



# THE EU'S APPROACH TO FRAGILITY AND ITS CONFLICT DRIVERS: CHANGES, RISKS AND OPPORTUNITIES

## Discussion Paper

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## European Peacebuilding Liaison Office (EPLO)

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# Introduction

This Discussion Paper assesses the evolution of the European Union's (EU) engagement in fragile and conflict-affected contexts in light of geopolitical shifts, institutional reform and negotiations on the 2028–2034 Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF). It examines the risks and operational implications of these developments for conflict prevention and peacebuilding, and proposes policy recommendations to safeguard coherence and effectiveness, at a time when the EU is developing its new integrated approach to fragility under the coordination of DG ECHO.

EU external action is undergoing a significant transformation. Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, rising geopolitical competition, growing defence spending, internal economic pressures, and calls for increased strategic autonomy are reshaping EU priorities. Migration also remains a key political issue in national politics across Europe, as well as at the EU level.

To meet these internal and external demands, the EU is increasingly aligning its external action and development financing with its internal objectives around competitiveness, defence, and resilience. While the EU has not abandoned its commitments to values-based partnership or global public goods including development and peacebuilding, the recent political and policy changes in Brussels have raised legitimate concerns on: i) whether the EU can maintain its commitment to values and principles while pursuing interest-based partnerships; ii) if the focus on infrastructure investment and private sector-focused cooperation will be compatible with fragile and conflict affected contexts; and iii) whether the EU will maintain its leading role as a global development and peacebuilding actor.

Against this backdrop, this discussion paper examines the ongoing evolution of the EU's engagement in fragile and conflict-affected contexts. It aims to:

- Provide an overview of the EU's past approaches to fragility and its conflict drivers;
- Discuss proposed changes to the EU's approach to fragility and identify risks and opportunities; and
- Provide actionable recommendations to strengthen coherence, effectiveness, and strategic clarity.

The analysis is based on a targeted literature review of recent policy documents, peer reviews, and analytical reports, complemented by eight semi-structured interviews conducted with officials from EU institutions and Delegations, member states and national development agencies, an international organisation and civil society organisations (CSOs).

## The evolution of the EU's approach to fragility

This section examines how fragility and conflict prevention have been conceptualised and operationalised in EU external action. After outlining past approaches, it analyses the EU's policy and political shift toward an interest-driven, infrastructure-focused, and private sector-centered model of development cooperation, highlighting the tensions and risks this poses to its stated commitment to addressing fragility and underlying conflict drivers.

### ■ The integrated approach as a holistic path to addressing fragility

The EU has been actively articulating its ambitions and strategies on conflict prevention, crisis response and peacebuilding since 2003. The earlier basis to work on peacebuilding and security was a recognition of the link between security and development, namely that peace is a precondition for development. The EU's approach to fragility and its conflict drivers has evolved over the years. Since 2016, the integrated approach has been used as a conceptual framing to structure the EU's response to external crises and fragility. With this framing, the EU aimed to act in a multiphased (at different phases of a conflict), multi-dimensional (spanning different EU instruments and actors from Delegations, to member states to CSDP missions), multi-level (addressing conflict at local, national, regional and global levels) and multilateral (engaging all actors relevant for resolution) manner.<sup>1</sup>

**Conceptually, the integrated approach underlined the EU's understanding of the multi-faceted and non-linear dimension of conflict and peacebuilding.** It underscored the need to address these in a more strategic and iterative manner rather than as simply operational or linear engagements.<sup>2</sup>

The EU's funding instruments were also progressively adapted to allow for more flexible and multilevel funding<sup>3</sup>, enabling proactive engagement by the EU and enhancing the effectiveness of its support.<sup>4</sup> Between 2013 and 2018, the EU is said to have allocated €5.6 billion for conflict prevention and peacebuilding, even if the EU does not have any clear

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<sup>1</sup> Debuysere, L. & Blockmans, S. (2021). *The EU's integrated approach to crisis response: Learning from the UN, NATO and OSCE*. In R. Mac Ginty, S. Pogodda & O. P. Richmond (Eds.), *The EU and crisis response* (pp. 86–114). Manchester University Press.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> European Commission (2020). *External Evaluation of EU's Support to Conflict Prevention and Peacebuilding (2013–2018) – Final Report Volume I*. European Commission.

