Civil Society Dialogue Network Policy Meeting

EU Engagement for Peace: Exchange with Civil Society Partners

Thursday 6 October 2022, Brussels

Meeting Report

Background

The Russian war against Ukraine is shaping international peace and security at several levels, including the geopolitical and multilateral, and affects regional and national dynamics, with many fearing further escalation. The risk of violent conflict is rising in many fragile and conflict-affected countries around the world due to pressing food insecurity, rising prices, shifting alliances, rampant disinformation and increased pressure on international law and collective security frameworks.

This meeting brought together leading civil society experts to discuss some of the main impacts of peace and security dynamics that result from the Russian aggression in Ukraine, and to recommend ways for the European Union (EU) to maximise its contribution to peace, multilateralism and stability in the region and globally, using the tools at its disposal within the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP).

The objectives of the meeting consisted in: identifying lessons and recommendations to inform future EU engagements for peace in the region; capturing civil society perspectives on the main elements and risks, and recommendations to inform future EU engagements for peace globally, in the light of the new geopolitical and security situation and threats to peace. The meeting brought together 66 participants, including senior EU officials from the European Commission (EC) and the European External Action Service (EEAS), and the leadership of established peacebuilding civil society organisations (CSOs). Discussions were held under the Chatham House Rule.

This report includes the key points and recommendations which were expressed in the meeting. They may not be attributed to any participating individual or organisation, nor do they necessarily represent the views of all the meeting participants, the European Peacebuilding Liaison Office (EPLO) and its member organisations, or the EU institutions.

The following key points and recommendations emerged from the discussions.

Reflections on the global implications of the Russian war against Ukraine

Implications on global issues and other conflicts

- The food and energy crises resulting from the war against Ukraine, as well as current inflationary trends, are exposing economic vulnerabilities of countries across the world. This is particularly concerning for countries that only have small reserves in dollars and large public debts. The discontent emerging from the difficult economic situation, and the potentially repressive responses that many governments could adopt, will have serious implications on the stability of countries in the Middle East that do not produce oil (e.g., Tunisia, Lebanon and Egypt), South Asian countries such as Pakistan and Sri

Lanka, and African countries in transition (e.g., Sudan, Ethiopia). Rising popular discontent can also hinder progresses in fragile democracies (e.g., South Africa, Ghana, Kenya, Senegal).

- The geopolitics of the war against Ukraine has an impact in other contexts where tensions between the West and Russia are visible, such as Mali, Burkina Faso and the Central African Republic. Formal support for Russia (other than abstention in United Nations fora) by some African governments could lead the EU and its Member States to radically reduce their aid support to these countries, which would have substantial implications for the humanitarian situation.

- The strong diplomatic focus on the war against Ukraine by the EU and its Member States risks to draw attention away from fragile peace processes (e.g., Tigray, the Democratic Republic of Congo), where more engagement by the international community, including the EU, would be needed. In addition, the decision of the EU and EU Member States to increase the budget for humanitarian support towards Ukraine could lead to decreasing humanitarian support in other regions of the world.

- Different actors backed by the Russian government are carrying out disinformation and misinformation campaigns that – especially but not uniquely in the context of Ukraine – are contributing to the polarisation of the public opinion and undermining social cohesion within the EU and in other regions, like the Sahel, the Middle East, and the Western Balkans. Russian-backed disinformation is effective and is having negative implications for the perception of the EU and EU Member States in third countries.

- Media and Western political leaders often describe Ukraine as a united and cohesive entity, and the war is portrayed through the oversimplified dichotomy of Russia vs the West. This easy-to-read narrative ignores existing tensions and divisions within Ukraine, and focuses on the individual responsibilities of Vladimir Putin instead of looking at structural and systemic issues more holistically. This approach reduces space for dialogue (e.g., engaging with local authorities or representatives of the Orthodox Church), leads to frustrations among practitioners operating at local level, and risks to be reproduced in other complex contexts (e.g., Georgia, Nagorno-Karabakh, Moldova) where many other factors are at play.

- The implications of the war against Ukraine on security inside the EU risk being overlooked by policy-makers. Illicit arms flows towards EU Member States can strengthen organised crime and increase levels of violence at community level.

Implications on peacebuilding work

- Inter-state conflicts such as those in Ukraine and in the Nagorno-Karabakh are not about rebel groups challenging authorities, but about states competing for territorial control. This situation challenges the paradigm of power-sharing that is at the basis of most mediation approaches, and leads practitioners to rethink their *modi operandi*.

- This and other recent crises (e.g., Myanmar, Afghanistan) encourage a reflection on the duality between values/principles and support for peace, especially concerning neutral positioning in mediation. Reflections on impartiality become increasingly relevant also in relation to humanitarian aid.

