POST-CONFLICT RECONSTRUCTION IN THE BALKANS. LESSONS TO BE LEARNT FOR UKRAINE

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In the 2000s, Russia tried in the ex-Soviet space to replicate the same arguments (and tactics) of relativising international law that the West/ NATO used in order to justify their own intervention in the ex-Yugoslav space back in the 1990s. This strategy of so-called 'mimicry' manifests by changing the meanings of international norms based on one's own preferences, but does not accept other powers to behave in the same way. This strategy of legitimisation, which lies behind recognising the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia (2008) or the annexation of Crimea (2014), mixes real elements with fake ones, and ends in distorting reality. To illustrate the political consequences of such practices, we can take a look at Russia's strategy of invoking the Western 'precedent' in Kosovo in order to legitimate the illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014. The paper aims to argue that when analysing Russia's actions in Crimea in 2014, there is a need for a thorough analysis of the main legitimacy claims used to justify external intervention to outline potential lessons that could be learnt by Ukraine from the experiences of the Balkans.

'Why are states looking for legitimacy when they challenge the international law based on their own interpretations of the self-determination principle?' remains a focal question in the field of contemporary foreign policy analysis. In the last decades, external intervention, under different forms, has been a predominant way of addressing security issues by great powers. Politically constructed threats were claimed to justify external intervention for humanitarian purposes. NATO's campaign against the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, which ended the war in Kosovo, became a classic case study for discussing how the use of force in humanitarian interventions constitutes a hard case for the power of legal norms. This case, which was very much debated in the IR literature of the recent years, showed that international norms should not be taken for granted, as they are the result of the power games of big powers and they are exposed to politicisation[1].

The contradictory perspectives focused on the legal arguments of secession point towards the 'relativisation' of international law and its subsequent politicisation.

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[1]   See more in C. Reus-Smit (ed.), *The Politics of International Law,* Cambridge University Press: Cambridge 2004.

Bernhard and Kubik[2] analysed the history of legitimation claims made by Russia, understood as forms or traditions of imperial legitimacy. They proposed an instrumental explanation to the choices elites make when deciding to present history in a particular way. They are based on the observation that former empires or federal projects, which have dismantled, tend to have a more revisionist foreign policy, and this implies an active effort to remember some events in the past in a particular way. Many authors highlighted the tendency of great powers to shape the malleable facts of history into self-justifying narrative discourses[3].

These approaches showed that the principle of self-determination in particular creates a lot of symbolic and political space for international actors (especially for revisionist states) to discursively build a 'precedent' in order to justify their claims for the expansion of their territories. Russia, in the shadow of its Soviet Union's past, as well as Serbia, marked by its Yugoslav 'grandeur', are the countries that fit this category of 'revisionism', reflected in aggressive foreign policy actions. Based on that, those countries are more prone than others to sponsor secessionist groups and discourses in their former federal countries.

The problem is that this strategy of legitimisation mixes real elements with fake ones, and ends in distorting reality. To illustrate this idea and its political consequences, we can take a look at Russia's strategy of invoking the Western 'precedent' in Kosovo (both the military intervention in 1999 and the recognition of its self-proclaimed independence in 2008) in order to legitimate the illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014. The paper aims to argue that when analysing Russia's actions in Crimea, especially when the precedent of Kosovo's independence was invoked, there is a need for a thorough analysis of the main legitimacy claims used to justify external intervention. This discussion might be very useful in outlining the potential lessons that could be learnt by Ukraine from the experiences of the Balkans. Moreover, a closer look at the rhetoric surrounding the current Ukrainian-Russian conflict reveals that it is as much about the past as about the present or future. The conclusions will stress the main elements that could be useful for settling the conflict in Ukraine.

