding training for election officials and countering disinformation aimed at diminishing trust in electoral institutions. Particular attention is given to the

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role of domestic observer organizations, international partners and technical assistance providers in strengthening preparedness, supporting legal reforms, and monitoring risks to ensure transparency and public confidence.

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**Ukraine's experience provides valuable lessons in crisis management, innovation and resilience.**

Despite significant progress, Ukraine continues to face complex obstacles, including security risks in conflict-affected regions, uneven administrative capacity and the evolving nature of hybrid threats. The scale of internal displacement, damaged infrastructure and continual attacks on information systems further complicate election planning. Nonetheless, Ukraine's experience provides valuable lessons in crisis management, innovation and resilience. Through urgent adaptation, cross-institutional cooperation, and strong public commitment to democratic values, Ukraine has demonstrated how an electoral system can remain functional and credible even under extreme conditions.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

This case study examines Ukraine's approaches to protecting electoral integrity between 2014 and 2020, a period characterized by instability resulting from internal political dissent and Russian invasion. Following Russia's 2014 occupation of Crimea and the onset of armed conflict in the eastern part of the country, elections were organized amid challenging circumstances including the loss of territorial control in certain regions, internal displacement, cyberattacks and disinformation campaigns aimed at undermining public trust. Ukraine's Central Election Commission (CEC) and various stakeholders including state institutions, civil society and international partners, nonetheless cooperated to ensure the security and integrity of elections. These efforts were focused on legal reforms, strengthening of institutions and enhanced collaboration through improved management processes.

In this context, the CEC committed itself to the development of processes for effective responses to crises, based on a range of legal instruments, emergency procedures and protocols, and intersectoral cooperation. This case study emphasizes the importance of strengthening institutional knowledge and building resilience for navigating elections through the disruptions to democratic processes that armed conflict brings.

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## **BACKGROUND AND LEGAL-ELECTORAL FRAMEWORK**

In 2013, growing tensions in Ukraine over widespread corruption and abuse of power, along with the detrimental influence of Russia, led to large-scale public dissent. These tensions reached a critical point in November 2013, when President Viktor Yanukovich abruptly abandoned a long-anticipated association agreement with the European Union in favour of strengthening ties with the Russian Federation. Growing authoritarianism and a sudden shift in

Ukraine's geopolitical orientation triggered mass protests. The demonstrations evolved into the EuroMaidan movement, also known as the Revolution of Dignity. The government's violent crackdown, involving police brutality, serious human rights violations and the adoption of repressive anti-protest legislation, culminated in deadly confrontations. More than 100 protesters were killed and over 500 injured. The use of excessive force by law enforcement against peaceful protesters sparked nationwide resistance and mobilized even broader segments of the society.

The movement reflected a profound transformation in public values, with many Ukrainians expressing aspiration to a democratic, European future grounded in human rights and the rule of law.

On 22 February 2014, President Yanukovich fled the country; the Ukrainian Parliament declared that he was no longer able to fulfil his presidential duties, thereby removing him from office, and a new presidential election was announced for May 2014 with parliamentary elections to follow. The interim government that assumed power faced extraordinary challenges—not only in restoring public trust and political stability, but also in resisting Russian aggression and preserving the state's territorial integrity.

In March 2014, Russia invaded the Autonomous Republic of Crimea of Ukraine, taking control over the territory. An illegal so-called 'referendum' was held on 16 March 2014 in the presence of armed Russian troops, without international observation or adherence to Ukrainian law. The 'referendum' offered only two options: joining Russia or restoring the 1992 Crimean Constitution, effectively excluding the possibility of remaining part of Ukraine.

The 'referendum' in Crimea was widely condemned by the international community<sup>1</sup>, and it effectively prevented the conduct of any credible elections in Crimea and the city of Sevastopol, now claimed by Russia as a federal entity. The annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation represented a profound violation of international norms and significantly reshaped the geopolitical landscape of the region (UN 2014).

