

**Academic Friends of EPLO Roundtable**

**Beyond the end of the tunnel: EU Peacebuilding after 2020**

**23-25 November 2020**

**Online**

**MEETING REPORT**

The aims of this roundtable meeting were to look beyond the current crisis to identify threats to and opportunities for more effective EU peacebuilding in the future, and to identify lessons learnt from EU peacebuilding to date. The roundtable also intended to provide a platform for academic and practitioner researchers to exchange views and build relationships.

The meeting brought together 26 academic and practitioner experts carrying out long-term research into EU foreign policy and peacebuilding.

The discussions focused on the following topics:

1. (Re-)engaging with the world? The EU and peacebuilding after 2020
2. Never waste a good crisis: lessons from the nexus between conflict, public health and good governance
3. Preventing conflict in extraordinary crises: is the EU's crisis management toolbox fit for purpose?

The discussions were held under the Chatham House Rule. There was no attempt to reach a consensus during the meeting or through this report, which is a summary of the key points that were raised by the participants.

## Analysing the state of, and challenges to, EU support to peace

- The European Union (EU) is currently facing a significant number of challenges, many of which are interrelated and reinforce one another.
  - The internal challenges that the EU is facing have an impact on how it is perceived internationally and on its external action, including with respect to its ambitions as an advocate for peacebuilding. These challenges include responding to:
    - the COVID-19 pandemic;<sup>1</sup>
    - threats to EU (political) integration, including to democracy and the rule of law in certain European countries (in particular in Hungary and Poland);
    - Brexit;<sup>2</sup>
    - threats to women's rights (particularly to their reproductive rights) in certain EU Member States (EU MS);
    - the rise of far right parties in several EU MS;
    - criticism by certain actors of EU support to civil society organisations (CSOs);
    - the spread of mis/disinformation;
    - the absence of a common understanding of what type of international actor the EU wants to be.
  - The external challenges that the EU is facing include:
    - the COVID-19 pandemic;
    - the climate crisis;
    - the rise of authoritarianism that is perceived as a realistic and 'competent' alternative to democracy;
    - the proliferation of intra-state conflicts and non-state conflict actors;
    - the fragmentation of authority (including with respect to the change from a unipolar to a multipolar / multinodal world);
    - the spread of mis/disinformation;
    - digitalisation (which can also provide opportunities for peacebuilding, as digitalisation can help carry out peacebuilding activities from a distance in situations like the current COVID-19 crisis, for example, however the spread of mis/disinformation online can be a significant driver of conflict).
  - The EU is also struggling to define its own approach to peace and conflict issues. It can find it difficult to exist as an actor for peace in its own right in areas where EU MS have a strong presence and involvement (e.g. in the Sahel).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> It was pointed out that the COVID-19 pandemic has multiple dimensions: the health crisis itself, the policy and political responses to the crisis, the socio-economic consequences, etc.

<sup>2</sup> The length and complexity of the negotiations absorbed EU attention and resources, and one participant noted that the United Kingdom had previously played a role in promoting the women, peace and security (WPS) agenda and in advancing human rights (HR) as a foreign policy lens at the EU level.

<sup>3</sup> One participant suggested that it may be helpful for researchers to analyse in more detail the internal and external policies and actions of EU MS that relate to the human security of populations, and how they relate to those of the EU.