Russia's Legitimisation Strategies – the Smokescreens of 'the Precedent'

In any situation of ongoing conflict, competing 'facts' and versions of events are produced – often for the specific purpose of leading or misleading external opinion. Those versions of the 'facts', which are reproduced by international journalists and experts in the media, become a part of the political strategies of legitimisation. In the Balkans, there are numerous contradictory versions of the wars for the dissolution of Yugoslavia, with some countries accusing others of ethnic cleansing and others rejecting the accusations. This is what I recently called 'the war of meanings' that severely and negatively affects the post-conflict Europeanization process most visibly in Bosnia and Kosovo[4]. There is a great danger that Ukraine could also be

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[2]   M. H. Bernhard, J. Kubik, *Twenty Years after Communism: The Politics of Memory and Commemoration*, Oxford University Press: Oxford 2014.

[3]   J. Subotic, *Narrative, Ontological Security, and Foreign Policy Change*, "Foreign Policy Analysis", 2015, No. 12, pp. 610–627. And A. Faizullaev, J. Cornut, *Narrative Practice in International Politics and Diplomacy: The Case of the Crimean Crisis*, "Journal of International Relations and Development", 2016, [DOI 10.1057/jird.2016.6].

[4]   M. Troncotă, *Post-conflict Europeanization and the War of Meanings. Challenges to EU Conditionality in Bosnia and Kosovo*, Tritonic Publishing House: Bucharest 2016.

affected by similar trends, especially when looking at how Russia uses disinformation in order to propose different versions of events that occurred in the Ukrainian crisis.

There were a few attempts of the Russian leadership to provide legitimate grounds for the annexation of Crimea. The analysis tries therefore to show that there is a gap between legitimisation discourses (pointing to what states narrate regarding their own evaluation of the conditions) and the facts on the ground. From this point of view, an

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issue that deserves more attention is the fact that Russia launched a series of 'competing truths' or 'alternative facts' regarding the annexation of Crimea. This put Ukraine's government in a very difficult position in front of the international community. As shown in a recent academic analysis, Putin's normative justification for the seizure of Crimea was 'to protect' ethnic Russians and Russian language speakers from imminent danger. The Russian government incorporated Crimea by engaging in a sophisticated effort of intervention, through non-military and military means. An essential part in this process was to promulgate narratives justifying Russia's breach of Ukrainian territory[5]. The same tactics were used by the regime of Milosevic in the 1990s in order to justify Serbia's

military actions against the breakaway states Croatia or Bosnia-Herzegovina.

In this context, there were plenty of scholarly discussions that have comparatively examined the similarities and the differences between the conflict settlement strategies in the Western Balkans (former Yugoslav space) and the Black Sea Region (former Soviet space) in recent years. It was shown that the Russian foreign policy has used the Yugoslav secession wars and external intervention for the legitimisation of its own actions in the former Soviet space. Therefore, there is a need to highlight the consequences of Russia's ability to exploit legal ambiguities, more precisely the tension between the principles of self-determination and territorial integrity and between a humanitarian intervention and an illegal military intervention (open or covered) for a particular interpretation of international law. Have European policy makers learnt something from those experiences? In the context of a revived East-West division, are we witnessing a new form of external intervention and its legitimation taking place in Ukraine?

Since the beginning of the 2000s, Russia's legitimisation strategy of its military interventions both at home and abroad has taken Western actions as a point of reference. Most evidently, the 2008 invasion of Georgia was presented as a peacekeeping operation meant to defend lives of the Russian citizens and peacekeepers in South Ossetia, who were supposedly 'attacked by Georgian troops'. Then, as the war in Georgia developed, Moscow even accused Tbilisi of genocide against the local population. After the ceasefire, the Russian government used the Kosovo precedent for recognition of the independence of Abkhazia and South

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5   M. Troncotă, *Romania's Concentric Circles in the Line of Fire?*, Policy paper, 2017
     [http://dri.snspa.ro/uploads/brosura_policy_paper-v8-LE-hi_res.pdf]

Ossetia[6]. The same rhetoric was used in the case of Russia's illegal intervention in Crimea in 2014. The parallel between Kosovo and Crimea was used by Russia to challenge international law from two main perspectives: as a way of justifying the use of force on a foreign territory, and also by invoking the principle of self-determination.

