The Role of EU Delegations on peace and security

Background Paper

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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 and 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.

The objective of this background paper is to provide a brief overview of the functioning of European Union (EU) Delegations and their role in implementing and supporting EU policies related to peace and security. It has been prepared in advance of the online CSDN Training Seminar taking place on 18 February 2025.

The learning objectives of the training seminar are:

- Enabling the participants to deepen their understanding of the EU as a foreign policy actor, institutional capacity in conflict prevention and peacebuilding, with an emphasis on geographic dimensions in the EU's engagement in third countries, including the role of EU Delegations.
- Learning about obstacles and potential of the EU to conduct effective peacebuilding and gain practical knowledge through concrete examples of advocating for more effective policies and programmes on conflict prevention and peacebuilding and engaging with EU Delegations.

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Establishment of EU Delegations

EU Delegations (EUDs) were established with the entry into force of the Treaty of Lisbon in 2009 and became operational in 2011. Prior to the Lisbon Treaty, the EU was represented in third countries by offices of the European Commission (EC), which primarily handled matters in areas of exclusive or shared competences, such as trade, humanitarian aid, and development[1]. With their establishment, EUDs took on broader responsibilities, including diplomatic representation, administrative and operational functions, and technical cooperation.

The legal basis for EUDs is provided in Article 221 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the EU (TFEU), which states:

1. Union delegations in third countries and at international organisations shall represent the Union.
2. Union delegations shall be placed under the authority of the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. They shall act in close cooperation with Member States' diplomatic and consular missions.

Under this framework, EUDs operate as the external frontline of the EU, ensuring that the Union's positions and policies are implemented in close collaboration with Member States. They carry out different functions and hold various responsibilities, which include:

- Representing the EU's foreign policy and interests in third countries and international organisations across multiple policy areas and sectors (e.g., trade, development, energy, fisheries, health, agriculture, etc.).
- Implementing EU development and peacebuilding policy, through the execution of multiannual programmes.
- Coordinating EU Member States' diplomatic and consular missions.
- Providing diplomatic and consular support for EU Member States with limited diplomatic representation.

Structure and operational dynamics
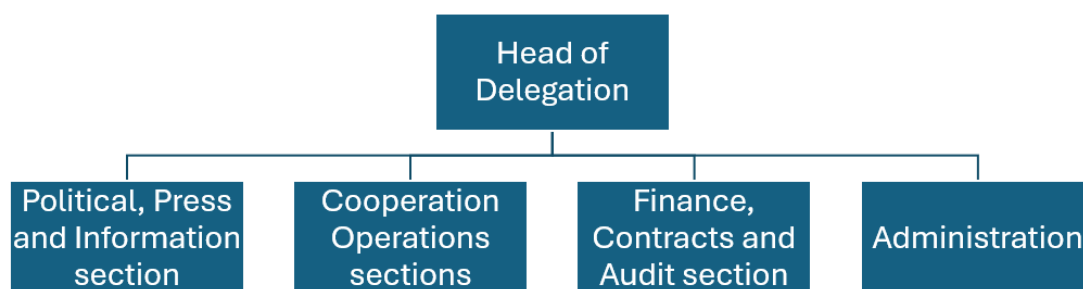
EU Delegations today function as a hybrid structure, combining diplomatic tasks, carried out by staff from the European External Action Service (EEAS), and operational responsibilities, such

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[1] For a detailed overview of the role and function of the different EU institutions, please consult the Mapping of EU Actors.

as development cooperation and trade, managed by EC staff – usually from DG INTPA (International Partnerships) and DG NEAR (European Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations)[2].

The Service for Foreign Policy Instruments (FPI) also has five Regional Teams, plus additional antennas, in EU Delegations, which contribute to designing and implementing projects closer to the place of action. FPI Regional Teams include:

- Americas: HQ in Washington; antennas in Brazil, Canada, Colombia, Mexico
- West and Central Africa: HQ in Dakar
- East and Southern Africa: HQ in Nairobi
- Middle East and North Africa: HQ in Beirut, antennas in Saudi Arabia and Tunisia
- Asia/Pacific: HQ in Bangkok, antennas in China, India, Japan, Pakistan and South Korea
- Europe and Central Asia: HQ in Brussels, antennas in Austria (EUD to International Organisations in Vienna), Moldova and Ukraine

While EEAS staff primarily focus on political analysis, and EC staff handle operational aspects, this distinction is not always clear-cut. Coordination among the different sections varies depending on the size of the delegation, management style and leadership of the Head of Delegation (HoD), and the level of support from the headquarters in Brussels.