<sup>4</sup> Hauck V. (2020). *EU's support to conflict prevention and peacebuilding*. Impulse 9/2020, 16 December 2020. FriEnt.

conceptual frameworks which define its support for conflict prevention.<sup>5</sup> When the EU merged its financial instruments in the Neighbourhood Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI) in 2021, aside from geographic pillars that could fund peacebuilding, around €6.4 billion was made available for crisis response and peacebuilding.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, specific thematic pillars ensured the EU's engagement in peacebuilding and other topics relevant for conflict-affected contexts. These were the Thematic Programmes on Human Rights and Democracy (€1.362 billion), Civil Society Organisations (€ 1.362 billion) and Peace, Stability and Conflict Prevention (€908 million).<sup>7</sup> A non-programmable pillar, the Rapid Response Pillar, was allocated €3.2 billion.<sup>8</sup> This aimed at responding to emerging crises as well as opportunities for peace, and at financing activities that cut across institutional mandates such as Humanitarian, Development and Peace (HDP) activities.

The multiplicity of funding modalities, coupled with the availability of dedicated funding for fragility and its conflict drivers allowed for proactive engagement on the topic. As an external evaluation of the EU's support for conflict prevention and peacebuilding for 2013-2018 noted,<sup>9</sup> the EU's substantial financial allocation, willingness to engage in complex settings, and ability to combine financial support with political engagement earned it a unique value-add in comparison to other international actors.<sup>10</sup>

## ■ A shift toward interest-based partnerships and geopolitical prioritisation

To cope with internal and external changes, **the EU's adapted external action foresees increasing focus on security in the neighbourhood, a drive to gain more visibility and recognition in comparison to strategic competitors, and aligning external action and development cooperation with internal economic and geopolitical interests.** This shift results in increased attention to Ukraine and the Eastern Neighbourhood,<sup>11</sup> an intention to

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<sup>5</sup> Hauck V. (2018). *How the EU can step up its support to conflict prevention and peacebuilding*. Commentary, 7 December 2020. ECDPM.

<sup>6</sup> Hauck, V., & Desmidt, S. (2024). *The EU risks neglecting fragile and conflict-affected countries*. Commentary, 17 June 2024. ECDPM.

<sup>7</sup> Sergejeff, D. & Jones, A. (2022). *Catching up with Global Europe: 15 questions on the EU's new financial instrument answered*. Briefing Note No. 144. ECDPM, p. 2.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> European Commission (2020). *External Evaluation of EU's Support to Conflict Prevention and Peacebuilding (2013-2018) - Final Report Volume 1*. European Commission.

<sup>10</sup> Hauck V. (2020). *EU's support to conflict prevention and peacebuilding*. Impulse 9/2020, 16 December 2020. FriEnt.

<sup>11</sup> Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2025). *States of Fragility 2025*. OECD, p.25; EU development co-operation increasingly focuses on ODA-eligible countries in Europe, particularly Ukraine. Including Ukraine, 60.8% of bilateral ODA from EU institutions goes to ODA-eligible countries in Europe, reflecting geopolitical priorities.

pursue interest-based partnerships, a leaning towards financing strategic infrastructure projects, and increasing engagement with the private sector. These trends were reflected in the NDICI in 2021, and now in the proposed Global Europe Instrument (2025), but also in the launch of Global Gateway in 2021, and in the introduction of the Team Europe approach.

These choices are driven by, among other things: i) the EU's heightened ambition to be a more pronounced geopolitical actor; ii) the desire to engage in interest-based partnerships, where external action is expected to generate value for the EU; iii) the focus on infrastructure investment as a way to attain the first two points; and iv) a growing interest (and necessity) to involve European private sector and private finance in international development, particularly for the realisation of Global Gateway.

Despite the evolving political context in Europe, the EU's rhetoric and policy discourse demonstrate its commitment to addressing fragility, fostering resilience, and supporting peacebuilding. The extent to which these commitments will be matched by political will and financial resources, however, is still uncertain. However, increased concentration of funding towards some partners with lower levels of fragility, such as in the Eastern Neighbourhood, and the shift toward private-sector and infrastructure-led development cooperation raise concerns.

