# Localized Ceasefires: Lessons from the OSCE Engagement in Ukraine, 2014–2022

*Lukasz Mackiewicz*[*]

## Abstract

This paper explores the underexamined role of localized ceasefires facilitated by the OSCE Special Monitoring Mission (SMM) to Ukraine between 2014 and 2022. While not part of the Mission's original mandate, these localized arrangements became critical tools for enabling humanitarian access and infrastructure repairs amid ongoing hostilities. Drawing on field experience and operational data, the paper analyzes the SMM's efforts to negotiate temporary truces, the challenges posed by the expansion of the Mission's tasks, and its constrained ability to assign responsibility for ceasefire violations. It argues that localized ceasefires, despite their ad hoc nature, offer valuable lessons for future missions in protracted conflict settings. The paper concludes with policy-oriented recommendations to institutionalize localized ceasefire mechanisms, enhance local ownership, and ensure the strategic integration of field-level innovations into broader peacebuilding efforts.

## Keywords

Ukraine, OSCE, SMM, ceasefire

## Introduction

Spring 2025 marked the eleventh anniversary of the Russian Federation's annexation of Crimea and the subsequent outbreak of violent conflict in eastern Ukraine. Between 2014 and the initiation of the full-scale Russian invasion in February 2022, over fourteen thousand individuals lost their lives, while more than 1.6 million people were forcibly dis-

[*] Independent consultant on peace and security
Former OSCE SMM staff member
mackiewicz@posteo.net

placed.[1] In response to the annexation of Crimea and escalating tensions in eastern Ukraine, the fifty-seven participating States of the OSCE reached a consensus in March 2014 to deploy the Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine (SMM). The Mission was mandated to contribute "to reducing tensions and fostering peace, stability, and security."[2]

This paper examines a largely overlooked aspect of the SMM's operations—namely, the facilitation of localized ceasefires, in the form of "windows of silence" and "disengagement zones." Despite its potential to enhance the effectiveness of

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the Mission's mandate, neither the SMM's leadership nor OSCE participating States fully recognized or utilized this mechanism to significantly influence political negotiations in Minsk. This oversight can be attributed, in part, to the inherently political nature of the SMM, which was embedded within a broader geopolitical confrontation. Given ongoing discussions on potential future peace or peacebuilding missions in Ukraine, however, a critical reassessment of the role and impact of localized ceasefires remains relevant.[3] Moreover, the experience of the SMM underlines the importance of localized ceasefires as a conflict management tool that can be useful in other geographic settings.

## The OSCE and the Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine

The conflict in Ukraine led to the establishment of a complex institutional framework.[4] At the political level, the Normandy Four format (Ukraine, Russia, Germany, France) provided strategic direction to OSCE mechanisms such as the Trilateral Contact Group (TCG) and the SMM.[5] The TCG, which included Ukraine, Russia, de facto authorities from Donetsk and Luhansk, and the OSCE as a mediator, sought a diplomatic resolution to the conflict. Deployed in March 2014, the SMM was tasked with reducing tensions and monitoring OSCE principles.[6] Yet its mandate, designed before full-scale hostilities began, remained vague and

largely unchanged, despite the evolving situation.[7]

The SMM expanded from 100 to nearly 1,300 personnel, including over 740 unarmed civilian monitors, with an annual budget of approximately €100 million.[8] Although it operated throughout Ukraine (except Crimea), access to many parts of non-government-controlled areas remained limited or was obstructed by the de facto authorities. Initially focused on human rights monitoring and dialogue facilitation, the SMM shifted toward monitoring the ceasefire along the Line of Contact following the Minsk agreements.[9] Despite its limitations related to operational procedures (no patrolling at night, limited access to non-government-controlled areas), the SMM became the primary source of reliable conflict reporting. It improved its monitoring capacity through advanced technology, though assets such as drones and cameras were frequently targeted.[10] Between 2014 and 2022, the Mission published 2,432 daily reports and 242 spot reports.[11]

The SMM's effectiveness was severely constrained by geopolitical dynamics, and its purely civilian mandate proved inadequate during conflict escalations.[12] SMM monitors were regularly threatened with the use of force and could not enforce more robust activities. On the other hand, the civilian mandate limited the use of military technologies that could have been used to enhance monitoring. Despite ongoing criticism, the SMM's sustained presence likely helped prevent further atrocities.[13] This achievement was

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ultimately overshadowed by the full-scale Russian invasion in February 2022. Within days, the Mission evacuated its international personnel, and three Ukrainian staff members were detained in Russian-controlled areas.[14] Although the SMM was well positioned to continue documenting violence, it ceased operations on March 31, 2022, after failing to secure a mandate extension.