Additionally, the presence of other EU actors in a country, such as Special Representatives or Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) missions, adds complexity to the EUD's competences and operations. Depending on the EU's priorities, EUDs may also develop special working relationships with different Directorate-Generals (DGs) of the European Commission, such as DG JUST (Justice), DG HOME (Migration and Home Affairs), and DG MARE (Maritime Affairs and Fisheries).

Effectiveness

The clarity and effectiveness of the work of EUDs depends on several factors including the performance and mandate of HoDs, the amount and quality of staffing and resources given to them, existing coordination and bureaucratic competition with headquarters, the influence of individual Member States in the specific geographic context in question, the political and institutional landscape, including historical ties (and colonial past), and the relationship with the third country.

Given the complexity of the EU framework and intricacies of its relationships with Member States and their Embassies, EUDs operate with a certain level of "agency slack"[3], i.e. a level of independence in its action that was not necessarily foreseen by design or desired by its mandating institutions. In practice, the EUD's role in EU foreign policy is not a simple hierarchical relationship with Brussels and the Member States. On the contrary, it is a result of the complexity of interactions between multiple – often competing – actors, including the EEAS, EC, the EU Council and EU Member States.

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[2] DG NEAR was operational until 1 February 2025. Following an institutional restructuring, DG MENA (Middle East, North Africa and the Gulf) and DG ENEST (Enlargement and Eastern Neighborhood) have taken over its responsibilities.
[3] Ewers-Peters, N. M. (2024). The EU's longer arm abroad: the role of EU Delegations in crisis management. *European Security*, 1–19. https://doi.org/10.1080/09662839.2024.2402793
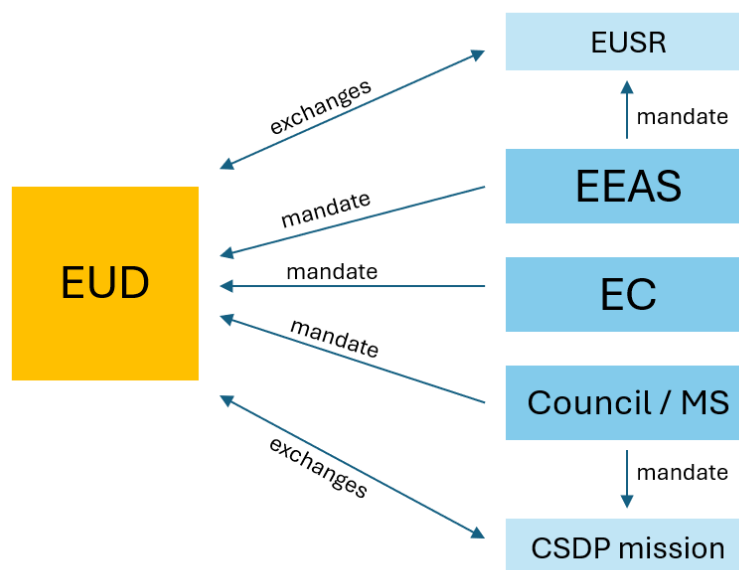
Influence of EU Delegations on policymaking

EUDs play an important role in designing, programming and implementing EU peacebuilding and conflict prevention policy. They are also key in coordinating these efforts with Member States, as well as enhancing the visibility of EU initiatives.

Additionally, EUDs contribute to shaping the EU priorities for external funding. The current Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF), which runs until 2027, emphasises geographic allocations over thematic ones, particularly within the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI – Global Europe), which funds peacebuilding and conflict prevention initiatives. This geographic focus is expected to persist, as negotiations for the next MFF are set to begin in 2025. Given the influence of EUDs in identifying priorities for funding, civil society engagement with EU delegations is crucial to ensure that local priorities are reflected in EU strategies and programming.

