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CSDN MEMBER STATE MEETING

Building Partnerships
to secure peace

Meeting Report
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European Peacebuilding Liaison Office

The European Peacebuilding Liaison Office (EPLO) is the largest independent civil society platform of European NGOs, NGO networks and think tanks that are committed to peacebuilding and the prevention of violent conflict. EPLO's mission is to influence European policymakers to take a more active role in securing peace and resolving and preventing conflict through nonviolent means in all regions of the world, and to do so more effectively.

Civil Society Dialogue Network

The Civil Society Dialogue Network (CSDN) is a mechanism for dialogue between civil society and EU policy-makers on issues related to peace and conflict. It is co-financed by the European Union (Neighbourhood Development and International Cooperation Instrument – Global Europe). It is managed by the European Peacebuilding Liaison Office (EPLO), a civil society network, in cooperation with the European Commission (EC) and the European External Action Service (EEAS). The fifth phase of the CSDN will last from 2023 to 2026. For more information, please visit the EPLO website.



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Building Partnerships to Secure Peace

■ Background

On 6 October, the European Peacebuilding Liaison Office (EPLO), in cooperation with the European External Action Service (EEAS), the European Commission's (EC) Service for Foreign Policy Instruments (FPI), and the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, organised a Civil Society Dialogue Network (CSDN) Member States Meeting in Rome.

This dialogue meeting provided a platform for policy-makers, mediation experts, and practitioners to discuss how to enhance peace mediation partnerships, focusing on adapting to present and future conflict dynamics, and exploring opportunities to strengthen collaboration, build joint mediation engagements and develop strategies to overcome political and operational challenges.

The CSDN meeting was held under Chatham House Rules and gathered 28 participants.

The following sections gather the key points and reflections that emerged during the discussions. The key findings of the meeting inspired a session at the 7th EU Peace Mediation Community of Practice (CoP).

| A challenging global context

The current global conflict landscape is increasingly complex and fragmented. Global dynamics are not shaped by a precise centre of gravity but reflect a multipolar world where regional powers are in competition. **Value-based approaches, international law, and multilateralism are increasingly being challenged**, leaving the European Union (EU) and its Member States (MS) struggling to find their role on the global stage.

This difficult situation is further exacerbated by a challenging financial environment. Funding for peacebuilding and mediation is decreasing, and the United Nations (UN) and its agencies are confronted by a deepening financial crisis. With conflicts on the rise worldwide, **the need for investment in peace mediation is higher than ever**.

Practitioners emphasise the need to advance inclusive approaches in peace mediation. However, both the **Youth, Peace and Security (YPS)**, and **Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agendas are losing momentum**. The progress achieved in the last 15 years,

particularly in conflict-affected and fragile countries, risks being reversed, and is often merely replaced by tokenistic commitments.

The EU is committed to a value-based foreign policy, yet it faces a profound **credibility crisis** internationally. The perceived double standards in its approaches to different conflicts have eroded trust and are hindering its ability to forge genuine partnerships, thereby undermining the effectiveness of its foreign policy. Addressing these challenges will be critical for the EU to advance its role as a credible and constructive global peace actor.

| A transactional approach to mediation

In the current global context, a transactional approach to peacemaking is favoured, with short-term, rapidly negotiated deals prioritised over the long-term comprehensive agreements that the EU, the UN and most MS have historically supported. As this transactional model gains prominence, **the EU's ability to participate meaningfully and sit at the negotiation table is reducing**. The lengthy decision-making process at the EU level further exacerbates this challenge.

Participants widely recognise that the added value of the EU's engagement on peace mediation lies in its **commitment to long-term engagement** and its **sophisticated and holistic approach to negotiations**. The main challenge for the EU, therefore, is to carve space for mediation efforts that prioritise depth and sustainability, and that advance a more nuanced understanding of conflicts. Without such approaches, **mediation risks being trivialised into superficial dealmaking**, lacking the transformative potential of more comprehensive peacemaking.

The broader mediation community continues to advance the traditional long-term engagement models, which often clash with current transactional trends and the complexity of an increasingly fragmented geopolitical context. To remain relevant, the **community must change and adapt, becoming more agile and innovative**. Participants stressed the need for greater open-mindedness in seeking partnerships and identifying new entry points for mediation engagements.

| Defining partnerships

Participants agreed on the importance of partnerships for the EU and MS as a means to adapt to the current geopolitical landscape and counter the risk of the EU's global influence diminishing further.

Trust was identified as a fundamental component for partnerships. It is demonstrated through the endurance of relationships and **commitments that extend beyond short-term pragmatic considerations**. For partnerships to be meaningful, they should move beyond simple cooperation and basic information exchange, to focus on more structured and substantive types of engagement.