Russian forces positioned themselves along the border with Ukraine's eastern regions and between March and April 2014, armed groups took control of administrative buildings in several cities within the Donetsk and Luhansk regions. Soon after, reports of violence and abductions began to surface (UN OHCHR 2016). On 11 May 2014, self-proclaimed authorities in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions of eastern Ukraine also held so-called 'referendums on independence', seeking to legitimize the creation of a Donetsk People's Republic (DPR) and a Luhansk People's Republic (LPR). These 'referendums' again constituted illegal acts in violation of the Constitution of Ukraine. Irregularities were reported by a range of sources, including Ukrainian authorities, independent journalists, international media and non-governmental organizations (BBC 2014; Walker et al. 2014).

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<sup>1</sup> 'The General Assembly today [27 March 2014] affirmed its commitment to Ukraine's sovereignty, political independence, unity and territorial integrity within its internationally recognized borders, underscoring the invalidity of the 16 March referendum held in autonomous Crimea' (UN 2014).

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**Between 2014 and 2020, Ukraine conducted six nationwide elections, marking a period of intense electoral activity amid armed conflict.**

Despite the numerous challenges and obstacles, Ukraine moved forward with holding democratic elections under extraordinary conditions. Between 2014 and 2020, Ukraine conducted six nationwide elections—presidential in 2014 and 2019, parliamentary in 2014 and 2019, and two cycles of local elections in 2015 and 2020—marking a period of intense electoral activity amid armed conflict. During this period, the legal framework for governing all three types of election cycle underwent significant transformation.

#### **Legal-electoral reforms**

The foundation of Ukraine’s electoral system is rooted in the Constitution, which guarantees the principles of universal, equal and direct suffrage by secret ballot and outlines the mandates of the president, the Parliament (Verkhovna Rada) and local governments (Ukraine 1996). While the Constitution provides a general framework, specific elections were historically governed by evolving electoral laws, leading to inconsistencies and legal fragmentation. The Law on the Election of the President of Ukraine, originally adopted in 1999, defined the two-round system, eligibility requirements and campaign regulations. Amendments to it were introduced in 2014 and 2015 aiming to improve transparency and accountability. These included, among other things, clearer rules for campaign finance and the introduction of sanctions for electoral violations, further contributing to clarify these aspects of the legal framework.

Similarly, the Law on the Election of People’s Deputies of Ukraine (2011) governed parliamentary elections and initially relied on a mixed electoral system, with half the parliament elected through party-list proportional representation and the other half through single-member districts. Reforms following the 2014 parliamentary elections sought to enhance transparency and reduce fraud, but despite calls for open party lists, no comprehensive change was made (OSCE/ODIHR 2014b).

Local contests were regulated by the Law on Local Elections, adopted in July 2015 amid significant political pressure and without public consultation (IFES 2015). This introduced three different electoral systems depending on municipality size: a first-past-the-post system for small communities, a two-round majority system for larger mayoral elections, and a proportional representation system for councils in cities and regions. The 2015 legislation also raised the electoral threshold for parties to 5 per cent and introduced a gender quota requiring 30 per cent women candidates on party lists, though without enforcement mechanisms. The law faced criticism for its complexity, the exclusion of internally displaced persons (IDPs) from local elections, and ambiguity around the procedures for second rounds and candidate replacement (OSCE/ODIHR 2016).

Other relevant legislation includes the Law on the Central Election Commission (CEC) from 2004, which outlines the structure and functions of Ukraine’s electoral management body. Meanwhile, the Law on the State Voter Register (2007) governs the maintenance of voter lists and the procedures for temporary change of voting address. Finally, the Law on Political Parties (2001)

and in parallel Ukraine's Criminal Code and Code of Administrative Offences together set out the rules for party financing, campaign activity and sanctions for electoral crimes. The latter were amended in 2015 to include greater financial reporting requirements, but enforcement remained weak. Draft law introduced in 2018 to strengthen sanctions and improve electoral integrity was never adopted.