What the analysis tries to stress at this point is that in the 2000s, Russia tried to replicate in the ex-Soviet space the same arguments (and tactics) of relativising international law that the West/NATO used in order to justify their own intervention in the ex-Yugoslav space back in the 1990s. This strategy of so-called 'mimicry' aimed at provoking and showing the limits of what Russia called 'Western hypocrisy', meaning use of international norms based on its own preferences, but not accepting other powers to behave in the same way.

Lessons to Be Learnt by Ukraine

It was much debated in recent years that the Ukrainian crisis worked as a trigger for the revival of a 'New Cold War' rhetoric in international affairs that goes far beyond the borders of Ukraine. Moreover, those deep divides have appeared not only in the Russia-West relations, but also in the European space at large, most evidently affecting relations between the EU and the Western Balkans. Economic stagnation, defunct democracies, and the weakening pull of Europe have all presented opportunities to Russia to come and fill the gap.

The main argument of those supporting the idea of a 'New Cold War' is an unprecedented low level in the relations between Russia and the West, triggered by the economic sanctions imposed by the latter following the

annexation of Crimea and Moscow's support for the separatist war in Eastern Ukraine. On several occasions, President Putin used the language of a humanitarian interventionist to rebut criticism of Russia's involvement in Crimea. In order to explore a series of possible lessons to be learnt by Ukraine from the experiences of the Balkans in post-conflict transformation, I will focus on two main elements that are of crucial importance: a. the role of using the past in order to justify political decisions and contestation of international norms; b. unexpected consequences of external intervention.

a) Instrumentalising the past is probably one of the most controversial, yet most widely used political strategies to date in the Balkans.

Foreign policy narratives are often based on ways in which direct observers of an international event look to the past to make sense of the present. International conflicts usually create a symbolic space for the promotion of various interpretations of political events that interact in dynamic ways with their opinions and their stereotypes about domestic politics, foreign policy, and a country's subjective history. For the intervention in Crimea, Russia's legitimising mechanisms implied using controversial claims about the history of Ukraine. This should be a warning for Ukraine not to engage in the re-interpretation of history in order to respond to Russian attacks. In this regard, an important lesson to be learnt from the Balkans is that alternative narratives about the past have the potential to do more harm to the conflicting parties.

One important instrument for destabilisation in the area where one aims to exert influence

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6   See more in G. Ó Tuathail, *Russia's Kosovo: A Critical Geopolitics of the August 2008 War over South Ossetia,* "Eurasian Geography and Economics", Vol. 49, No. 6, 2008, pp. 670–705.

is the re-interpretation of history with the purpose of contesting borders. This is still, 25 years since the dissolution of former Yugoslavia, a strategy most often used in the Balkans. The problem is that this destabilisation is profitable for Russia. It is based on the premises that if the Balkan countries get weaker and more unstable, they will be appealing neither to the EU, nor to NATO. This strategy was applied also in the case of Ukraine.

Much of the politics in the Balkans is still connected to the past. For example, people who were directly involved in the war for the dissolution of Yugoslavia in the Balkans managed to retain key positions in political life and business. Although they quickly adapted their behaviour to the changed environment, the legacy of the old regimes is still present in their political attitudes. The fact that the elites are trapped in a discourse obsessed with the past makes the situation of the post-conflict settlement even more difficult. This applies more evidently to the referendum in Crimea in March 2014, but mainly to the legitimising claims in V. Putin's speech in front of the State Duma on 18 March, in which he drew a parallel between Kosovo and Crimea. This comparison remained misleading and controversial, especially because most of the EU countries are supporting Kosovo, but not supporting Crimea's secession.

