



## Lessons learned from the Balkans can help Ukraine

**As often happens, it is the citizens who are forgotten. This is also the case in Ukraine. Lessons learned from the Balkans teach us to put citizens first. There is an important role for them to play. Citizens are ultimately the foundation of both peace and democracy.**

Will the truce hold for Eastern Ukraine - 'Minsk II'? As we write this, Debaltseve has fallen following heavy fighting, while the violence actually appears to be subsiding elsewhere. There is scepticism, but also hope. The Dutch peace organisation PAX is taking lessons from the Balkan Wars and proposes that the international community could and should increase the chances of sustainable peace, stability and democracy by putting the interests of citizens first.

Today's Ukraine is often compared to the Balkans during the wars twenty years ago. However the ethnic dimension is far less important in Ukraine than in the Balkans. Here the conflict plays out between the advocates of a democracy according to the EU model, often without realising what this actually entails, and those that feel more at home with the political culture from the Soviet period.

The difference between the Balkans and Ukraine is significant, especially now that some analysts are suggesting that Ukraine needs a sort of Dayton Agreement. Yet there is a fitting warning in this respect. The Dayton Peace Agreement (1995) may have ended the war in Bosnia, but it also legitimised ethnic cleansing and saddled the country with a hopeless state structure. The country is ethnically fragmented and the ethnically oriented nationalist parties are predominantly the ones that still call the shots. The Dayton decentralisation model is an abomination.

Although there are two Dayton elements that could be of great interest for Ukraine. A body was set up, the Peace Implementation Council (PIC), which meets on a monthly basis to monitor the Dayton Agreement. It involves over fifty states and international organisations that contribute to achieving the Dayton objectives. A type of PIC for Minsk II could prove to be rather effective. Then there is the system of the so-called *absentee ballots*. It enables people who fled to still vote for the municipality from which they came. Minsk II proposes local elections in the Donbas region in the future. National and international programmes must actively promote the return of displaced persons to Donbas. Nevertheless people who have not yet returned must also be able to vote to elect the local authorities in their municipality of origin.

### Eastern Slavonia

Anyone that wants to learn from the Balkan experiences must examine Eastern Slavonia in particular. For four years, this region in north eastern Croatia was under Serbian control (1991-1995), but was peacefully reintegrated into Croatia a few years later. The Dayton Agreements were accompanied by the so-called Erdut Agreement, which formed the basis for a relatively brief but successful UN mission (UNTAES, 1996-1998). At the time, the UN succeeded in close cooperation with the OSCE, the EU,

international organisations and numerous local groups, in improving local governance and security in Eastern Slavonia. Other priorities included humanitarian aid, the return of the Croats, promoting dialogue between the different groups that had violently fought each other and of course the restoration of houses, roads and the economic infrastructure. Most Croats returned and the different ethnic and religious groups gradually became quite successful at living together in peace.

### **Donbas**

Citizens' interests played a key role here, in an international approach that made a fundamental difference with its targeted programmes. While we could call Russia an immense country and Ukraine quite a substantial one, Donbas is a small region that could easily be compared with Eastern Slavonia. A new dynamic could be created if, on the one hand, the ceasefire endures and on the other, the international community can quickly provide large-scale humanitarian aid, build a strong presence in the region, make it possible for displaced persons to return, support Kiev in preparing legislation and organising elections and support local citizens' groups and newly elected local authorities. Only when citizens see that their own authorities and the international community are taking their interests seriously, will a shaky ceasefire be able to blossom into lasting peace.

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