The accumulation of legal inconsistencies, overlapping procedures and delayed reforms led to repeated calls for harmonization by electoral stakeholders. After multiple attempts, the Election Code of Ukraine was adopted in December 2019 and came into force in January 2020. The code (Ukraine 2020) introduced new electoral systems for parliamentary and local elections; consolidated the laws governing presidential, parliamentary and local elections; fully enfranchised persons living in internal displacement; and set mandatory gender quotas for political party lists in parliamentary and local elections. Notably, it replaced the mixed electoral system for parliamentary elections with a fully proportional open-list system.

The 2007 Law on the State Voter Register and the 2004 Law on the CEC remained as separate laws since they regulated the work of the respective institutions during both elections and referendums. Further additional amendments of the code were made on specific issues.

### Gender equality

Since 2014, Ukraine has made meaningful progress in advancing women's participation in electoral processes, largely through the introduction and gradual strengthening of gender quota legislation and related reforms. These efforts, however, have encountered uneven implementation and persistent structural challenges.

Equal rights of men and women including in public and political life are guaranteed by the Constitution of Ukraine (1996: article 14). Subsequent legislation, such as the Law on Ensuring Equal Rights and Opportunities for Women and Men (2005) and the Law on the Principles of Prevention and Combating Discrimination in Ukraine (2012), has had broad effects. Since 2014, political parties have been required to include statutory quotas ensuring at least 30 per cent representation of each gender in party lists for parliamentary elections. As mentioned, in 2015 a revised version of the Law on Local Elections introduced a similar requirement at the local level, mandating that 'the representation of individuals of the same sex in electoral lists of candidates for local council deputies in multi-member constituencies shall be at least 30 per cent of the total number of candidates'. This marked a major step towards gender parity at the community level.

Nevertheless, these provisions initially lacked enforceability; political parties often ignored the quotas and electoral commissions accepted and registered lists regardless of compliance. The CEC and the courts did not systematically challenge this non-compliance, weakening the intended effect of the legislation (OPORA 2021).

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A significant shift occurred with the enactment of the new Electoral Code in early 2020. The code raised the gender quota to 40 per cent and made it legally binding, requiring electoral commissions to reject non-compliant party lists. It also introduced a placement rule: at least two out of every five candidates on the party list must be of the same gender (Ukraine 2020). Despite inconsistencies in implementation, women's representation improved significantly in the 2020 local elections. Women made up 44.2 per cent of all candidates, up from 35 per cent in 2015. They accounted for 36 per cent of elected local officials overall, a striking increase from just 4.7 per cent in 2015. On regional councils, women held 28.4 per cent of seats, while in localities with fewer than 10,000 voters, they made up 41.7 per cent of councillors. Nonetheless, disparities persisted at the executive level: only 16.8 per cent of mayoral and community head positions were won by women, and just 9.3 per cent of cities had female mayors (IFES 2021a).

Legal reforms and institutional strengthening were complemented by a quest for the adoption of management processes that can ensure that elections are successfully navigated through the array of electoral risks, threats and crises—both process- and context-related.

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## ELECTORAL RISK MANAGEMENT DURING ARMED CONFLICT

In the wake of Russia's aggression and the occupation of parts of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions, the CEC was confronted with unprecedented challenges, especially in partially occupied territories. Against this backdrop of crises and threats, between 2014 and 2020 the CEC's efforts to uphold electoral integrity relied on a combination of legal safeguards, institutional safeguards and inter-agency coordination.

### Legal safeguards

One significant threat to the integrity of the electoral process stemmed from the inability to conduct voting in territories no longer under government control, effectively disenfranchising millions of eligible voters. In this context, risk management became an urgent priority, particularly in the lead-up to the 2014 early presidential and early parliamentary elections. Decisions regarding the security and the feasibility of organizing elections in conflict-affected areas had to be made under extreme time constraints. These circumstances demanded new legal provisions and procedural innovations to the electoral process, while maintaining compliance with national legislation (CEC 2025).