- In addition, the increase in polarisation within certain EU MS may have an effect down the line on which types of Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) missions are favoured, which kind of personnel is deployed as part of CSDP missions, etc. It may also lead to a gap between the tools at the EU's disposal and the situations it will need to address, perhaps even within the EU.
- The above-mentioned challenges involve different policy fields, and there is a degree of competition between actors from different fields to obtain EU funding.
- The COVID-19 pandemic has had diverse impacts on human security, peace and conflict, and on the EU's ability to play a role as a peace actor.
  - The impact of the pandemic has varied across contexts. In many areas, it is contributing (and will continue to contribute) to existing trends of widening inequalities. It has also exacerbated the root causes, drivers and consequences of conflict in certain contexts, particularly with respect to gender-based violence (including domestic violence, which often increased with lockdowns) and to authoritarian leaders using lockdowns and emergency COVID-19 measures to consolidate and extend their power. As such, the pandemic has often been a continuation of existing crises, violence and matrices of oppression. As these impacts are complex, varied and context-specific, it is important to analyse them in depth and to avoid assumptions with regard to what they may be in a given context.
  - There is a risk that the COVID-19 crisis will continue to undermine the investments needed into peacebuilding and conflict prevention and to divert the attention of policymakers away from them. This is particularly problematic as peacebuilders are already facing difficulties carrying out their work due to the practical impacts of the pandemic.
  - The COVID-19 pandemic has had ambiguous effects on five enabling factors that contribute to the EU's ability to play a role as a peace actor:
    - The existence of cohesion among EU MS: there has been no clear effect of the pandemic one way or the other with respect to the EU's external action.
    - The existence of well-functioning multilateral frameworks: the pandemic weakened multilateralism to an extent (e.g. the World Health Organization faced criticism from certain actors, and for several months the United Nations (UN) Security Council was unable to adopt a resolution calling for a global ceasefire). At the same time, multiple actors acted to defend multilateralism, some positive initiatives were taken within multilateral institutions in the face of the crisis,<sup>4</sup> and certain UN-led peace processes made progress over the period of the pandemic (e.g. in Yemen and Libya). There may be opportunities for enhanced international collaboration in relation to the pandemic on the horizon.
    - Peacebuilding receiving adequate funding and being considered a priority: the pandemic may offer an opportunity to demonstrate to EU citizens that global affairs matter and that it is important to invest in addressing issues and in helping people outside of the EU. At the same time, the pandemic poses a threat to levels of funding for peacebuilding as EU MS may seek to focus their resources on the economic crises they are facing.<sup>5</sup>
    - Conflict parties being willing to engage in talks and to make peace: the EU relies on the consent of the conflict parties to engage constructively. There were some initial positive

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<sup>4</sup> One participant illustrated this point with the example of the G20 reaching an agreement on a common approach to restructuring the government debt of poorer countries at risk of default due to the pandemic.

<sup>5</sup> One participant added that EU MS may decide to reduce the resources allocated to the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), which may negatively impact the ability of EU MS to be more ready to address health emergencies in the future.

signs, with certain groups accepting calls for a global ceasefire and working together in the face of the crisis, however these effects dissipated quickly.

- The ability to talk to all relevant actors in a conflict context: the travel restrictions and lockdowns have been an impediment in that regard, however the increased use of digital tools to promote dialogue has been a positive development, especially with respect to the possibility of involving larger numbers of people in peace processes, particularly local actors and marginalised groups (including women's groups).
  - The COVID-19 pandemic has had mixed impacts on CSDP missions: some vulnerable staff had to be flown home, some of the activities of missions had to be adapted or stopped (e.g. due to movement restrictions and the social distancing imposed by host countries), and some additional tasks had to be integrated in the mandates of certain missions (e.g. to provide information on the pandemic, to deliver health equipment, etc.). CSDP missions have not been assessed for the threat they pose for transmitting COVID-19 to local communities.
  - The impact of pandemic on the resources and budgets of other international actors, and on their foreign policy, has not yet been sufficiently studied.
- The EU has made some positive progress in its support to inclusive peace. For example:
- The new European Commission (EC) includes a commissioner solely focused on 'equality' for the first time, and in November 2020 it presented a promising first-ever [strategy for LGBTIQ equality](#).
  - The EU is increasingly recognising the importance of having an intersectional approach, as reflected in its [Gender Action Plan III](#).
  - The EU and the European Court of Human Rights have been promoting the human rights of trans women and men, including in relation the accession process.
  - The revision of the [EU Concept on Peace Mediation](#) was welcome, and EU ambassadors and members of EU delegations are receiving more explicit training on mediation.
- The EU has been engaging in a process of 'militarisation', developing the military aspects of its external action, focusing on state-centric understandings of security and increasing the scope of the use of military instruments.<sup>6</sup>
- Most participants criticised this process of militarisation of the EU's external action, arguing that it was taking resources away from peacebuilding and conflict prevention, that military actions are not helpful in addressing the structures of inequalities and the root causes of conflict (contrary to peacebuilding), and that they can even be counter-productive by contributing to conflict. The militarisation process has also blurred, to an extent, the distinction between civilian and military spheres of action.
  - The militarisation process results in part from the misguided idea that to be a 'real' and 'credible' international power, the EU needs to be able to wield military power.
  - There are risks with trying to behave as other types of international actors whilst not having the same capacities and resources.