The strategies to instrumentalise the past for justifying the present foreign policy decisions are part of Russia's main strategy in the Ukrainian conflict. The biggest problem is that Ukraine has responded with the same tactics, and looking at the Balkans example, this is detrimental for a country's development and democratisation. How can we distinguish in this case between historical arguments and facts and emotional arguments based on an 'imagined' past? Using the Kosovo precedent in the case of the blatant breach of sovereignty that occurred in Crimea is based on the dangerous essentialist idea that ethnic composition can justify the secession of the territory.

In the context of the Ukrainian crisis and the Balkans' instability, there is a need to draw attention to the association between power and territorial claims based on ethnic arguments. This is where the instrumentalisation of the past comes into play. All parties involved, countries, and international organisations interpret the events of March 2014 in contrasting ways: While Russia justified its actions under the pretext of defending the Russian minority against alleged Ukrainian 'neo-Nazi groups', Western countries perceived Moscow's actions as 'an act of aggression'. But the facts on the ground should not be mistaken for their representations in discourse. Russia aimed to blur the threshold between the legal and illegal by exploiting some areas of uncertainty in international law, while making unfounded assertions of 'facts' and by using Russians and Russian speakers from Ukraine as the main legitimating devices.

An important lesson to be learnt from the Balkans is that multi-ethnic states and cultural and religious differences are still hard to reconcile if the main actors do not share the main meanings of the processes they go through. Ukraine should avoid deepening its divisions.

b) External intervention, under different forms, has been a predominant way of addressing security issues after the collapse of Yugoslavia, but with limited results.

The geopolitical realpolitik of the post-Cold War period has showed that any type of intervention has a potential of becoming a tool for the interference by a strong one in the affairs of a weak one. International law was built on the doctrine of non-intervention, but great powers employed sophisticated legitimacy discourses in

order to convince other states to accept their decisions and to legitimise their interventions. The justifications employed by countries before or after an intervention against another state and the follow-up process, by which other countries and the international community as a whole (through the UN General Assembly) find those justifications acceptable or not, is a result of politicisation.

External intervention to stop the war in Bosnia was delayed and could not prevent the ethnic genocide. In Kosovo, the international community acted more promptly in order to avoid further massacres by the Serbs of the Albanian community in Kosovo. However, whether those interventions were efficient and managed to reach their humanitarian goals remains a big controversy in scholarly debates. M. Kaldor[7] was one of the authors who stressed a series of lessons from the Balkan Wars in a post-conflict reconstruction and proposed that the international community (particularly the European Union) could increase the chances of sustainable peace, stability, and democracy by putting interests of the citizens first in the case of the Ukrainian conflict[8]. She promoted the concept of 'human security' as the main reason that legitimises the intervention of international actors in a civil war with the main goal of saving lives of innocent civilians.

There are many limits to the parallels that can be drawn between the conflict in and around Ukraine and the war in former Yugoslavia.

The ethnic dimension of the conflict is far less important in Ukraine than in the Balkans, even though Russian narratives put more emphasis on this. Is Russia entitled to intervene in Ukraine in order to protect the Russian-speaking citizens of Ukraine? This was a crucial question raised in the years that followed the annexation of Crimea.

The intertwinement between the Ukrainian events and the developments in the Balkans[9] can be stressed. Studies showed how the Russian hybrid activities involved financing anti-government groups, disseminating false information and propaganda, infiltrating agents of influence, who worked as destabilising factors both in the Balkans and in Ukraine. Russia sought to gain influence over (if not control of) critical state institutions, bodies, and economy, and uses that influence to shape national policies and decisions in the two regions. In this strategy, a lot of stress is put on corruption, which is used as the lubricant on which this system operates, concentrating on exploitation of state resources to further Russia's networks of influence. The essence of its policy is playing a 'weak hand' the best possible ways, taking advantage of others' weaknesses. This is seen particularly in the fact that the anti-EU rhetoric started to abound in local media. S. Bose also argued that one key driver of escalation in the Balkans in the early 1990s poses a continuing risk as the Ukraine crisis unfolds[10]: that is the contribution of ostensibly 'democratic' processes – elections, referenda, even constitution-making – to inflaming tensions.