To mitigate the risk of disenfranchisement facing those from occupied territories, numerous legal measures were considered by the Parliament to facilitate access to the polls. The Law on Securing the Rights and Freedoms of Citizens and the Legal Regime on the Temporarily Occupied Territory of Ukraine (Ukraine 2014) established the legal framework for addressing the status and governance of territories temporarily occupied as a result of foreign aggression, that is, in the Autonomous Republic of Crimea and parts of the

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Donetsk and Luhansk regions. The legislation affirms that these territories are integral parts of Ukraine, subject to its Constitution and laws, and outlines measures to protect the rights and freedoms of Ukrainian citizens residing therein. The law stated that voting would not take place on the Crimean Peninsula.

Under article 7.3 of the Law on the State Voter Register, citizens relocated from temporarily occupied territories could make a request for temporary change of voting address, allowing them to vote for the upcoming elections. This change had to be completed no later than five days before election day. However, the procedures for change of voting address remained onerous for voters still living in the temporarily occupied territories, since it required them to apply in person at the Register Maintenance Body (RMB) office in parts of the country not under occupation—that is, to travel to these locations (OSCE/ODIHR 2014b).

For the following early parliamentary elections, to further mitigate the risk of disenfranchisement of IDPs and voters residing in Crimea and other occupied areas, the CEC adopted Resolution No. 1529 on 7 October 2014, simplifying the procedure for temporary change of voting address without requiring justification to be provided. However, the procedure still required voters residing in the occupied territories to take two trips—one to register and another to cast their vote—posing significant financial, logistical and physical risks. Some 32,800 voters from the Donetsk and Luhansk regions, along with 3,600 from Crimea, successfully re-registered to vote for parliamentary elections under this procedure, but participation remained limited due to logistical obstacles (ENEMO 2014b).

According to the 2015 legislation, the right to vote in local elections was tied to the voter's registered place of residence, known as the *'propiska'* system. Since most IDPs had not changed their registration from their original homes in occupied territories (Donetsk, Luhansk or Crimea), they were not included in the voter lists for the local elections in their new places of residence. This effectively disenfranchised a large portion of the IDP population, estimated to be over 1.5 million people in 2015. This matter led to significant criticism from election observers and civil society groups, who advocated for legislative changes to ensure full voting rights for displaced citizens in future elections (OSCE/ODIHR 2016).

With the adoption of the Election Code (Ukraine 2020), IDPs were fully enfranchised including for local elections—with the possibility to register to vote for places where they actually lived. This was made simpler still by introducing an online application for changes of address with electronic signature, an electronic service within the State Voter Register (SVR) system. Prior to this, voters could only change their place of voting for presidential elections and for the proportional component (not for majoritarian constituencies) of parliamentary elections.

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To further facilitate this process, on 24 July 2020 the CEC issued Resolution No. 145 lifting the requirement of additional proof of address (documentation such as a lease agreement or utility bill) when changing electoral address. This change was particularly beneficial in enabling IDPs to register at their actual place of residence, even if they lacked such documents (CEC 2025). During the 2020 local elections, approximately 100,000 voters exercised their right to change their voting address. Of these, 41,000 used the online platform while 59,000 completed the process through other means (CEC 2020).

Between 2014 and 2020, the CEC implemented a series of measures to ensure the electoral participation of military personnel deployed on the front line in eastern Ukraine. Recognizing the operational constraints faced by soldiers stationed in the Anti-Terrorist Operation (ATO) zone, later reclassified as the Joint Forces Operation (JFO) zone, the CEC collaborated primarily with the Ministry of Defence to facilitate secure voting procedures. One of the principal mechanisms employed was the temporary change of voting location, which allowed military personnel to vote outside their place of permanent residence without altering their official registration. This procedure was governed by the Law on the State Register of Voters and enabled thousands of service members to participate in national elections despite being stationed away from their home constituencies (OSCE/ODIHR 2019a).

#### **Institutional safeguards and coordination**

Throughout this period the CEC worked closely with the Security Service of Ukraine (SBU), the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the National Police to ensure the security of election infrastructure and prevent disruptions, including cyberattacks and physical threats. Although there were no specific electoral risk management policy, methodology and framework in place, risk assessments were largely based on security protocols developed in coordination with law enforcement and national defence authorities, rooted in established security practices. These protocols encompassed procedural algorithms for addressing risks during electoral processes (CEC 2025).