EU Delegations are also key players in joint programming between the EU and Member States, as well as in multi-stakeholder approaches in EU strategies and plans. These strategies include action documents related to private sector engagement, which can have significant implications for development, peace, and security.

Role in crisis management

Despite maintain a presence in partner countries, EUDs have an overall relatively limited influence in crisis management. EUDs may often assume a prominent role in early-stage conflict prevention and response, as their proximity allows them to address urgent security needs and provide intelligence and analysis to other EU institutions more easily. However, in the development of a more structured approach to crisis management, decision-making remains at headquarter and in Member States. For example, the establishment and deployment of a CSDP mission is determined by Member States, with planning and operational command managed from Brussels.

While the mandates of CSDP missions are usually rather clear and well distinguished from the tasks of EUDs, overlaps can occur in areas such as advisory roles, support to the partner country ministries, and collaboration with security forces and local authorities. In this regard, the

main challenge lies in coordination, as the complexity and overlapping responsibilities of the various EU entities risks fragmenting information flows and reducing overall effectiveness and efficiency.

Role of Civil Society

EU Delegations are responsible for EU programming at the country level. They manage calls for proposals, oversee the selection of successful projects, and collaborate with headquarters in Brussels on these processes. They are also responsible for organising the EU's political and policy dialogue with local authorities, national governments, and regional organisations.

The relationship between civil society and EUDs is therefore crucial for influencing funding priorities and ensuring access to information. EUDs typically have a designated focal point for civil society engagement, although in some cases, this role is covered by officials with other responsibilities, such as gender or human rights focal points.

The EU's relation with civil society started to be developed more structurally with the adoption of the European Commission Communication "The Roots of Democracy and Sustainable Development: Europe's Engagement with Civil Society in External Relations"[4] in 2012. This document recognised CSOs as key actors and mandated EUDs to engage with them in a more structured and strategic manner. As a result, in 2014, the EU introduced "Country Roadmaps" for civil society engagement, which provide analyses of the civil society landscape, highlight challenges and opportunities in engaging them, and therefore improve the predictability and effectiveness of EU actions.

The development of these roadmaps has varied across regions, depending on the level of interest from EU Delegations and the perceived relevance of civil society to EU priorities in each country. While these roadmaps are rarely published, they have facilitated structured dialogue and improved alignment of EU programming with civil society priorities. Some EU Delegations have gradually updated their roadmaps to incorporate new priorities that inform ongoing programming cycles.

However, the extent to which EU Delegations engage strategically with civil society depends on multiple factors, including the EUD's operational capacity, and staff motivation and ability to translate policy into practice. Bureaucratic rigidity and lack of flexibility has often been identified by civil society as a critical point hindering access to non-traditional civil society. This represents a considerable challenge in promoting inclusive governance and reaching small-scale and grassroots organisations.

Recent trends

In recent years, there has been a gradual shift toward aligning development cooperation more closely with geopolitics and internal security priorities. Traditional development cooperation has increasingly moved toward infrastructure and investment-oriented initiatives (Global Gateway), with a greater emphasis on the role of business and the private sector.

In late 2024, leaked documents revealed some plans by the European Commission to significantly reduce EUD staff worldwide. This would include a refocus on a core group of main priority countries for the EU and a reduction in DG INTPA's staff presence from approximately 100 EUDs to 18 regional hubs.

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[4] The Communication can be accessed at the following link: https://www.eeas.europa.eu/node/5969_en

The impact of these changes on civil society is uncertain. While support for civil society at the EU level has remained somewhat stable in recent years, the shrinking civic space in many third countries – as well as within some EU Member States – has made interactions between CSOs and EUDs more sensitive and challenging.

Furthermore, other evolving factors are making civil society engagement more challenging. Increased administrative and accountability requirements for CSOs have created operational barriers, and international donors in general are increasingly adopting a "management-oriented" rather than "partnership-oriented" approach, emphasising service delivery over cooperation.

Finally, it is worth noting that the EU has increased its focus on local ownership, but risk aversion in funding and limited capacity for the EU to manage small grants are making it difficult to materialise.