Partnerships can have different shapes and characteristics depending on the objectives of the engagement and the specific mediation contexts. In addition to traditional governmental and institutional counterparts, participants underlined the importance of building partnerships with civil society, as well as with other actors, such as academia, businesses, and municipalities and local governments, which can provide a **more localised and nuanced understanding of conflict dynamics** and the internal diversity within countries. Supporting **networks of mediators and like-minded civil society actors** was also highlighted as a valuable strategy, in particular for the potential virtuous cycles prompted by sharing resources, opportunities and synergistic collaboration.

In contexts where the EU's decision-making has been slowed or is stuck due to disagreements among Member States, participants suggested advancing progress through “**coalitions of the willing**”, including in the area of peace mediation. Given the contextual nature of partnerships, the EU can identify entry points and **capitalise on the special relationships** that some individual member states might enjoy with third countries. This is particularly relevant in regions and countries where the EU has struggled to play a significant role despite the geographical proximity, such as Libya and Lebanon. This approach could be operationalised through smart appointments of EU Special Representatives (EUSRs) who have previously held strategic positions at member state level.

Ultimately, **support for peace mediation hinges on political will**. The broader peacebuilding and mediation community faces the significant challenge of demonstrating impact and persuading decision-makers of the value of investing in peace mediation and fostering partnerships in this key area.

The EU's transformational potential

Participants generally met with scepticism the idea that the EU itself should adopt a more transactional, interested-driven foreign policy. Instead, they identified the EU's focus on values, international law, and a more long-term and holistic approach to crises as its defining strength on the global stage. Several participants stressed that the EU should remain steadfast in upholding these principles, resisting pressure to conform to prevailing transactional trends. By maintaining **consistent, long-term engagement**, the

EU can provide more stability and predictability to mediation processes, thus reducing the risk of third countries engaging in “forum shopping”.

Participants noted that this approach does not imply isolation or inaction. On the contrary, such an attitude was seen as a necessary counterbalance to current developments and essential in providing **a complementary framework for engagement**. By maintaining this distinctive approach, the EU can exert meaningful influence on peace processes and create entry points for deeper engagement.

It was argued that the EU’s **sophistication** in reading international contexts puts it in a position to contribute critically to peace mediation efforts. The EU can **provide technical expertise** that is very much needed to transform quick deals into robust, implementable agreements, for example, in areas such as humanitarian negotiations, security sector reform, electoral support and transitional justice.

Compared to other international actors in peace mediation, the EU is seen to be particularly well equipped to operate effectively at **track 1.5 and track 2**, which is essential for both translating high-level agreements into actionable commitments and creating alternative channels to unstick processes that seem blocked at track 1.

Participants also observed that the **lack of formal partnerships can negatively impact existing initiatives**. Even when organisations share similar objectives, poor information-sharing and coordination – both among external partners and within EU institutions – can lead to dysfunctionalities, duplication and overall reduced impact.

Finally, it was noted that the EU itself can play a vital role in advocating for peace mediation as a priority foreign policy tool, helping to elevate its status and secure greater commitment from the broader international community.

The need for flexibility

Participants underlined how the impact of mediation is inherently challenging to measure in terms of immediate success, and that meaningful results are usually obtained through patience, adaptability and a willingness to embrace risk, which often clashes with the political pressure of showing visible outcomes.

Donor flexibility is seen as not merely a practical necessity, but as **a principle in itself for effective mediation**, closely linked to tolerance for risk. Engaging with difficult actors frequently requires persistence, a trial-and-error approach, creative problem-solving and innovation.

While donors generally understand this reality, participants highlighted that the mediation community faces growing pressure to demonstrate the tangible impact of their support and interventions. The expectations for showing positive results are sometimes inconsistent, with donors on the one hand seeking compelling stories, and on the other demanding empirical data. Participants highlighted how this **growing pressure reduces the appetite for experimental approaches and creativity**, which are essential elements in developing effective mediation engagements, but difficult to quantify through traditional performance indicators.

Despite this, there is common understanding that while peace agreements are the most visible outcomes, mediation also delivers critical – albeit less quantifiable – benefits, such as conflict prevention and trust-building. In order to foster constructive donor-recipient partnerships, both sides must openly **communicate their objectives, explain obstacles, and learn from failures**, while embracing a certain degree of risk. This transparency can help shift the focus from quantifiable metrics to qualitative indicators, which better capture the complexity of mediation and the progress attained.

Challenges and opportunities in partnerships with Gulf countries

As the EU is actively seeking to expand its partnerships in peace and security, the CSDN meeting held a session exploring the potential for mediation in EU and MS partnerships with the Gulf countries and the broader Mediterranean region.