For example, temporary polling stations established within military units and field camps for the 2019 presidential elections were coordinated with local election commissions and adapted to prevailing security conditions, ensuring both access and integrity. The Ministry of Defence played a critical role in this, providing logistical coordination, security and voter lists, as well as facilitating communication between military and electoral authorities. Importantly, the organization of military voting was restricted to areas under Ukrainian Government control. Overall, the Ukrainian authorities' approach to military voting and managing its risks was pragmatic, balancing electoral inclusion with legal and operational constraints (OSCE/ODIHR 2019a; ENEMO 2019).

The CEC's Secretariat coordinated preparatory actions with different stakeholders enabling early identification and resolution of potential threats. However, information about risks and measures remained fragmented across departments, and no centralized database or knowledge management tool existed to systematize risk responses.

The first steps towards institutionalized risk management were taken in 2021. A working group on strategic planning was formed within the CEC to explore risk management strategies and tools, including potential integration of International IDEA's electoral risk management software. Although not all processes are fully formalized, the CEC undertook many risk-aware initiatives, particularly during budgeting, procurement planning and operational coordination with other state institutions. These actions signified a growing internal culture of risk identification and mitigation, albeit without a centralized risk registry.

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## ELECTORAL RESILIENCE-BUILDING DURING ARMED CONFLICT

The resilience of Ukraine's electoral system from 2014 onward was tested by a constellation of threats relating to foreign occupation; hybrid warfare, including disinformation campaigns; stresses relating to internal displacement; and the Covid-19 pandemic. The CEC's responses allowed the electoral system to withstand these stresses and shocks while maintaining democratic continuity.

A significant area of risk for the May 2014 presidential election was cybersecurity. During that period, the CEC of Ukraine was exposed to a series of coordinated cyberattacks that aimed to disrupt the electoral process and undermine public confidence in democratic institutions. Three days before the elections, attackers using advanced cyber-espionage malware disabled CEC network nodes critical for sending and receiving data, and deleted information from numerous components of the election system, including the Results Management System.

Further, cyber attackers attempted to manipulate the official results by infiltrating the CEC network and uploading fabricated data. However, due to timely intervention by Ukrainian cybersecurity experts and the SBU, the falsified information never appeared on the official website. The system was made operational through offline backup.

Dissemination of false results through Russian state-controlled media outlets during the same time is indicative of a coordinated effort to amplify the impact of the cyberattack through disinformation. Despite the severity of the intrusion the core infrastructure, including the State Vybory system—the CEC's centralized election information and results-tabulation system—remained intact. Rapid detection and response measures ensured that the election results were not compromised, allowing the vote to proceed as scheduled (IFES 2018).

The attacks of 2014 underscored the urgent need for robust defences against politically motivated cyber threats and prompted significant reforms in Ukraine's approach to cybersecurity, particularly in relation to election infrastructure. The CEC, with support from CERT-UA (Ukraine's Computer Emergency Response Team) and international partners, formed ad hoc working

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groups to bolster cybersecurity protocols and crisis response plans, especially during election periods. By 2019, with support from international partners, new cybersecurity measures including equipment upgrades and staff training were implemented to protect the voter register and results systems from major intrusions during future elections.

### Covid-19 response

**The CEC responded with notable adaptability and procedural innovation, demonstrating a significant degree of institutional resilience.**

In the context of Ukraine's 2020 local elections, the CEC was confronted with the additional and extraordinary challenge of organizing and administering an electoral process during the global Covid-19 pandemic. This constituted a profound stress test for the institutional resilience of the CEC, as it had to balance public health imperatives with the constitutional requirement to hold regular democratic elections. Despite the absence of tailored legal provisions for conducting elections under pandemic conditions, the CEC responded with notable adaptability and procedural innovation, demonstrating a significant degree of institutional resilience.

One of the primary constraints on the CEC was the lack of explicit legal provisions within the Election Code 2020 or other electoral laws relating to public health emergencies. The CEC convened a dedicated working group comprising members of the Parliament, representatives from the National Security and Defence Council, the Ministry of Health, the National Health Service, the Ministry for Communities and Territories Development, the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the State Border Guard Service, as well as representatives of international organizations (CEC 2020).