## Ceasefire: What's in the name?

There is no universally accepted definition of a ceasefire. Instead, the scope and provisions of any such agreement—objectives, timelines, security arrangements, and monitoring mechanisms—are determined through negotiation.[15] Broadly, a ceasefire entails a temporary or permanent cessation of hostilities, with terms such as "truce," "humanitarian pause," and "cessation of hostilities" often used interchangeably.[16] It differs fundamentally from a peace agreement, which constitutes a political settlement aimed at ending the conflict and addressing its underlying causes. Between 1989 and 2020, over two thousand ceasefires were declared globally, yet 70 percent lacked monitoring or verification mechanisms.[17] Despite their limitations, ceasefires generally produce temporary reductions in violence, lowering the costs of conflict.[18] Ceasefire monitoring enhances accountability, reduces the risk of inadvertent escalation, and provides early warning of potential conflict resurgence.[19] Durable

ceasefires tend to include monitoring, though its effectiveness depends on fostering communication rather than serving as an accountability tool.[20] The SMM adhered to this principle, refraining from attributing violations to conflict parties. As Buchanan et al. argue, the SMM exemplified monitoring aimed at containing rather than resolving conflict.[21]

The UN categorizes ceasefires based on their focus. Humanitarian pauses, as defined by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, are temporary cessations of hostilities for strictly humanitarian purposes, typically confined to a specific timeframe and geographic area.[22] These pauses often occur alongside negotiations for broader ceasefires, allowing mediators to reinforce compliance with legal obligations and norms early in the mediation process.[23] Beyond humanitarian pauses, the UN also recognizes geographically focused ceasefires, often referred to as "disengagement zones."[24] These apply only to specific areas—such as cities, regions, and provinces—and are designed to manage hotspots, de-escalate conflict in particular locations, or protect vulnerable populations. Agreements typically outline geographic boundaries, access rules, permitted activities, and service provisions. These limited ceasefires can demonstrate goodwill and a conflict party's ability to maintain command and control, potentially paving the way for broader agreements.[25] In Ukraine, the SMM implemented both approaches, using windows

of silence and disengagement zones in its operational framework.

## Localized ceasefires: A perspective from Ukraine

The escalation of heavy fighting in 2014 led the SMM to shift its focus toward the politico-military aspects of the conflict. The intensified hostilities during the winter of 2014–2015, coupled with diplomatic efforts, culminated in the adoption of the Package of Measures for the Implementation of the Minsk Agreements in February 2015. Commonly known as Minsk II, this agreement underscored the OSCE's role in monitoring and verifying the ceasefire and the withdrawal of heavy weapons.[26]

To fulfil these tasks, the SMM prioritized operations along the Contact Line, initially deploying vehicle patrols and gradually expanding toward the use of various technological tools such as drones, surveillance cameras, and video analysis.[27] Despite commitments by the Minsk signatories to uphold the ceasefire, the SMM consistently reported hundreds—sometimes thousands—of daily violations between 2015 and 2022. At regular intervals, the conflict parties reaffirmed their commitment to the ceasefire ahead of specific events, such as Easter or the start of the school year (September). These periods saw temporary reductions in ceasefire violations followed by a gradual resurgence of hostilities, demonstrat-

ing that adherence to the ceasefire was largely contingent on political will.[28]