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<sup>6</sup> This has included developments relating to the PESCO, the European Defence Fund, discussions around the EU's 'strategic autonomy', training and building the capacities of the armed forces of partner countries, the proposal for a European Peace Facility 5EPF), etc. Military instruments have increasingly been presented as useful to address issues beyond their traditional mandates, such as development efforts, migration, the COVID-19 pandemic and the effects of climate change.

- Two participants argued that in certain cases the military has been able to help civilian authorities respond to the COVID-19 pandemic, including with respect to logistics, the distribution of resources, the provision of support to medical services, etc., and that this highlighted the importance of strengthening civil-military cooperation on different issues. They added that civilian actors and instruments should also be strengthened further.
  - Several participants argued that although the use of the military in certain situations may sometimes have an immediate positive impact, the militarisation of responses to crises often has various negative effects. These include that:
    - armed forces may carry out diverse forms of violence against populations as part of their expanded mandate;
    - the ideologies of the military may be disseminated in other policy spheres, which can also result (a) in people experiencing violence down the line as part of the new management of these policy spheres, and (b) in the exclusion of people whose security needs are not recognised/prioritised through military lenses;
    - emergencies may be used as justifications for the deployment of the military to curtail civil liberties.
  - Participants also pointed out that the fact that military has the resources enabling it to respond to crises relating to different policy fields should be criticised: it reveals that such resources would often be better placed in other public services; an expansion of the military's role can threaten the strengthening of these services by limiting the resources available for them
  - The securitisation and militarisation of responses to certain crisis and conflicts can shift attention away from, and/or actively contribute to, forms of violence that are often overlooked. For example, responses to the COVID-19 pandemic have shown that the securitisation of health can contribute to increases in domestic violence (e.g. as families are forced to stay in their homes together).
  - The EU has been externalising the management of its borders by partnering with governments in its neighbourhood to prevent migrants from reaching its territory. This has had detrimental effects on the human security of migrants and it is increasingly making the EU a 'client' of relevant partner governments, damaging its credibility as a peacebuilding actor and a defender of human rights in the process (including among local populations).
  - One participant called for a reflection on the use of the term 'crisis' to refer to issues that may primarily be the result of underlying structures and long-term processes. The term evokes a state of emergency and a short time frame, and such framings may contribute to the prioritisation of short-term, securitised responses.
- An important aspect of EU crisis management is that it contributes to getting EU MS to speak to one another, to reflect collectively and to learn to think slightly in the same manner about difficult issues, and to build trust between them in doing so.
- In that regard, EU policymaking processes relating to peace and security issues have been doing quite well, as the EU has been relatively quick in picking up issues of importance and in getting MS to discuss them with one another.
- The election of Joe Biden to the presidency of the United States (US) will likely lead to an increase in collaboration between the US and Europe on different issues, including on climate change and the promotion of multilateralism.

## Recommendations to strengthen EU support to peace

- The EU should pursue a feminist foreign policy and ensure that it follows through on its commitments to the women, peace and security (WPS) agenda.
  - As the COVID-19 pandemic has shown, the EU should seek to understand the gendered impacts of crises and how they affect diverse population groups differently, and it should design and implement its responses (and, more broadly, its external action) based on these understandings. In particular, the EU should seek to understand how different identities and dynamics of marginalisation may intersect and lead to different experiences of a crisis and/or conflict.
  - The EU should ensure that its policy processes and the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of engagements are participatory in nature, and that they include diverse local populations and civil society, particularly diverse women, young people and marginalised groups, as this is essential to maximise the positive impact of engagements. Ensuring that processes are structured in a participatory manner also helps ensuring that diverse input can be integrated rapidly if needed. The EU should partner with international and national actors to strengthen consultation frameworks and to have access to people it would not have access to otherwise.<sup>7</sup>
  - The EU should ensure that does not limit inclusion and diversity in policymaking processes and institutions to the representation of certain groups and identities, but instead that it pays attention to being inclusive with respect to viewpoints and political positions and that it acts on the input provided.<sup>8</sup>
  - The EU should recognise that implementing the WPS agenda is helpful in connecting and achieving transformative change across different policy fields.
  - The EU should ensure that its external action does not involve ‘othering’ external actors through an orientalisng approach.
  - The EU should recognise that (political) processes and local realities can be complex and messy; that the interconnection of issues can make it difficult to address them separately; that it is not always possible to distinguish between the short and long terms and between the internal and external dimensions; and that it is not always possible to segment its analysis. It should develop its capacity to account for and to respond to such messiness.
  - The EU should promote and support ‘feminist triangles’, coalitions between epistemic communities / academia, civil society and policymakers within public institutions that push for positive, feminist change.