Based on the outcomes of this group's activities, a set of proposals was submitted to the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine. These outlined general guidelines for the implementation of Covid mitigation measures during the preparation and conduct of local elections, covering procedures at polling stations, healthcare facilities, provisions for individuals in self-isolation and the campaigning period. Additionally, the proposals included a list of recommended measures to be undertaken by both executive authorities and local self-government bodies to ensure safe and effective electoral processes (CEC 2020).

Three days before the 2020 elections, on 22 October, the CEC approved Resolution No. 409 containing its Covid-19 recommendations. The resolution also drew stakeholders' attention to the fact that ongoing preparation and conduct of the elections were to be in accordance with the new election code (Ukraine 2020) among other laws, including the 'Procedure for Implementation of Anti-Epidemic Measures During the Organization and Conduct of Elections approved by the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine', Resolution No. 641 of 22 July 2020 (CEC 2020).

The CEC's Covid mitigation measures included mandates for the use of personal protective equipment (PPE) by election officials, social distancing measures within polling stations, hygiene and sanitation protocols, and specialized procedures for voters under quarantine or exhibiting symptoms

(OSCE/ODIHR 2021: IFES 2021b). Moreover, on 6 November 2020, the Commission adopted a follow-up resolution covering repeat voting<sup>2</sup> based, among others, on an analysis of voting conducted on 25 October (CEC 2020).

The implementation of these health measures required not only procedural adaptation but also institutional flexibility, particularly in the realm of logistics and public communication. The CEC undertook extensive efforts, often in collaboration with external partners, to provide voter education campaigns that informed citizens of the new procedures and encouraged safe participation. Further, the Commission made special voting arrangements for individuals in self-isolation, allowing them to vote from home through mobile polling teams (equipped with PPE and disposable materials) (CEC 2025).

Despite challenges, the 2020 local elections were conducted without major incident and with no confirmed election-related outbreaks of Covid-19. The low voter turnout, which stood at just under 37 per cent, was attributable in part to pandemic-related concerns, but also to structural factors within the local governance system and voters' apathy. From a resilience perspective, however, the ability of the CEC to hold technically sound elections in the midst of a public health crisis reflects its growing institutional capacity to maintain its core democratic functions while under pressure from unprecedented shocks and stresses. Electoral resilience was also reflected and reinforced by the CEC's growing cooperation with civil society and other state actors. Starting in 2014, relationships with domestic non-governmental organizations and international organizations evolved from adversarial to collaborative. Civil society partners contributed to the development of electoral protocols, voter education and training manuals for police officers involved in election security (OPORA 2020). The CEC actively considered recommendations from these stakeholders to refine practices across electoral cycles (CEC 2020).

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## CRISIS MANAGEMENT AND RECOVERY FROM CRISES

Initially, Ukraine's electoral crisis protocols were not fully developed. The CEC responded to such situations by issuing internal regulations and initiating staff-level discussions. Over time, however, the CEC established crisis-specific protocols, such as those for bomb and other security threats, epidemics and transport disruptions (CEC 2025).

During the 2014 early presidential election in Ukraine, the electoral process in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions was gravely disrupted by violent interference from illegal armed groups. A particularly severe aspect of this interference was the widespread kidnapping, intimidation and physical attacks targeting members of election commissions. These incidents represented a direct danger for electoral personnel and infrastructure, creating high uncertainty

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<sup>2</sup> 'On Urgent Measures to Create Appropriate Conditions for the Safe Organization and Conduct of the Repeat Voting in the October 25, 2020 Local Elections and on Certain Issues of the Implementation of Anti-Epidemic Measures during its Organization, Preparation and Conduct'.

and demanding urgent action. The CEC responded with improvised crisis-management decisions and actions that evolved over time into more formalized security protocols.