Between 2014 and 2022, the SMM recorded over 1.5 million ceasefire violations (including the use of small arms and artillery and rockets), with 2017 being the most active year (401,336 violations) and 2021 the least kinetic (93,902 violations).[29] While these figures are striking, they must be interpreted with caution. Due to methodological constraints—such as the SMM's reliance solely on direct observations rather than reports from local populations—alongside operational limitations (e.g., the lack of night patrols), technological challenges (attacks on drones and installed cameras), movement restrictions, and the extensive length of the Contact Line, the SMM could only provide a partial picture of the situation. It can therefore be assumed that the SMM was underreporting the situation on the ground. Consequently, the total number of ceasefire violations can be primarily understood as a trend indicator rather than precise statistical data. This perspective is reinforced by the fact that despite consistently high violation numbers, civilian casualties steadily declined from 2017 until the full-scale invasion in February 2022.[30] This suggests, perhaps counterintuitively, that while the SMM's ability to quantitatively monitor ceasefire violations improved over time, the actual number of civilian casualties was decreasing.

In its ceasefire monitoring efforts, the SMM acknowledged the absence of a functional accountability mechanism to

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assign responsibility for violations or take follow-up action.[31] The lack of such a mechanism also had implications for the security of SMM monitors, who frequently operated in high-risk environments.[32] Moreover, attributing specific incidents to conflict parties would likely have led to further access restrictions, undermining the Mission's ability to operate effectively.[33]

## Windows of silence

Based on its mandate to facilitate dialogue on the ground, the SMM established the practice of facilitating localized windows of silence. These timely and geographically limited ceasefire arrangements were aimed at repairing critical infrastructure. Since the Contact Line was an artificial boundary cutting through previously undivided communities, some critical infrastructure—such as water canals, gas pipelines, and electricity lines—crisscrossed the front line multiple times, creating interdependence between conflict parties.[34] Heavy fighting, particularly in 2014–2015, deteriorated an already ageing infrastructure in eastern Ukraine. As a result, civilians suffered from frequent breakdowns, which caused difficulties in accessing clean water, electricity, and natural gas.

The TCG in Minsk played a central role in facilitating political negotiations between Ukraine, Russia, and the OSCE, including the formulation of localized ceasefires. In contrast, the Joint Centre for Control and Coordination (JCCC)—established in September 2014, initially consisting of approximately seventy-five Russian and seventy-five Ukrainian military officers—functioned at the operational level, enabling day-to-day coordination between the parties on the implementation of ceasefires, including their timing, scope, and geographic focus. The JCCC played a crucial liaison role in the context of infrastructure repairs by providing security guarantees for the SMM staff and repair works companies. Once security guarantees were in place, the SMM deployed "mirror patrols": teams positioned visibly on both sides of the Contact Line in proximity to the repair works.[35] The JCCC also worked to maintain the ceasefire during repair operations.

Facilitating windows of silence required considerable resources: between January 2017 and October 2021, the SMM facilitated and monitored 5,875 such events, deploying 13,649 patrols. These efforts enabled 556 repair and maintenance projects.[36] As early as 2015, the SMM facilitated repairs at the Krasnohorivka gas distribution station and the Marinka-Krasnohorivka gas pipeline, which had been damaged by shelling in 2014, cutting off natural gas supply to over twenty thousand people.[37] Between 2015 and 2019, the SMM enabled maintenance and repairs on the main water lines of the Siverskyi Donets–Donbas (SDD) canal, the primary water source for nearly the entire Donetsk region, supplying approximately 2.3 million people

in non-government-controlled areas and 950,000 in Ukraine-controlled areas.[38] Substantial efforts were also made to restore electricity services as high-voltage power lines were frequently damaged, causing outages in residential areas and industrial plants. In 2017, the SMM facilitated the repair of a fiber-optic cable, which restored internet access and mobile coverage for 700,000 people in non-government-controlled parts of the Luhansk region.[39] Overall, according to OSCE estimates, around four million civilians on both sides of the Contact Line benefited from SMM-facilitated repairs.[40]