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<sup>7</sup> One participant illustrated this point with the example of the regular consultations of civil society and populations organised by the African Union (AU).

<sup>8</sup> One participant illustrated this point by stating that certain women in policymaking processes may not support feminist policies. Another participant explained that it is often the case that more women take part in online consultations, but that it is unclear what changes happen and what decisions are taken as a result of their input (if any).

- The EU should put human security – not state-centric security – at the centre of its approach to peace and security.<sup>9</sup>
  - The EU should reflect on who it is caring for, helping and supporting, and whose security will benefit from its actions. It should pay particular attention to how its actions contribute to the human security of diverse women, young people and marginalised groups, including with respect to their political, civic, economic and social rights, and patterns of inclusion and exclusion.
  - Reflections on contributing to the human security of populations should be mainstreamed across policy fields and not centralised in divisions within the European External Action Service (EEAS), within the ministries of foreign affairs of EU MS, etc.
  - The EU should embrace a broad understanding of human security, and ensure that it considers the wide-reaching implications of crises and conflict on the human security of diverse groups, including their health security and mental well-being, the different forms of gendered violence (including domestic violence) that they may experience, etc.
  - Although the responses of the EU and EU MS to the COVID-19 pandemic will likely improve in the next 6-9 months, the EU should ensure that it continues to address the crisis' negative effects beyond that period (especially its socio-economic effects), in particular among the most vulnerable and most hardly-hit groups in fragile and conflict-affected countries.
- The EU should strengthen its role as global actor for peace by enhancing and increasing its financial, human and political support to peacebuilding and conflict prevention, by recognising peacebuilding as a political priority, and by ensuring that its engagements are conflict-sensitive.<sup>10</sup>
  - All EU engagements should be informed by continuous and robust gender-sensitive conflict analysis and risk assessments, as any engagement in a given context will have an impact on the distribution of power, resources, and dynamics in the context. In certain situations, the EU should be ready to decide against intervening if it is the best way to avoid doing harm.
  - These analyses should systematically integrate the input and knowledge of diverse local populations and civil society, as they have the most expertise and experience with respect to local peace and conflict dynamics. The EU's engagements should be based on their understandings of what should be done to address these dynamics.<sup>11</sup>
  - EU support to peacebuilding and conflict prevention should involve both 'structural' prevention (investing in strengthening structures and institutions, particularly local government structures, and promoting good governance) and 'operational' prevention (supporting local nonviolent mechanisms of conflict resolution and societal transformation). It should ensure that it addresses the root causes and drivers of conflict.
  - The EU should increase its number of staff with expertise on peacebuilding and conflict sensitivity, and with experience with implementing policies in practice and with building connections with local actors.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> One participant stated that this is also relevant to how the EU understands crisis management.

<sup>10</sup> One participant expressed that they consider it impossible to be completely conflict-sensitive, but that the EU and other actors should strive to be as conflict-sensitive as possible.

<sup>11</sup> The COVID-19 pandemic should not prevent EU policymakers from consulting and integrating the input of local civil society actors, as they should at the minimum engage with them remotely.

<sup>12</sup> One participant illustrated this point with the example of COVID-19 vaccine distribution, for which such connections and experience will be essential.