- The war against Ukraine is showing how very diverse issues can be weaponised by the warring parties (e.g., energy, food, visas, cyberattacks, etc.). This means that peacebuilding efforts should now be thought through a new and different intellectual framework, which is proving to be challenging for both civil society and international actors such as the EU due to a lack of specific expertise.

- The current food and energy crises are being exacerbated by the war in Ukraine but are the result of wider structural problems, including in connection to the climate crisis. For example, food and water insecurity was already acute in the Middle East and North Africa before the war against Ukraine and is worsening because of it. Linkages

between conflict, climate and humanitarian issues shows clearly how important it is to address structural problems through a triple-nexus approach.

- The start of a major war on the European continent has increased the awareness on the importance of maintaining and strengthening peace within the EU. This represents an opportunity to advocate for more support for peace organisations inside Europe, and to integrate peace and conflict considerations in EU programming on other issues, such as youth, social cohesion, development, etc.

Implications on the international role of the EU

- The credibility of the EU not only depends on its effectiveness in addressing conflicts in its neighbourhood, but also on how cohesive and consistent its foreign policy towards other regions of the world is. For example, the effectiveness of peacebuilding initiatives in Africa also depends on how consistent the EU is in promoting in its neighbourhood the same principles and policies it supports in Africa. Double standards in the EU's position in different contexts (e.g., Israel-Palestine, Western Sahara) have negative implications on its credibility.
- Since the start of the war against Ukraine, peace discussions and the response of the international community have so far mostly focused on military support, including at the EU level. Other aspects, such as support to existing peace initiatives by Ukrainian CSOs and local authorities, as well as the democratic resistance and civil society within Russia, have been largely overlooked.
- Examples of EU engagement in the Sahel and other contexts have demonstrated that a strong focus on a military response to security issues can have a negative effect on the perceived security by the communities and weaken social cohesion. Further increasing the focus on military responses, including on threats within the EU territory, risks compromising the credibility of the EU as an international peace actor and therefore its comparative advantage in dealing with crises elsewhere in the world.

Recommendations for EU peace engagement

Engaging with civil society and local communities

- The EU should strengthen its engagement with civil society, including by formalising structured dialogues and exchanges, and involving relevant civil society actors at a higher political level. The amount of financial resources the EU currently allocates to supporting civil society is small. A substantial increase would contribute positively to peacebuilding efforts across the world, including in Ukraine, and would not represent neither a political nor a financial risk.
- The EU should further engage with local civil society and support locally-led peacebuilding efforts. This is particularly important for Ukraine, where multiple initiatives driven by local civil society exist and focus on a wide range of topics, including mediation and dialogue, youth, peace education, and trauma healing. In addition to providing financial support, the EU should also work to make sure local CSOs capabilities are strengthened, and needs and perspectives from minorities are taken into consideration.
- International actors that operate in Ukraine, including international NGOs and the EU, should make sure that their initiatives do not inadvertently hinder existing locally-led efforts to promote peace. For this, it is crucial that their engagement is informed by thorough conflict analysis and is conflict sensitive at all stages.
- The EU should pay particular attention to the role played by women's rights groups in the context of the war in Ukraine. Many organisations and individuals are influential at community level, especially for their work on mediation and dialogue, and their security

expertise is often overlooked. Women's rights organisations should not be exclusively consulted on gender aspects, but be considered for their expertise and first-hand experience on security issues too.

- Examples from other conflict contexts (e.g., Colombia) have shown the positive role diaspora communities, refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) can play in promoting peace. The EU should consider supporting initiatives that strengthen the role of these groups as agents for constructive conflict transformation.

- The EU should provide funding to CSOs on a longer-term perspective in order to strengthen the effectiveness of peacebuilding initiatives. CSOs are frustrated by short term approaches by donors and have to dedicate a large part of their resources to reporting and fundraising instead of focusing on project implementation. Funding should also be more flexible so that CSOs are able to better adapt to rapidly changing security contexts.

- The EU should make sure that its sanctions against Russia and its policies on terrorist financing do not inadvertently hinder operations and restrict access to funding for CSOs that operate in the occupied Ukrainian territories, in order to prevent these territories to be pushed in an even worse conflict situation. This could help to rethink wider structural engagements with communities in countries subjected to an EU sanctions regime (e.g., Syria, Afghanistan, Myanmar, etc.).

- The war does not have the same impact across all Ukrainian regions and provinces. While it is important to have continuous exchange with the Ukrainian government, the EU should also strengthen its engagement and capacity building initiatives with Ukrainian cities and municipalities, especially given the crucial role local authorities play in sustaining peace at local level.

