

The Balkans Model and Conditions for Peace in Ukraine

June 10, 2025 by [Mariya Heletiy](#) [Leave a Comment](#)

Editor's note: This article is part of [Project Europe](#) which focuses on European and European-adjacent security issues to deter and defend against irregular threats, develop IW knowledge, and advance the American understanding of allied, partner and competitor practices of IW. We invite you to contribute to the discussion, explore the complex IW environment and help.

Following the 2024 US presidential elections, President Donald Trump prioritized peace negotiations between Ukraine and Russia as a key foreign policy objective. The peace talks that followed led Putin to declare a brief "[Easter truce](#)" that he summarily broke, echoing Russia's repeated violations of the 2019 [ceasefire agreement](#) and highlighting its broader challenge to Europe and the post–World War II international order.

These recent ceasefire violations underscore a critical lesson: in today's conflicts, where the lines between conventional and irregular warfare are blurred, durable peace cannot be achieved through formal negotiations and traditional diplomacy alone. The Russia-Ukraine war is not just a conventional military conflict, but a struggle playing out across diplomatic, informational, economic, humanitarian and military dimensions.

As with all irregular wars, legitimacy and perception are at the center of the struggle. Russia seeks not only territorial gains but also to delegitimize Ukraine's sovereignty and erode Western unity. Accordingly, securing peace in Ukraine demands more than

conventional negotiations. Instead, it requires a comprehensive irregular warfare strategy attuned to the conflict's complex dynamics, much like the successful approaches used in the Balkans in the 1990s which integrated military deterrence, legal accountability, information dominance, civil resilience, and international governance mechanisms.

Lessons from the Balkans

An analysis of [the Balkan conflicts](#) offers important insights for Ukraine. The Balkan wars exhibited a hybrid nature characterized by the use of non-state actors and so-called volunteers, as well as the blurring of lines between civilian and military roles that included the mobilization of civilians and widespread information operations employed by all sides.

None of the Balkan conflicts were resolved solely through peaceful means or decisive military victory. Rather, they demonstrate how irregular warfare dynamics—including the use of irregular tactics, economic pressure, and information campaigns to subdue aggressors—can be integrated into a broader, multi-front strategy. Although negotiations are a common feature of peace processes, they often result in the unintended consequence of halting hostilities only to allow parties to regroup or codify the results of military victories for future generations to challenge. In conflicts characterized by irregular warfare, traditional approaches (such as ceasefires) may be insufficient, as they fail to address the underlying asymmetries, ideological drivers, and non-state actors that continue to fuel instability beyond formal cessations of conflict.

These dynamics played out most clearly during the Yugoslav wars. For example, in Croatia (1991–1995), temporary ceasefires functioned less as steps toward peace and more as tactical

pauses, allowing Croatian forces to regroup and consolidate territorial gains. The introduction of international peacekeeping missions merely served to temporarily freeze frontlines, enabling future offensives rather than securing lasting peace. The 1991 [Vance Plan and subsequent Sarajevo Agreement](#) were never fully implemented but still succeeded in pausing hostilities. These pauses, however, enabled the Croatian military to restructure, integrate civilian and military capabilities, and prepare for future operations with NATO support. Although framed as steps toward peace (establishing ceasefires, demilitarized zones, and conditions for refugee return), they ultimately codified battlefield positions without addressing deeper drivers of conflict.

Against this backdrop, [Croatia successfully integrated civilian and military capabilities](#) into a coordinated and highly functional organizational structure. This comprehensive approach managed to focus on developing defense capabilities to liberate occupied territories while also countering persistent disinformation campaigns propagated by Serbia and Republika of Serbian Krajina (Croatia), both domestically and abroad. Through clear strategic vision and effective communication with both its population and the international community, Croatia secured broad public support—an essential factor in sustaining national resilience and legitimacy. Backed by NATO airstrikes on Croatian Serb-controlled airfields authorized under [UN Security Council Resolution 958](#), this coordinated buildup set the stage for a decisive blitzkrieg-style offensive that allowed Croatian forces to regain control of nearly all formerly occupied territory. The Balkan experience ultimately shows that military, diplomatic, irregular warfare, and legal tools must all be used in combination to shift the balance of power, impose legitimacy, and build durable peace.