- The EU should strengthen its Early Warning System (EWS) in order to be able to anticipate and to respond to crises more rapidly and efficiently.
  - The EU should strengthen its ability to provide flexible and adaptive support to partners across the humanitarian-development-peace nexus, in order to allow them to adapt to changing circumstances in the contexts where they are living or operating. It should recognise and strengthen its response to the intersections between what is traditionally defined as ‘peace and conflict dynamics’ and other dynamics affecting the human security of populations.
  - The EU should continue to develop its secure communication infrastructure in order to be able to engage securely with partners at different levels remotely.
  - The EU should build up a credible, nimble and locally-tailored system to respond early and effectively to sources of mis/disinformation that fuel conflict.
  - The EU should learn from the lessons learned and good practices of other actors in supporting peacebuilding and responding to crises, including pandemics (international organisations, partner governments, civil society actors, etc.).
  - EU institutions, particularly the EEAS, should reward deep national/regional experience and expertise on peacebuilding, development aid, institutional reform, etc., among its staff and among the personnel of CSDP missions, instead of focusing primarily on management experience and on technical expertise on security/defence matters.
- The EU should strengthen its support to diverse (local) civil society actors for peacebuilding.
- The EU should prioritise strengthening and providing support to existing local peacebuilding actors, initiatives and structures,<sup>13</sup> and it should promote further the local ownership of projects and local resilience.
  - The EU should develop its capacities for identifying diverse members of local populations and civil society to partner with as part of its engagements, and for building long-term relationships with them. The existence of such relationships and of trust is very helpful in getting people to participate in policy processes (including peace processes), in early warning systems, etc., and to ensure that their input is acted upon by policymakers.
  - The EU should engage with local civil society actors who are able to access areas and build trust with actors that would otherwise be hard to reach.
  - The EU should support the participation of diverse members of local populations and civil society, particularly diverse women, young people and marginalised groups, in peace processes.
  - The EU should ensure that its funding instruments provide more direct support to local and national CSOs, instead of going through large international CSOs as intermediaries.
  - The EU should seize opportunities to engage with local populations and civil society actors through digital platforms in cases where it is not possible to engage through other means. At the same time, the EU should understand how dangerous it can be for the people it engages with in this manner to discuss certain issues; it should ensure their security (including their digital security and privacy); it should be mindful of who may be excluded from / unable to participate in digital processes; and it should recognise the limits of digital consultations and exchanges compared to in-person discussions, particularly with respect to building trust and to sharing information.

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<sup>13</sup> This includes local traditional leaders.



- The EU should engage in internal reflections on its approach to its external relations, particularly with respect to the enduring power hierarchies and structures relating to its external action (and their historical roots), and it should ensure that its engagements do not perpetuate a neocolonial approach and/or that they are not perceived as doing so by the populations in the countries where it engages.
  - The EU should pay close attention to who is contributing to the production of the knowledge informing its policies and their implementation, and it should ensure that it supports the production of knowledge by diverse members of the populations living in fragile and conflict-affected contexts, and that it values and takes this knowledge seriously to inform its policies and engagements.
  - The notion of ‘normative power’, particularly as applied to the EU, should be reflected upon critically: (a) the history of EU integration involves the perpetuation of the colonial projects of its MS, (b) the corollary of seeing the EU as a normative power is often that others are seen as less civilised or developed, (c) the EU is pursuing problematic, gendered and racialized policies toward migrants, and (d) there needs to be reflections on how EU values and norms (and their projections abroad) have been shaped by the EU’s colonial past.
  - The EU should ensure that it does not betray in its actions the values that it promotes externally, and that it meets the expectations of populations in fragile and conflict-affected countries with respect to respecting these values.
- The EU should move away from militarising its external action, and it should ensure that CSDP missions are conflict-sensitive and contribute to the human security of local populations.
  - The EU should ensure that the mission mandates of future CSDP missions account for pandemic risks, and that they are more flexible to allow them to contribute to the human security of populations in a conflict-sensitive manner when unforeseen crises arise (including by maintaining relationships, communication and trust with local civil society actors).
  - Some participants argued that the EU should not adopt the proposed European Peace Facility (EPF), as (a) it represents a significant shift toward a more militarised approach of EU foreign policy, (b) it will not be helpful in addressing the root causes of conflict and (c) it has the potential to actively fuel conflict, particularly by strengthening armed forces that commit abuses and contributing to the spread of weapons. Another participant argued that the EPF could be helpful in fostering co-operation between the EU and partner authorities, including local authorities, but that there should be strong safeguards in place to ensure that the provision of equipment does not have unintended consequences and that other priorities are not side-lined due to a focus on military co-operation.
- The EU should ensure that it addresses the links between climate change and peace/conflict in its external action.
  - Peacebuilding measures should be climate-sensitive, and climate adaptation and mitigation measures should be conflict-sensitive.<sup>14</sup> Peacebuilding measures often need to take into account the changing climate conditions in order to be sustainable.