7   M. Kaldor, *Ukraine and Crimea. A Report from the Front,* "The Nation", 2015
    [https://www.thenation.com/ article/ukraine-and-crimea-a-report-from-the-front/]

8   M. Kaldor, *Ukraine and Crimea. A Report from the Front,* "The Nation", 2015
    [https://www.thenation.com/ article/ukraine-and-crimea-a-report-from-the-front/]

9   M. Troncotă, *Romania's Concentric Circles in the Line of Fire?,* Policy paper, 2017
    [http://dri.snspa.ro/uploads/brosura_policy_paper-v8-LE-hi_res.pdf]

10 S. Bose, *Ukraine's Lessons from Balkans' Nightmare,* "Open Democracy", 2014
    [https://www.opendemocracy.net/can-europe-make-it/sumantra-bose/ukraine-lessons-from-balkans-nightmare]

Overall, there are two main parallels most often invoked when discussing potential lessons to be learnt by Ukraine from the experience of the Balkans. They both deal with unexpected consequences of external intervention and how third-party actors (such as the EU or OSCE) could help Ukraine settle the conflict with the two separatist territories in Donbas.

The (Dis-)Functionality of the Balkan 'Precedents'

First, there is a 'precedent' created by Kosovo's secession from Serbia. It has reappeared in the rhetoric of the Russian president again with the secessionist referendum in Crimea and subsequently ensured the territory's smooth takeover from Ukraine. The Declaration of Independence of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea also refers to the Kosovo Declaration of Independence as well as to the Decision of the United Nations Court of Justice in 2010.[11] Public debates have already questioned the instrumentality of the Kosovo case for the Russian foreign policy discourse, showing that it is based on multiple errors and 'forced similarities'. In reality, the two situations could hardly be more different. Attempts to use Kosovo to justify Russia's actions in Crimea are an unusually blatant exercise in false moral equivalency. There is no evidence indicating that Crimea's majority-Russian population was threatened with any remotely comparable atrocities at the hands of the Ukrainian government, which was indeed the case for the Albanian community living in Kosovo.

Second, there is a Dayton model that was proposed as a solution to a potential federalisation in Ukraine following the Bosnian example. Some analysts suggested that because the Minsk II Agreement is not respected, Ukraine needs a sort of Dayton Agreement[12]. At the end of March 2014, Russian foreign minister S. Lavrov pressed a demand to State Secretary J. Kerry that Ukraine be forced to 'federalise', meaning that it be compelled to accept partition of its territory and that it establish the Russian language as the second official language alongside the Ukrainian[13]. The problem is that the Dayton Peace Agreement (1995) may have ended the war in Bosnia, but it also legitimised ethnic cleansing and saddled Bosnia with a dysfunctional and extensive state structure. The country is ethnically fragmented and the ethnically oriented nationalist parties are predominantly the ones that still call the shots. So there would be no reason to consider the Dayton decentralisation model as something that could in any way solve the problems of Ukraine. Nevertheless, as the Pax analysis shows, one thing that could be borrowed from Bosnia is the Peace Implementation Council (PIC), which meets on a monthly basis to monitor the Dayton Agreement. It involves over 50 states and international organisations that contribute to achieving the Dayton objectives. It was suggested that a type of PIC for Minsk II could prove to be rather effective[14]. But this too would be yet another 'external experiment'.