Confronting the Limits of Legal Solutions in Ukraine

The current conflict in Ukraine has none of the conditions that could allow for a legal solution to bring an end to the war. A legal solution would demand the full withdrawal of Russian forces, an unlikely prospect while Russia maintains [claims of sovereignty over four Ukrainian oblasts](#) and Crimea and continues to leverage [illegal referenda](#) to fabricate political authority. Moscow has shown no willingness to deescalate, compensate for its aggression, or demilitarize. Sanctions—while they have been partially effective in past conflicts such as [Yugoslavia](#) and have [inflicted some economic pain—have been insufficient](#) to compel Putin to reconsider his decision to invade Ukraine thus far. Finally, while justice for war crimes and restoration of human rights are vital for reconciliation, international tribunals require not only substantial evidence admissible in court but also the political leverage to secure extradition and enforcement.

In light of the above, drawing lessons from the Balkan experience demonstrates that conflicts of a similar nature require a combination of force and diplomacy to attain peace. The Dayton Peace Accords and the Kumanovo Agreement that ended the 1995 Bosnia War and 1999 Kosovo War, respectively, were only possible after NATO airstrikes targeted Serbian positions in Bosnia and Herzegovina and its territory during the Kosovo war. A similar dynamic is visible today in the war between Ukraine and Russia, where negotiations show no genuine willingness from Russia to implement a ceasefire or end hostilities. Only by further strengthening Ukraine's military capabilities and applying sustained pressure on Russia and its allies can meaningful negotiations be pursued.

As long as Russia refuses to acknowledge the core tenets of international law and sovereignty, these long-term mechanisms for peace remain aspirational rather than actionable. Until that paradigm shifts, irregular warfare strategies remain Ukraine's

most viable path forward to challenge Russia's willingness to fight and impose prolonged costs over time.

Beyond the Battlefield: Fighting Russia's Hybrid War on Multiple Fronts

The Russia-Ukraine has had a [distinctly irregular character since fighting began over three years ago](#). Russia used a range of hybrid tactics, from disinformation campaigns and coercion to the use of proxy forces and private military companies to provide a veneer of legitimacy for its actions while also giving deniability and obfuscating its objectives. These tactics blur the lines between state and non-state action, making the conflict inherently political, psychological, and transnational.

To counter Russia's hybrid approach (and until there are changes to the underlying conditions that limit the effectiveness of legal mechanisms, such as international war crimes tribunals), Ukraine and its allies should consider the following integrated lines of effort that address the full spectrum of irregular threats.

The first line of effort is **countering Russian information operations**. Russia's information strategy targets various audiences to reinforce pro-Russian sentiment among targeted populations, justify its war in Ukraine, or complicate decision making for acting against Moscow. Russia does this by spreading historical and cultural myths, creating pretexts of needing to protect Russian-speaking populations in Ukraine. Russia's information operations also transcend national borders, extending their reach to interfere in elections in neighboring [Romania and Moldova](#). In the Balkans, Russia amplifies its disinformation through cultural centers, such as a [Wagner Group-affiliated facility in Belgrade](#), aimed at destabilizing the region and diverting attention from the war in Ukraine.

To counter Russia's advances in the information domain, Ukraine and its partners must adapt a [comprehensive approach](#) involving government leadership and citizen participation. Complex threats such as deepfakes and hybrid information warfare demand coordinated efforts across civil society and the state.

Governments must enhance strategic communication, invest in [media literacy and information integrity](#), and consider establishing dedicated counter-disinformation agencies.

Regulatory frameworks should govern digital intermediaries, promote transparency, and uphold the quality of government communications to maintain public trust. Finally, fostering media pluralism, supporting professional journalism, and promoting media literacy will strengthen citizens' ability to discern reliable information from falsehoods.

