

The reconstruction of the Balkans: what lessons for Ukraine?

Description

While the war continues, Ukraine's reconstruction has begun. To better understand and prepare for the stages to come in Ukraine, the lessons of the post-war reconstruction of the Balkans may be helpful, especially as the donors and international organizations involved are the same, as are the logic and phases of the reconstruction.

The announcement of the Balkans' reconstruction in June 1999([1](#)) set in motion a process that, even after twenty-five years, continues to shape the region. This enduring and resilient process, intertwined with the shared contexts of war and post-war challenges, offers profound insights that can guide Ukraine's reconstruction in the long run.

Post-war reconstruction: a long process

The reconstruction of the Balkans commenced with the cessation of conflicts in Bosnia-Herzegovina([2](#)) and the signing of the Dayton Accords in December 1995. It then progressed through several distinct phases: a transition from humanitarian aid to post-war reconstruction from 1995 to 2001, marked by the European programs Echo, PHARE, Obnova and CARDS([3](#)); a period of support for the consolidation of states from 2001 to 2007, primarily through the last program; and finally, a period of aid for accession to the European Union from 2007 to 2027 with the IPA([4](#)) funds for the pre-accession of the Western Balkans and Turkey. This clear progression, even if the international funds allocated to the reconstruction of the Balkans followed these three stages chronologically, each extended in parallel with the new ones, provides a valuable framework for understanding the complexity and duration of such processes.



Without a timetable for accession to the EU, it is questionable what will happen to the pre-accession funds after 2027. Indeed, the 2030 deadline for the accession of the Western Balkans, [announced in 2023 by the President of the European Council, Charles Michel](#), is likely to remain a mere announcement that could lead to disappointment and feed Euroscepticism. The EU will, therefore, have to think about the financial resources that will be put in place to help these countries join the EU indefinitely.

Multiannual installments of IPA pre-accession funds

(for the Western Balkans and Turkey)

IPA fund tranches	Amounts (in €bn)
IPA I – 2007-2013	11.468
IPA II – 2014-2020	11.699
IPA III – 2021-2027	14.162

The donors for the reconstruction of the Balkans are the same as those for Ukraine. The EU is vital in allocating funds and implementing various financial instruments. Before the war, Ukraine had already been benefiting from European Neighbourhood Policy funds. Some Member States are also contributing bilaterally to the reconstruction effort. In the case of the Balkans and Ukraine, the United States also appears to be a significant contributor. The World Bank, the

European Investment Bank (EIB), the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), and other international organizations – some fifty international players- are involved in the reconstruction process. Coordination between them is an essential factor in the effectiveness of aid.

Aid that falls short of needs

In June 1999, when the bombing of Serbia and Montenegro came to an end, and a Stability Pact for South-Eastern Europe was announced, a Marshall Plan for the Balkans was announced. However, this never materialized, and the amounts allocated for international reconstruction aid fell far short of what was needed. In the case of Bosnia-Herzegovina, for example, after the signing of the Dayton agreements and the first donors' conference, a sum of \$5.1 billion was promised for five years, whereas reconstruction needs had been estimated at \$100 billion. In the case of Ukraine, [reconstruction efforts were estimated at €400 billion by the World Bank in spring 2023. By the end of July 2023, however, barely €400m had been pledged by the Member States](#). For 2024 alone, the Ukrainian authorities estimate emergency reconstruction needs at €15 billion. There are, therefore, significant discrepancies between the sums allocated and the needs.

In addition, the slowness with which funds are allocated often means that urgent needs cannot be met. In the case of the IPA pre-accession funds for the Western Balkans and Turkey, it takes two to three years from the programming phase to implementation.

Ongoing adaptation between post-war reconstruction and EU integration

The case of the Western Balkans has shown that the post-war reconstruction process, particularly in terms of infrastructure, was quicker to implement than EU integration. However, international aid must adapt to both methods with specific characteristics. As far as infrastructure reconstruction is concerned, the slowness lies mainly in the preparation of technical documentation; as far as the process of integration into the EU is concerned, the case of the Western Balkans has shown that several stages are necessary: signing stabilization and association agreements, obtaining candidate status, starting negotiations, harmonization and transposition of the Acquis Communautaire, etc.

The recognition of candidate status granted to Ukraine and Moldova on 23 June 2022 and then to Georgia on 14 December 2023, at the very moment when the first two countries were authorized to begin negotiations, has given rise to numerous reactions in the Balkans and even a certain incomprehension on the part of the countries of the Western Balkans, which have been waiting for many years for the accession process to be speeded up and for a timetable to be set to define a European future. Indeed, since the Thessaloniki Declaration of June 2023, the European future of the Western Balkans has been affirmed many times, but no precise and credible date for accession has been set. As seen from the Balkans, the acceleration of the accession process for Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia is incomprehensible.



Dragojla, "Untitled," painting on metal, 1968.

Targeted international aid to strengthen the rule of law

The Western Balkans countries, like Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia, face the problem of the rule of law. In the case of the Western Balkans, the European Court of Auditors found in its 2022 Report that EU action had contributed ["to the introduction of reforms on technical issues and the drafting of related legislation, but overall had little impact on the fundamental rule of law reforms in the region."](#) Chronic problems persist despite the progress made in the reforms.

This contrasting situation is also present in Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia. Numerous reports on corruption in Ukraine have been made. In 2021, the European Court of Auditors stated that ["grand corruption and 'state capture' have plagued Ukraine for many years."](#) Despite ongoing efforts, corruption scandals broke out in 2023 and 2024. This raises the question of the role and effectiveness of European aid in consolidating the rule of law.

The limits of comparison

Reconciliation in the Balkans is still a work in progress in 2024, despite the many efforts and programs implemented to strengthen regional cooperation. Since the 1990s, this reconciliation has come up against the new powers' rewriting and interpretation of history. They are also asserting their stranglehold on education systems: revisionist theses are being taught, monuments to the fight against Nazism and fascism are being forgotten or destroyed, and places of remembrance of the Second World War are being abandoned. Those who were tried as war criminals by the [International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia in The Hague](#) are regarded by some as heroes in their own countries.

Post-war reconstruction in the Balkans took place without any genuine reconciliation. And yet, without reconciliation, reconstruction remains an indefinite process that does not allow for the re-establishment of links between peoples and states. All the Western Balkans countries wish to join the European Union, where it will be possible to live together. Reconstruction without reconciliation also runs the risk of fuelling instability, making lasting peace all the more fragile and complex.

Notes :

(1) Daniela Heimerl, Yorgos Rizopoulos, Nebojsa Vukadinovic, "Contradictions et limites des politiques de reconstruction dans les Balkans," in *Revue d'études comparatives Est-Ouest*, vol. 30, 1999, n° 4, pp. 201-244.

(2) Nebojsa Vukadinovic, *La reconstruction de la Bosnie-Herzégovine : aide internationale et acteurs locaux*, Les études du CERI, 1996.

(3) ECHO: European Commission Humanitarian Office; PHARE: This program was established in 1989, initially to help rebuild the economies of Poland and Hungary, then extended to all the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. In 1996, 10% of the PHARE program was allocated to the post-war reconstruction of Bosnia-Herzegovina; OBNOVA (translation of BCMS/Bosniak-Croat-Montenegrin-Serbian): Reconstruction; CARDS: Community Assistance Programme for Reconstruction, Development, and Stabilisation in South-Eastern Europe, which benefited the countries of the Western Balkans.

(4) IPA: Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance.

Thumbnail: Dragojla, "Untitled," painting on metal, 1968.

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