However, mutual distrust and concerns that windows of silence could be exploited for military purposes severely undermined the JCCC's effectiveness and hindered progress in repair efforts. In December 2017, officers from the Russian Federation's armed forces withdrew from the JCCC, forcing the Ukrainian military and the OSCE to negotiate directly with representatives of the so-called Luhansk and Donetsk People's Republics (LPR and DPR). This development worsened security conditions on the ground and complicated efforts to repair and maintain civilian infrastructure.[41] Moreover, despite the security guarantees provided by the conflict parties, the SMM regularly recorded ceasefire violations near locations where repair works were being conducted. Between July 2019 and October 2021 alone, the SMM documented 7,900 such cases. The lack of adherence to localized ceasefires put at risk not only utility workers engaged in repairs but

also SMM staff.[42] From early 2021, the SMM observed increasing difficulties in obtaining security guarantees due to the erosion of trust between the conflict parties.[43] By October 2021, the situation had worsened, with no security guarantees being granted at all.[44] These mounting challenges may have been early indicators of the impending escalation that would culminate in the full-scale Russian invasion in 2022.

## Disengagement areas

By the summer of 2016, the violent conflict in eastern Ukraine had already continued for more than two years, with no end in sight. Daily, the local population confronted SMM monitors with the same question: "When will it all end?"—often accompanied by complaints and even harassment, including accusations of inaction in the face of violence.[45]

In this context, a new attempt at a more permanent localized ceasefire with a particular geographic focus was undertaken. On September 21, 2016, the members of the TCG committed to an agreement on "disengagement." The head of the SMM, Ertugrul Apakan, argued that creating disengagement areas provided an opportunity "to alleviate the situation for civilians who continue to pay the price for the ceasefire violations."[46] The disengagement process was initially planned for Stanytsia Luhanska, Petrivske, and Zolote —three areas that either already served as crossing points or were considered

suitable for that purpose.[47] Conflict parties were to withdraw armed forces, formations, and hardware from their positions, creating disengagement areas at least two kilometers wide and two kilometers deep.[48] Moving forward into these areas was prohibited for both sides. The SMM was tasked with monitoring and verifying adherence to the framework. Unlike the Minsk II agreement, which lacked a functional accountability mechanism, the Framework Decision on disengagement included provisions allowing emergency TCG meetings in case of escalations or violations.[49]

However, the Framework Decision contained provisions that undermined its effectiveness. One major obstacle was the precondition of a complete ceasefire for seven consecutive days before disengagement could commence.[50] This requirement made progress nearly impossible, as kinetic activity on the front lines often followed its own unpredictable logic, independent of political agreements. In several instances, the SMM was informed that accidental discharges of weapons—sometimes due to a soldier mistakenly perceiving an approaching enemy—reset the countdown to the beginning.[51] Moreover, Russia's (and its proxies') political will to implement agreements was more than questionable. In addition, the Framework Decision lacked clarity on operational aspects, which led to further tensions. In the Zolote disengagement area, meant to serve as a vehicle crossing point, disputes arose over how extensively adjacent fields should be demined and which party was

responsible. At Stanytsia Luhanska, the main challenge was the reconstruction of a partially destroyed bridge that hindered crossings by over 100,000 people every month.[52]

After nearly three years of delays and several unsuccessful attempts, the disengagement process in Stanytsia Luhanska was conducted in June 2019, which allowed for the footbridge's reconstruction in November 2019.[53] Similarly, in November 2019, the SMM observed the beginning of disengagement at the Petrivske disengagement area.[54]

In sum, the Framework Decision on disengagement proved exceedingly difficult to implement, demanding substantial human and financial resources from the SMM. From the outset, SMM monitors faced restricted access to disengagement areas, along with frequent movement limitations. Shelling and gunfire were often reported nearby. Furthermore, SMM drones and cameras were regularly jammed, shot at, or destroyed, further complicating verification efforts.[55]

## Conclusions and recommendations

Despite their positive impact, ad hoc localized ceasefires were merely a second-best alternative to a permanent and comprehensive ceasefire. These measures primarily addressed symptoms rather than the root causes of the conflict.[56] A key assumption behind localized ceasefires was their potential as confidence-building measures. Despite negotiating over

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five thousand windows of silence between 2017 and 2021, however, the conflict parties continued to disregard broader ceasefire agreements. In fact, persistent violations of these localized ceasefires, frequently documented by the SMM, may have further undermined efforts to achieve a lasting ceasefire as both sides routinely accused each other of deliberately breaking agreements, further eroding mutual trust.