Participants noted how relationships between the EU and the Gulf countries in engaging on specific conflicts has fluctuated, often becoming more difficult as conflicts have grown in complexity. For example, in the cases of Libya and Syria, the EU's collaboration with the League of Arab States showed promise but faltered as Member States' positions diverged in response to conflict developments. **Divergences among Member States on the nature of engagement with Gulf countries will likely complicate EU partnerships in the region**, with different perspectives and political will potentially testing the endurance of these collaborations. This dynamic has been evident in multiple contexts, and most recently on Gaza. In this light, a “coalition of the willing” approach was seen as a desired set up to offer a pragmatic path, allowing for incremental integration and a flexible engagement.

As the field of mediation grows more competitive, participants underlined that the EU's primary objective is not necessarily to identify new actors to support, but rather to **leverage its long experience as a coordinator and convener**. Gulf countries, while not new in mediation, could benefit from the EU's multidisciplinary approach, **its focus on**

specificity and competence to engage with third actors through diverse entry points, such as trade, infrastructure, energy, etc. In view of this, some participants suggested exploring capacity-building programmes, including secondment arrangements, to strengthen institutional mediation units in Gulf countries.

Some participants underlined the lack of connectivity between Gulf countries and the East Mediterranean, especially on economic issues. Through deeper partnerships, **the EU could foster dialogue and cooperation in technical areas**, such as connectivity, border security, and energy infrastructure, which can also serve as mediation entry points in regions where the EU is not sitting at the negotiating table.

It was also highlighted that these partnerships could generate tension on the value-based approach in external action, and that this could bring some MS and peace mediation practitioners to see EU partnerships in the region less favourably. However, it was also argued that there remain several areas of mutual interest, particularly in **promoting multilateralism and supporting the United Nations framework**. While diverging interpretations on values and principles, as well as on the definition of ‘peace’, emerge, **dialogue and transparency** on discussions over these topics could help **build mutual trust and understanding**.

Finally, participants highlighted a significant divergence in how mediators and peacebuilding practitioners, particularly at the global level, perceive both the idea of peace and the EU’s role in advancing it. **Many local actors see the EU and western partners with scepticism**, citing recent shifts in foreign policy priority, a perceived decline in support for peacebuilding initiatives, and reluctance to put pressure on partner governments to address the regression on the YPS and WPS agendas. Addressing these concerns and **managing reputational risks in the region will be crucial for the long-term sustainability of EU partnerships**.

Leveraging the EU and Member States’ added value

Across the three sessions of the meeting, participants identified several distinctive strengths of the EU’s approach to peace mediation that could be leveraged strategically through partnerships to improve effective mediation efforts:

- **Convening power:** the EU is unrivalled in its ability to bring parties together and promote dialogue. This can have a significant impact in preventing competition among mediators and improving coordination, especially when partnerships are with other regional actors.

- **Multidisciplinary approach:** unlike many international actors, the EU brings a holistic understanding of conflicts and can mobilise its expertise in many sectors to identify entry points for mediation.
- **Technical approach:** while the decision-making process may be slow, the EU possesses deep technical knowledge in many areas adjacent to peace mediation, such as security sector reform, border management, transitional justice, climate mitigation, etc. These make the EU a vital partner in complementing transactional peace deals.
- **Capacity-building:** the EU could make use of its technical expertise and embed it in partnerships to build capacity of other governments, civil society and even its own institutions, ensuring mediation is mainstreamed more broadly.
- **Track 2 experience:** the EU's partnerships with organisations supporting track 2 initiatives are critical to complement high-level deals. They are essential in both supporting concrete implementation of track 1 deals and creating alternative paths to unstuck processes that are blocked at the highest political level.
- **Regional approach:** by engaging partners regionally, the EU and MS can significantly increase coordination and trust among neighbouring countries. There is strong appetite for more harmonised approaches to overcome inter-state fragmented dynamics, especially in areas like energy, infrastructure, and border security.
- **Complementarity with Member States:** the EU can capitalise on individual Member States' unique relationships with third countries to identify entry points for mediation. At the same time, EU-MS partnerships can only thrive if Member States integrate an EU dimension into their external engagements.
- **Long-term engagement:** the EU's commitment to engage long term, focusing on values and sustainable peace, sets it apart from most other international actors. When the EU gives up on this approach, it loses its influential role in peace processes.
- **Strategic patience:** the EU's credibility is rooted in its long-term strategic thinking. By prioritising the sustainability of agreements over transactional interests, the EU can maintain its transformative potential. On the other hand, trying to adapt to a more transactional landscape without sufficiently swift decision-making processes risks alienating partners and diminishing its global relevance. Willingness to invest in the long term, even when it goes against prevailing trends, can reinforce the EU's legitimacy in building peace mediation partnerships globally.