### **Global Gateway: the limits of private sector-oriented development**

Launched in 2021, the Global Gateway is framed as a strategy that will structure the EU's international engagement in alignment with the European Commission (EC)'s ambition to be a 'geopolitical Commission'. The Global Gateway aims to provide EU funding and leverage private finance for large-scale, visible infrastructure projects which will be carried out with/through the European private sector in partner countries.<sup>12</sup>

**The commercial and private sector focus of the Global Gateway has raised concerns around its suitability for fragile and conflict-affected contexts,**<sup>13</sup> which may not be automatically investment-friendly.<sup>14</sup> While 41 out of 61 Global Gateway initiatives are located in extremely or highly fragile contexts, and 37% of flagship projects under Global Gateway are in Least Developed Countries (LDCs), there is no publicly accessible information on the financial volumes attached to these investments.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> European Commission (2021). *Global Gateway: up to €300 billion for the European Union's strategy to boost sustainable links around the world*. 1 December 2021. European Commission.

<sup>13</sup> Brees, I. (2025). *The Global Gateway's missing ingredient: Adding peace to the mix*. Commentary, 26 November 2025. ECDPM.

<sup>14</sup> Fabre, C. and Spencer Bernard, S. (2025). *Understanding fragility: Why should the EU care?*. Development Matters, 1 January 2025. OECD.

<sup>15</sup> Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2025). *States of Fragility 2025*. OECD, p.27.

To counter the risk of exclusion of LDCs or fragile contexts, the EU has developed the ‘360-degree approach’. This approach is aimed at creating an enabling environment for investment. With this approach, EU funds will also be deployed to address structural weaknesses in partner countries, combining investment with support to regulatory frameworks, technical assistance, and skills development.

The 360-degree approach is described as a unique proposition compared to other global actors’ offers. It is also seen, at the political level, as a sufficient solution to the risk of leaving some partners behind. However, interpretations of what the 360-degree approach means vary widely. Some view it narrowly as a ‘do no harm’ principle; others interpret it as regulatory and technical capacity support; still others see it as broader investments in education and health to complement infrastructure-heavy investments in climate, energy and digital sectors.<sup>16</sup> **There is a lack of shared understanding, even in EU institutions, on what the 360 degree approach entails,<sup>17</sup> and how to operationalise it in fragile contexts.<sup>18</sup>**

Similarly, a “differentiated approach” has been proposed for fragile and conflict-affected countries.<sup>19</sup> In Ursula von der Leyen’s mission letter to Joseph Síkela, Commissioner for International Partnerships, the Commissioner is tasked with developing a differentiated approach for LDCs, conflict-affected areas, fragile contexts, and other complex settings. The need to develop and apply such an approach is also reiterated in the proposed regulation establishing Global Europe.<sup>20</sup> Essentially, the differentiated approach recognises the diverse realities of the EU’s partners and seeks to make the EU’s engagement effective not only in middle-income countries but also in LDCs and conflict-affected regions, where the Global Gateway’s orientation towards funding large-scale strategic infrastructure projects and empowering the private sector may not be automatically feasible. In theory, the differentiated approach, in combination with the 360 approach of the Global Gateway, would allow for engagement and the accompanying grant-based resources to work in fragile contexts. However, **there is no clarity as of yet on what this differentiated approach would entail and the criteria on which differentiation would be made.**

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<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p.51–52

<sup>17</sup> Hauck, V., & Desmidt, S. (2025). *Will fragility get the attention it needs in the EU’s next MFF?* Commentary, 9 April 2025. ECDPM.

<sup>18</sup> Interviewee, European Commission, 2026.

<sup>19</sup> European Commission (2024). *Mission Letter to Jozef Síkela Commissioner-designate for International Partnerships*, 17 September 2024. European Commission.

<sup>20</sup> See Article 9, and recital 25 in the Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council establishing Global Europe.