Moreover, the agitation over a status of the Russian language resembles the situation

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[11] *Парламент Крыма принял Декларацию о независимости АРК и г. Севастополя (The Crimean Parliament Adopted Declaration of Independence of ARK and Sevastopol),* Пресс-центр Верховного Совета АРК, Rada Crimea, 11 March 2014, [http://www.rada.crimea.ua/news/11_03_2014_1]

[12] M. Pizzi, *Is Ukraine the Next Bosnia?,* "Al-Jazeera", 14 March 2014, [http://america.aljazeera.com/ articles/2014/3/14/is-ukraine-the-nextbosnia.html]

[13] S. Tisdall, *Russia Sets Tough Conditions for Diplomatic Solution in Crimea,* "The Guardian", 30 March 2014, [https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/mar/30/russia-ukraine-john-kerry-sergei-lavrov-paris]

[14] *Lessons Learned from the Balkans Can Help Ukraine,* "PAX", 2015, [https://www.paxforpeace.nl/publications/all-publications/lessons-learned-from-the-balkans-can-help-ukraine]

in Croatia in the 1990s, where Serbs alleged that they were victims of Croatian discrimination against the Serbian dialect of the language once called 'Serbo-Croatian' and now called 'Bosnian-Croatian-Serbian'. In our opinion, these comparisons lay on a series of misrepresentations and are rather overstretched.

I. Krastev argued that "Putin's current strategy is not one of the land grabbing but one of a state-re-building"[15]. He further added, "The Kremlin's vision for Ukraine's future is that it becomes a 'Greater Bosnia' – a state that is radically federalized with its constituent parts allowed to follow their natural cultural, economic and geopolitical preferences." In other words, Russia might have in mind a strategy of 'divide and neutralise', a prospect that would have farther-reaching implications for Kyiv than merely losing Crimea. Other commentators more convincingly argued that Bosnia is no model for Ukrainian peace[16].

There are plenty of reasons why the Bosnian peace-building process was exceptional and could not offer a proper model for Ukraine. More than two decades after the conflict ended, interethnic hostilities that had generated the war persist in Bosnia because of perpetuated ethnic divisions and complicated decision-making structures enshrined in the Dayton constitutional setting. Bosnian politics is still divided along ethnic lines, with each group afraid of losing power and influence relative to the other two. The Dayton Peace Accords froze the ethnic tensions, rather than solved the conflict, leaving each ethnic group

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unsatisfied with the results. Moreover, it created a political system that, in addition to being extremely complex, put too many decisions in the hands of foreign actors unaccountable to Bosnians (such as the Office of High Representative). Most Bosnian politicians and foreign officials now agree that the Dayton Agreement has run its course, but they cannot agree on how to modify or replace it and this leads to a huge crisis for constitutional reform.

Should Ukraine follow the same pattern for securing peace in the breakaway regions? As explained previously, there are clear reasons not to recommend the Dayton model for Ukraine, especially that most of the citizens (be it Ukrainian or Russian speakers) do not support the scenario with a federal model that would split the country. Political fragmentation undermines Bosnia's economy. The European Union membership perspective did not succeed to unite the country's competing communities. Bosnian stakeholders' inability to agree on a replacement for the Dayton Agreement allowed the country's divisions to persist. As shown in previous research on the topic, the Balkans were faced with multiple policy

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[15] I. Krastev, *What Does Russia Want and Why,* "Prospect Magazine", 2014, [http://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/ politics/what-does-russia-want-and-why]

[16] *Bosnia is No Model for Ukrainian Peace,* "Balkans in Europe Policy Blog", 2014, [http://www.suedosteuropa.uni-graz.at/biepag/node/106]

[17] I. Bărbulescu, M. Troncotă, *EU's "Laboratory" in the Western Balkans. Experimenting Europeanization without Democratization. The Case of Bosnia and Herzegovina,* "Revista Española de Ciencia Política", No. 31, March 2013, pp. 63-99.

experiments in external intervention that had detrimental political consequences, which we called 'Europeanization without democratization'[17]. I would argue that this is a pattern that should be avoided by Ukrainian elites.

The other lesson that could be learnt by Ukraine is from the dangers of separatism and its promoters in the Balkans. Since becoming Republika Srpska's president in 2010, M. Dodik has repeatedly threatened secession. Over the past five years, Dodik has frequently promised to call for a referendum on Republika Srpska's future, vowing to protect ethnic Serbians from alleged attempts by the Bosniaks to take control of the substate.