Reports from Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights and Civil Network OPORA observers at this time confirmed that armed militants abducted members of District Election Commissions (DECs), including the chairpersons of DEC numbers 44 and 48, one of whom was kidnapped twice. Election officials and their families were threatened with death, residences were raided, and election materials were seized or destroyed. For example, Precinct Election Commissions (PEC) members in districts 54 and 55 received threats of harm to family members, and the DEC 44 secretary was threatened with being shot. On 20 May, gunmen stormed the Artemivsk city council building housing DEC 46, confiscating electoral documents and personal belongings. These actions formed part of a broader strategy by separatist forces to obstruct the electoral process, ultimately making voting impossible in 14 of 22 districts in Donetsk and 10 of 12 in Luhansk, disenfranchising over four million citizens (OPORA 2014).

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**In response, the CEC implemented emergency measures to preserve administrative continuity where possible.**

In response, the CEC implemented emergency measures to preserve administrative continuity where possible. It authorized the relocation of DECs from conflict zones to safer areas, for instance, transferring DEC 47 from Slovyansk to Olexandrovka and relocating DECs in Donetsk city to the airport. The Commission also coordinated with the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the SBU to enhance protection of its own premises. Amendments adopted by Parliament enabled 24-hour police protection of election premises and their lawful relocation under extreme threat. Nonetheless, enforcement was often unreliable. Observers reported that police in some locations refused to resist militants. The Ministry later acknowledged that nearly 17,000 law enforcement personnel had defected to separatist forces in Donetsk and Luhansk, revealing a profound crisis in local police integrity and command (OPORA 2014; UN OHCHR 2014).

Despite these obstacles, many commission members persisted. In some cases, they met in secret at undisclosed locations to continue electoral preparations under threat, an act of defiance that exemplified Ukraine's institutional resilience. It is an example of both immediate crisis management and impetus towards developing adaptive frameworks capable of maintaining democratic processes during war.

Genuine efforts were made by the electoral authorities to conduct voting throughout the country, despite continued unrest and violence in the east, which seriously impacted the election environment, negatively affected the human rights situation, obstructed meaningful observation, and had a significant adverse effect on preparations. Forced evictions and closures of District Election Commissions by armed groups, abductions, death threats, forced entry into private homes and the seizure of equipment and election materials were attempts to prevent the

election and to deny citizens their right to vote, the observers said ... Over the two months our mission has been present in Ukraine we have witnessed impressive efforts by the election administration to ensure citizens' rights to vote.

(OSCE/ODIHR 2014a)

The traumatic experience of 2014 prompted reforms in electoral security planning. In subsequent elections, specifically in 2019 and 2020, no similar scale of violence or abductions occurred, due in part to the exclusion of areas outside government control from elections and the professionalization of law enforcement practices related to electoral security. In the face of ongoing hybrid threats, and with support from domestic and international partners, the CEC strengthened contingency planning, improved coordination with security services and enhanced cybersecurity protections. Reactive crisis response strategies were joined up with prevention and resilience-building efforts.

For example, among the critical infrastructure vulnerabilities exposed by the crisis in Crimea and eastern Ukraine were the integrity and accessibility of the SVR. Seizure of voter lists by illegal armed groups in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions had compromised both sensitive voter data and the safety of election staff. In response, the CEC implemented extraordinary measures, including the temporary closure of RMBs in affected areas. Approximately 40 RMBs in Donetsk and Luhansk were disconnected from the SVR in early May 2014 to prevent unauthorized access and further abuse. These actions were prompted by direct attacks on state infrastructure, the confiscation of voter lists from at least two RMBs, and widespread threats and violence against commission members (OSCE/ODIHR 2014a).

Although the closures disrupted local electoral administration and delayed the delivery of preliminary voter lists to around 1,500 PECs, significant achievements were accomplished by election day. Access had been restored to all but 13 RMBs, and in several cases, voter lists were printed and delivered under covert conditions or from relocated offices. This adaptive emergency response was not limited to disconnection from the SVR. Legislative amendments were introduced to grant law enforcement agencies, particularly the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the authority to secure RMB premises and provide 24-hour protection in the 10 days leading up to elections. This legislative innovation directly addressed the security vacuum left by local law enforcement in territories under threat and was essential to safeguarding both election infrastructure and voter data (OPORA 2014).