Moreover, the SMM applied only a limited understanding of what constituted "local" involvement. While it engaged with local and communal administrations, these actors were not meaningfully included in ceasefire discussions in Minsk or at the JCCC. Although local utility companies could request security guarantees at the JCCC, broader local communities were not sufficiently consulted on their priorities regarding disengagement areas or infrastructure restoration. Instead, key decisions were made primarily at the negotiating table in Minsk. Furthermore, despite international best practices emphasizing the importance of civil society participation in ceasefire monitoring and negotiations, the SMM did not incorporate this approach. At least two Ukrainian NGOs offered support for monitoring efforts, but these proposals were not pursued.

The OSCE SMM's experience in Ukraine provides valuable lessons for future peace and peacebuilding missions. Localized ceasefires, when strategically integrated, can serve as critical tools for conflict mitigation and trust building.

However, their success depends on institutional commitment, strategic foresight, the political will of the parties, and a willingness to embrace locally driven solutions.

Despite their potential, the strategic value of localized ceasefires was not fully recognized or leveraged by the SMM's management or the OSCE's participating States to achieve progress at the political level during negotiations in Minsk. The SMM's experience highlights critical gaps in organizational learning and the ability to translate field-level innovations into broader strategic decision-making. While localized ceasefires for infrastructure repair works were successful on an operational level, they remained fragmented rather than institutionalized within the Mission's overall approach. There was no systematic mechanism to extract lessons learned, integrate them into operational planning, or scale up successful initiatives.

The case of localized ceasefires for repair works demonstrates that such mechanisms are particularly effective when there is interdependence between conflict parties, such as a shared reliance on infrastructure, water, or electricity. However, experience from Russian-occupied territories in the war suggests that Russia is actively seeking to eliminate such interdependencies by integrating occupied regions into its infrastructure networks. As a result, diminished interdependence will likely reduce the number of potential topics for future negotiations and dialogue facilitation efforts.

Drawing on the SMM's engagement in Ukraine between 2014 and 2022, several recommendations can be made to enhance the efficacy of future peace or peacebuilding missions involving localized ceasefires:

*Enhance ceasefire design with realistic preconditions.* Future ceasefire agreements (both in the context of the OSCE and beyond) should avoid overly rigid preconditions (e.g., seven consecutive days of silence)[57] that are unlikely to be met in fluid conflict environments. Instead, they should embrace more flexible, adaptive benchmarks for the initiation and continuation of disengagement. This depends, however, on the specific conflict context. In settings where geopolitics is less of a driving factor, more rigid and clearly defined benchmarks may be preferable.

*Institutionalize localized ceasefire mechanisms.* Future missions should not treat localized ceasefires (especially for infrastructure repair works) as ad hoc activities. Instead, they should be embedded within the mission's core strategic planning from the outset. This requires establishing dedicated units or focal points within the mission structure responsible for facilitating and tracking localized ceasefires.

*Identify interdependencies in conflict settings.* Localized ceasefires often succeed where mutual reliance on infrastructure exists. Future missions must identify and prioritize areas of interdependence (e.g., shared water or power sources) as potential entry points for cooperation.

*Ensure systematic learning and scaling of good practice.* A robust lessons learned system should be instituted to capture field-level innovations and integrate them into mission-wide planning. This includes implementing feedback loops from field teams to inform strategic decision-making, regularly evaluating the effectiveness of ceasefire arrangements through mission-wide impact assessments, and scaling up successful models across comparable contexts.

*Broaden local inclusion and ownership.* The impact of localized ceasefires can be significantly enhanced when local communities are consulted and empowered. Future missions should move beyond engagements with formal local authorities and systematically include civil society actors and local service providers in ceasefire planning and monitoring. Recognizing that the involvement of local sources can be biased or vulnerable to misuse and manipulation, missions should develop mechanisms for integrating community feedback into operational decisions, particularly in relation to infrastructure repair, access routes, and security guarantees.

To sum up, future peace and peacebuilding missions in Ukraine (and elsewhere) should move beyond treating localized initiatives as ad hoc solutions and instead embed them within the core strategic framework.

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