Media reports that picture Ukraine as a deeply divided, almost artificial state are off the mark, focusing on divisions that play a much smaller role in the country's political life than it appears. In reality, before Crimea, the issue of separatism was simply absent from the public debate. Nevertheless, separatist rhetoric has ever since been sponsored by Moscow. Moreover, by occupying a part of Ukraine, Russia sends a signal that Ukrainian borders are open to question in order to artificially bring the topic of the partition of Ukraine in the limelight. Despite the country's complex history and regional divergences, the wish to pursue European integration has been a unifying, not a dividing, factor in Ukraine. Ethnic divergence, with different parts of Ukraine not sharing historical memory and language, has not resulted in a public vote for separatism as in the case of Republika Srpska in Bosnia. It was part of the Russian strategy to make foreigners look at Ukraine through the prism of ethnic division. The Ukrainian authorities could take an important lesson learnt by dissociating from the far-right arguments and essentialist perspectives and transform different languages and varied political aspirations and cultures from a weakness into a strength.

Here one could argue that language is not, in fact, the most important predictor of separatist sentiments. Preferring stronger ties with Russia does not equate to wishing to become a part of the Russian state. Nevertheless, there are serious concerns about the fact that the EU has seen its power eroding in the Balkans. Consequently, Moscow has been seeking to step up its influence all across the countries of the former Yugoslavia. This could also be the case of Ukraine.

Conclusions. A New Strategic Approach for Ukraine

For the many regional and international organisations engaged in the Balkans in the 1990s, the experience has been akin to one large 'experimental laboratory' where both successes and failures occurred. It is important not to repeat the same in Ukraine, because this situation would be in favour of Russia only and its strategy of maintaining frozen conflicts. In reality, Ukraine requires a new strategic approach and an alliance of

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friends, partners, and supporters composed of countries with similar interests. The reform and transition experience of the Balkans matters for Ukraine from a different perspective. In the 1990s, the Balkan countries were in a similar – or possibly worse – situation as Ukraine is today, and those in Europe and the West developed institutions to turn war-torn countries into successful EU members, as in the case of

Croatia, or successful candidates, such as Montenegro.

The main challenges of the post-conflict reconstruction periods in the Balkans were interactions among clashing ethnic identities with poor governance and corruption. In the Balkans, at the moment, their political and economic development is being delayed by territorial/secessionist conflicts (Serbia/ Kosovo, Bosnia/Republika Srpska). Not only bad relations with neighbours, but also internal politics are an important factor of destabilisation. Uncompromising political elites and ethno-nationalist parties are part of the establishment and have consolidated their economic and political power in these areas. This is a pattern that should be avoided by Ukrainian elites.

Looking at the post-war Balkan reconstruction, there is a wide range of existing institutions that helped the Balkan countries reform and grow their economies that could also help Ukraine. Ukraine now confronts three main challenges that must be avoided with the lessons learnt from the Balkans:

• its own far-right extremism;

• Russia trying to solidify and recapture its long-time traditional areas of influence and control; this poses also the collateral danger of promoting the Russophile anti-Westernism discourses among Russian-speaking communities;

• the West positioning itself in a semi-Cold-War rhetoric and in antagonising relations with Russia.

The recent years has been the living proof that communities that are suffering from economic hardship are increasingly inclined to take anyone's help, including Russia's, if there is a promise of a better future. Corrupt practices, low levels of accountability, distortions of historical facts by using controversial 'precedents', and even hybrid war were the main methods used in this process of reviving 'the old spheres of influences' in Eastern Europe.

A good settlement of the conflict in Ukraine should apply the lessons learnt from the Balkans by avoiding the dangers of cooperating with the same political elite. In such circumstances the Balkan experience showed that party leadership will keep their dominant position, limiting party democracy and halting advancement in the European integration process.

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