Addressing long-term challenges

- The EU should address all issues related to peace and security taking into consideration the climate crisis, including by investing more in understanding linkages between climate and conflict, and implications of conflicts on environmental degradation and climate change.

- In the context of the Green Transition, the EU should make sure that its investments are conflict sensitive and in harmony with existing resilience initiatives at community level, especially in the Global South. For example, industrial agriculture is a thriving sector where many opportunities to invest positively in building local capacities and initiatives exist.

- The connections between conflict, development, climate, humanitarian, and health issues show how important it is for the international community to work better together and exchange expertise, including through the triple-nexus lens. Different EU institutions and bodies should break silos and cooperate in a more integrated manner when it comes to addressing crises.

- Post-conflict reconstruction efforts should focus first and foremost on the specific needs of the populations affected by conflicts, rather than be driven by short term infrastructures-oriented approaches. Reconstruction should be addressed with a long-term focus, taking into account the perspectives of local populations, their security needs and concerns, and the impact the war has had on social cohesion. Despite being central in post-conflict settings and social cohesion, mental health issues and psychosocial components in peacebuilding work are often overlooked due to a lack of expertise.

- The EU should also step up efforts to counter disinformation and other initiatives aiming at weakening social cohesion. For example, the EU could play a leadership role in promoting international good governance of the internet. This would help to ensure disinformation is addressed with a human rights and conflict sensitive approach, while

making sure the fight against disinformation is not used as an excuse by governments to repress civic spaces and the freedom of speech.

- Democracy support is another area where the EU could provide an added value at the global level. The EU should strengthen its support across all stages of the electoral cycle and over a long term, focusing more on citizen engagement and the needs of the populations (e.g., economic issues, access to land, etc.), and less on specific technical details and the ability of the partner country to follow the timelines strictly.

The EU as a peace actor

- The war against Ukraine represented a wake-up call for EU policy-makers on their approach towards the Western Balkans. The current political context in the region (no new changes of governments foreseen until 2024) opens a window of opportunity to strengthen engagement, by taking bold decisions and being clearer on the accession process. This is particularly important given the large role Russia plays as a normative actor in the region, and China's strong presence around major infrastructural projects and state companies.

- The EU should support the countries in its neighbourhood with more concrete and credible policy commitments in the framework of accession processes (e.g., visa settlements, tariffs, technical support, etc.) and more mutual trust-building initiatives, including towards Georgia and Moldova. At the same time, the EU should be more punctual, consistent and stricter in assessing progresses on reforms, especially with countries in the Western Balkans.

- Given that authoritarian governments have the tendency to become more aggressive and repressive towards the population, the EU should seek opportunities to engage them more systematically. A consistent engagement stressing the centrality of a rules-based international order rather than specific economic or geopolitical interests would increase the EU's credibility as an international actor and consequentially its leverage and political influence.

- The EU should strengthen partnerships and collaboration with other multilateral organisations addressing security issues. In the context of the war against Ukraine, the EU should further support the role of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), which is also crucial for peace and security in Central Asia. In Africa, the EU should support co-operation initiatives between African NGO networks and the African Union (AU) on issues such as access to justice, elections and mediation.

- In order to improve consistency in its foreign policy, reduce dissonance among Member States, and be able to take decisions more promptly, the EU should consider rethinking its decision-making processes, including by reforming the unanimity rule on Common Foreign and Security Policy.

- The EU should lead by example by increasing resources and strengthening initiatives on co-operation between military and civilian actors, including in the context of Common Security and Defence Policy missions. A stronger integrated approach within the EU, including more engagement between the EU Special Representatives and the other EU institutions, would help to make the EU act in a more credible way.

- As it has become clearer that peace within Europe, including the EU territory, cannot be taken for granted, peacebuilding work cannot be exclusively sustained by volunteers and activists. The EU should further support peace initiatives within its territory and take on a leadership political role when it comes to supporting peace at the global level. Upcoming policy developments (e.g., the EU Concept on Stabilisation) could represent an opportunity to further stress the importance of human security and unarmed approaches in crisis management.

- The EU should pay particular attention to the spill over effects of the war within its territory. In particular, the EU should look at the illegal influx of small arms and light weapons from Ukraine, which could considerably strengthen organised crime networks and terrorist organisations, with serious impacts on risks of violence at community level.
- The EU should further promote peace and non-violence in its strategic communication in order to promote narratives of non-violence and peace, and carry out initiatives contrasting malign foreign influence, especially in regions where civil society is not well equipped to face this issue.