## Global Europe instrument: the risk of flexibility without earmarking

The proposed Global Europe instrument aims to align EU internal priorities, such as competitiveness and security, with external action while promoting global public goods.<sup>21</sup> Its design prioritises flexibility: merging thematic instruments, enabling cross-geographic budget reallocations, and incorporating financial cushions and non-programmable components.<sup>22</sup>

While this enhances budgetary agility and simplifies management, such **flexibility should be accompanied by predictability for partners and CSOs**, rather than primarily serving internal EU interests.<sup>23</sup> Civil society coalitions have called for a balanced approach, combining flexibility with reliability and long-term commitment.<sup>24</sup>

**Without reporting benchmarks or indicative financial targets for fragile and conflict-affected contexts, there is a risk that flexibility gradually shifts funding toward the most politically salient priorities.** This risk is amplified by broader geopolitical shifts favouring defence and hard security, alongside documented declines in peacebuilding finance. Computation of data of the Multiannual Indicative Programmes (MIPs) for 74 countries in Africa, the Caribbean, Asia and the Americas shows that EU funding for peace, security and governance was cut on average by 60% between the 2021–2024 and 2025–2027 periods. In extremely fragile countries, these cuts averaged 72%.<sup>25</sup>

Non-earmarked flexibility, while useful for emerging crises, may crowd out sustained engagement in fragile contexts. As mid-term evaluations of the EU's current financial instruments (2021-2027) show, both the Rapid Response pillar and the cushion of the NDICI were heavily depleted mid-way through the financing period due to allocations to Ukraine, and to protracted crises in Lebanon and other neighbourhood contexts, leaving limited space to respond to emerging crises or to seize peacebuilding windows of opportunity elsewhere.<sup>26</sup> Flexibility without earmarking, therefore, risks making decisions on crisis response or peacebuilding priorities more politically driven.

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<sup>21</sup> Jones, A., & Karaki, K. (2025). *The Global Europe Instrument: balancing ambition, flexibility and accountability in the EU's external action*. Briefing. ECDPM.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> Interviewee, EU Delegation, 2026.

<sup>24</sup> European Peacebuilding Liaison Office (2025). *EPLO statement — Global Europe: ensuring the EU continues to fund conflict prevention and peacebuilding*. EPLO.; Voluntary Organisations in Cooperation in Emergencies. (2025). *Global Europe: A dangerous gamble for humanitarian action — VOICE statement*. VOICE.; Brees, I. (2025). *The Global Gateway's missing ingredient: Adding peace to the mix*. Commentary, 26 November 2025. ECDPM.

<sup>25</sup> Bergmann, J., & Watson, (2025). *Time to strengthen the EU's engagement in fragile and conflict-affected states*. Commentary, 25 March 2025. Global Public Policy Institute.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

# A forward-looking EU strategic approach to fragility: rationale and modalities

The previous sections examined how macro-level shifts in the EU's development cooperation are reshaping its engagement with fragility. They unpacked past approaches, highlighted ongoing changes, and assessed the potential implications of initiatives such as the Global Gateway, the proposed Global Europe Instrument, and negotiations on the next MFF, for the EU's role in addressing fragility. The sections that follow take a forward-looking perspective, exploring why and how the EU can – and should – engage with fragility, and providing entry points and practical guidance for future programming.

## ■ The strategic significance of tackling fragility

The broader geopolitical and security challenges confronting the Union cannot be overlooked and the EU's Member States, partners and civil society need to approach the situation with some pragmatic realism. However, even when changing gears to a new way of pursuing development cooperation, it is important to stress that the EU's credibility as a long-term, values-based partner remains a key asset in a fragmented global order with competing actors offering alternative models of engagement. **Addressing fragility and building peace should not be construed as charity, but as a key foreign policy interest** for various reasons.

First, there is a moral and reputational dimension. The EU has long positioned itself as a long-term development and peace partner. In a fragmented geopolitical environment with multiple competing actors, the Union's comparative advantage lies in its ability to combine development cooperation, political dialogue and long-term partnership. **Retreating from fragile contexts or shifting toward purely transactional engagement would risk reputational damage** at a time when the EU seeks to strengthen its global political and economic engagement.

Second, there is geopolitical pragmatism. **Countries and regions that the EU deprioritises are unlikely to remain neutral spaces.** They may deepen economic and security ties with actors whose strategic interests diverge from those of the Union. Regions such as the Sahel and the Horn of Africa are often framed primarily as zones to be contained due to displacement or security concerns. Yet they also carry economic, demographic and geopolitical potential, including access to trade routes, critical raw materials and growing markets. Treating them only as buffers risks overlooking both opportunity and long-term strategic positioning. This justifies the need to go beyond humanitarian aid and conflict management and engage in long-term processes that can help address structural, political and economic divides.