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<sup>14</sup> In the Sahel, for example, well-meaning climate adaptation measures have sometimes fuelled local conflict due to not being sensitive to local dynamics.

- The populations of countries and regions affected by climate change and conflict have experience and knowledge on how to adapt to their combined effects. The EU should use their knowledge to inform its engagements and it should support their initiatives.
  - The EU should support the role that actors from other fields (e.g. environmental protection) may play in contributing to peacebuilding efforts.
- The EU should strengthen its support to multilateralism and to multilateral organisations addressing conflict.
- The EU and EU MS should work together to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic and to other issues in a way that demonstrates the value of collective and preventive action to EU citizens.
  - The EU should lead on the worldwide distribution of COVID-19 vaccines through multilateral frameworks.
- The EU should enhance the way it addresses the different dimensions of crises and structures its responses through different time frames.
- As resources to respond to crises are limited, when and where relevant, the EU should ensure that it develops shared understandings of their different dimensions across relevant institutions and policy fields, and that it prioritises issues to respond to based on its added value, on available resources, and on the time frames that are the most adequate to respond.

## Additional resources

Please find below research articles, reports and other resources which were shared by participants:

- Ayansina Ayanlade & Maren Radeny, '[COVID-19 and food security in Sub-Saharan Africa: implications of lockdown during agricultural planting seasons](#)', *Nature*, September 2020
- Conciliation Resources and Saferworld, 'Facilitation guide on Gender-sensitive conflict analysis', October 2020: [available here](#) and [available here](#)
- ECDPM, '[International funding for peacebuilding: will covid-19 change or reinforce existing trends?](#)', September 2020
- Summer Forester and Cheryl O'Brien, '[Antidemocratic and Exclusionary Practices: COVID-19 and the Continuum of Violence](#)', *Politics & Gender*, 9 July 2020
- Marijn Hoijtink and Hanna L Muehlenhoff, '[The European Union as a Masculine Military Power: European Union Security and Defence Policy in 'Times of Crisis'](#)', *Political Studies Review*, November 2019
- International Crisis Group, '[Covid-19 and Conflict: Seven Trends to Watch](#)', Special Briefing No. 4, 24 March 2020
- International Crisis Group [webpage on COVID-19 and conflict](#)
- International Crisis Group [2020 Watch List event recordings](#)
- Joint Civil Society Statement, '[European 'Peace' Facility: Causing harm or bringing peace?](#)', November 2020
- King's College London, '[Understanding Violence' Seminar Series](#) (on Wednesday afternoons)
- Kvinna till Kvinna (Bela Kapur and Ola Saleh), '[A right not a gift: Women building peace](#)', 2020
- Kvinna till Kvinna, '[Shadow UNSC resolution on women, peace and security: women's economic rights, leadership and participation](#)', October 2020
- Kvinna till Kvinna, '[The Missing Peace: A gender brief on the current escalation between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorny-Karabakh](#)', September 2020
- Gerrit Kurtz and Christoph O. Meyer, '[Is conflict prevention a science, craft, or art? Moving beyond technocracy and wishful thinking](#)', *Global Affairs*, Vol. 5, No. 1, October 2018
- Christoph O. Meyer et al., '[How the COVID-19 crisis has affected security and defence-related aspects for the EU](#)', 27 July 2020
- Christoph O. Meyer et al., '[Warning about War: Conflict, Persuasion and Foreign Policy](#)', Cambridge University Press, August 2019
- Katariina Mustasilta, '[From bad to worse: The impact\(s\) of Covid-19 on conflict dynamics](#)', EU-ISS Brief No. 13, June 2020
- Katariina Mustasilta, '[The Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Peace and Conflict](#)', 23 October 2020
- Saferworld and Conciliation Resources, 'Effective local action: from early warning to peacebuilding', February 2016: [available here](#) and [available here](#)
- SPAN event, 'Turning the authoritarian tide: strategies for transforming securitisation', 28 October 2020, [recording available here](#)