Learning from 2014 crises informed prevention and resilience-building and actions in subsequent elections. Particularly in 2019 and 2020, the Ukrainian authorities sustained a policy of preventive disconnection of RMBs in non-government-controlled areas. By 2019, 82 RMBs, including those in parts of Donetsk and Luhansk, as well as in Crimea and Sevastopol, were not operational and therefore did not participate in election-related activities. The CEC adapted by ensuring that the SVR was only accessible from

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### **The traumatic experience of 2014 prompted reforms in electoral security planning.**

government-controlled territories and by implementing security upgrades to its IT infrastructure with support from international partners. The decentralized printing and delivery of voter lists became the norm, ensuring that sensitive data remained within secure environments.

The closure of RMBs in Donetsk and Luhansk during electoral events, particularly in 2014, represents an important crisis management institutional response to hybrid threats targeting the voter registration system. By securing the SVR and adjusting electoral procedures to operate under threat, the Ukrainian electoral authorities preserved both data integrity and administrative functionality. These efforts have since evolved into a sustained doctrine of risk-based isolation and operational decentralization, forming a cornerstone of Ukraine's electoral resilience strategy amid ongoing external aggression.

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## CONCLUSION

Ukraine's CEC demonstrated significant adaptability and institutional evolution between 2014 and 2020, navigating elections amid armed conflict, occupation, hybrid threats and a global pandemic. While it did not yet operate a formalized risk management system, the CEC developed practical and adaptive mechanisms to ensure electoral continuity under crisis conditions. Many of the core elements outlined by International IDEA—risk identification, resilience-building, inter-agency coordination and structured crisis response—were effectively implemented in practice.

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**Over time, the CEC's approach shifted from improvised emergency measures in 2014 toward more systematic preparedness.**

Over time, the CEC's approach shifted from improvised emergency measures in 2014 towards more systematic preparedness. This included scenario planning, strengthened cooperation with security agencies, legislative adjustments to enfranchise displaced voters, cybersecurity safeguards and gender quota reforms that expanded political inclusion. The adoption of the 2020 Election Code marked a milestone by consolidating fragmented electoral laws and advancing inclusivity, though gaps in enforcement and institutional capacity persisted.

Importantly, the Commission also embraced a principle of institutional learning. Post-election evaluations and cooperation with civil society and international partners informed improvements in subsequent electoral cycles. Nonetheless, the absence of a centralized risk management framework or digital registry to document crises and responses limited the ability to standardize practices and fully integrate lessons learned across the institution.

From the perspective of the Risk Management Capability Maturity Scale (Vincent, Alihodžić and Gale 2021), the CEC's evolution can be seen as a progression from an *initial* stage in 2014, when responses were largely reactive, towards a more *defined* stage by 2020. Namely, risk management became more consistent, inter-agency coordination more structured and electoral safeguards more systematically applied, even if predictive modelling and full

integration were still lacking. This trajectory illustrates a growing institutional culture of proactive planning rather than mere improvisation.

Looking ahead, the challenge for the CEC will be to move towards an *integrated* stage of risk management, where lessons learned are consistently documented, fed into future planning and fully integrated across all electoral processes. Establishing a centralized digital registry, enhancing transparency in risk-related decision making, and embedding risk management into long-term strategic planning would not only strengthen Ukraine's electoral resilience but also serve as a model for other democracies facing conflict, hybrid threats and systemic disruptions.

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## ABBREVIATIONS

<b>CEC</b>	Central Election Commission
<b>DEC</b>	District Election Commission
<b>IDP</b>	Internally displaced person
<b>PEC</b>	Precinct Election Commission
<b>PPE</b>	Personal protective equipment
<b>RMB</b>	Register Maintenance Body
<b>SBU</b>	Security Service of Ukraine
<b>SVR</b>	State Voter Register

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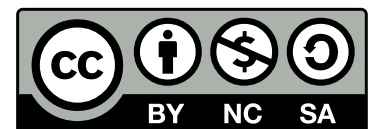
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