The second line of effort is **using ceasefires strategically**.

Ceasefires play a paradoxical role in this type of conflict. While often framed as a step toward de-escalation, in irregular conflicts they are often exploited for tactical advantage—used to reposition forces, manipulate public perception, and weaken an adversary's will to fight. Russia has repeatedly used ceasefires this way, including the recent "Easter truce," which was [reportedly violated with over 3,000 unique incidents](#). These violations reveal how ceasefires can be weaponized to sow doubt in the viability of resistance, create false expectations of peace, and pressure Ukraine into premature concessions.

Ukraine should not reject ceasefires outright, but must approach them with realism and incorporate them within a broader irregular warfare strategy. Ceasefires must be conditional, temporary, and allow for concrete gains in legitimacy, accountability, and lasting deterrence. They should only be accepted when they: (a) are accompanied by enforceable security guarantees, (b) allow time to rebuild and rearm, (c) include mechanisms to expose Russia's

duplicity when violated, and (d) support governance reforms to bolster public trust. Without these safeguards, ceasefires risk consolidating Russian gains rather than enabling lasting peace.

The third line of effort is **building civil and national resilience**. During the last few years, Russia has increased hybrid attacks to undermine Ukrainian society. Building resilience to Russian attacks would entail bolstering cyber, information, economic, and military resilience—not only at the state level but also by [empowering non-state actors such as civil society organizations and the private sector](#).

Civil society is central to building national resilience and reinforcing legitimacy during irregular conflict. In Ukraine, grassroots organizations, local actors, and the private sector have filled critical gaps left by the state, demonstrating how a [whole-of-society approach](#) can counter hybrid threats. These groups play a crucial role in developing new capacities in areas like cyber defense, humanitarian security, and [counter-disinformation efforts](#). Their activities range from monitoring military expenditures and assisting internally displaced populations to rebuilding homes, caring for children, combating disinformation, and directly supporting defense initiatives. In some cases, they even supply the armed forces with critical equipment and weapons under licenses issued by Ukraine's Ministry of Defense. Together, these efforts not only meet urgent needs but also strengthen public trust, foster national cohesion, and make society more resistant to manipulation and coercion.

Conclusion

Given the war's hybrid nature and complexity, Ukraine's path to peace will be long and arduous. A near-term legal solution is not only unlikely to end in agreement, but also unlikely to last. A

lasting settlement will require a suite of strategic and political tools including international oversight of temporarily occupied territories, robust security guarantees, a calibrated sanctions regime, and prosecuting war crimes. Some of these measures may be out of reach in the current strategic environment, yet they remain essential benchmarks for a just outcome.

A ceasefire may be a necessary first step. But taken in isolation, a ceasefire risks merely freezing today's battlespace, which aligns with Moscow's preferred outcome. Rather than unconditional ceasefires, Ukraine must insist on ceasefires that are conditional, temporary, and embedded within a broader irregular warfare strategy. This can degrade Russia's capacity to wage hybrid war while reinforcing Ukraine's sovereignty, legitimacy, and resilience. In the twenty-first century, peace is more than the absence of gunfire. Peace must be actively built, defended, and sustained through military and non-military means. For Ukraine, that means mobilizing every available instrument of national power to safeguard freedom, uphold international law, and secure the future of a democratic Europe.

The views expressed are those of the author(s) and do not reflect the official position of the Irregular Warfare Initiative, Princeton University's Empirical Studies of Conflict Project, the Modern War Institute at West Point, or the United States Government.

Mariya Heletiy (Ph.D.), is a member of the Advisory Board for the International Diplomacy Initiative.

Photo: Serhii Nuzhnenko, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty / the Collection of war.ukraine.ua

If you value reading the Irregular Warfare Initiative, please consider [supporting our work](#). And for the best gear, check out

the [IWI store](#) for mugs, coasters, apparel, and other items.