Third, **fragility directly intersects with EU economic and security interests**. As the EU increasingly integrates the European private sector into development cooperation and promotes competitiveness-driven engagement models, the non-linear nature of fragility becomes more consequential. Conflicts can recur, state capacity can deteriorate, and regulatory conditions can shift abruptly. Fragility is not an on/off phenomenon. This unpredictability increases risk-exposure for European businesses and investors.<sup>27</sup> Addressing root causes of fragility, rather than merely its symptoms, therefore becomes central to safeguarding European investments.

Fragility also has spillover effects. Instability can affect neighbouring countries where the EU seeks to advance strategic initiatives, including Global Gateway. **Sidelining fragility in one context may undermine engagement elsewhere.**<sup>28</sup>

Ultimately, as one Member State representative noted, “fragility is a foreign policy issue; not a technical one” and its instruments and approaches should address it as such.

## ■ How to strengthen the EU's engagement to address fragility

### Clarify how concepts guide approaches

Ambiguities raised during interviews on the interlocking concepts of conflict-affected settings, fragility and politically estranged states need to be clarified to more effectively inform negotiations on the MFF, the roll out of the Global Gateway or future activities of Team Europe. These concepts, though sometimes intersecting, are different in nature: although fragility and conflict can reinforce each other, fragility may also arise from other factors, such as natural disasters or environmental and climate risks. Likewise, while many politically estranged countries are also conflict-affected, not all conflict-affected countries are politically estranged. Ambiguity also persists as to whether references to fragility encompass the whole spectrum of fragility, including high or extreme exposure.

Distinguishing between these concepts and fleshing out the EU's approaches accordingly will be important in shaping the EU's priorities, policies, and commitments, and will have practical implications for the allocation of EU funding and its strategic engagement with partners. Regarding the thresholds of fragility, the EU could borrow from OECD and World Bank conceptual frameworks and classifications to inform its own definitions and distinctions.<sup>29</sup> **A differentiated approach should encompass both highly and extremely**

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<sup>27</sup> Mariani, B. (2026). *Fragility and peacebuilding: Will the EU succeed or fail?* Policy commentary, 19 January 2026. Conflict Management Consulting.

<sup>28</sup> Benlahsen, T., Ricci, C., & Rodier, E. (2024). *Engaging in fragile settings: Acknowledging the cost of inaction*. Egmont Policy Brief 360. Egmont Institute.

<sup>29</sup> See the OECD's approach to Fragility and Conflict and its framework and the World Bank's Classification of Fragility and Conflict Situations.

**fragile contexts, recognising that fragility is not binary and that thresholds for tailored engagement require clarity.**

As regards political estrangement, the EU could define what its engagement in such spaces should be to ensure that its action remains viable and impactful across fragile, conflict-affected, and more stable contexts alike. As political estrangement may emerge or shift rapidly following regime changes or major political upheavals, anticipating such shifts is essential. Similarly, the EU should proactively assess how shifts towards ‘estrangement’ in partner countries might affect its funding modalities, partnerships, and operational approaches, especially if such changes arise during project/programme implementation. Direct government-to-government cooperation may be limited, the involvement of European private sector actors may become more difficult, and engagement may rely more heavily on indirect channels such as civil society, multilateral organisations, or regional programmes.

### **Retain and rechannel effective tools**

Past approaches offer important lessons that the EU should adopt for the Global Gateway and the next MFF. Over the years, the EU has developed and deployed diverse policy tools such as policy-based loans, budget support, and technical assistance, which have allowed it to engage in diverse contexts.<sup>30</sup> It is also widely regarded by partners and CSOs as a reliable peace and development partner, particularly because it combines development cooperation with political dialogue – a practice that remains valued as global development finance declines.<sup>31</sup> These aspects of the EU's external action and partnership model are seen as unique value propositions that set it apart from other actors.

While the Staff Working Document on fragility, currently being drafted by DG ECHO in consultation with the EEAS, DG INTPA and FPI, will clarify the scope and priorities for the EU's future engagement in fragile and conflict affected contexts, it will be critical to provide a decent margin for manoeuvre and **bottom-up planning led by Delegations** in these very contexts.

One interviewee noted that under the current NDICI, moving toward **context-specific analysis before budget discussions** – rather than starting from predefined financial envelopes for Multiannual Indicative Programmes (MIPs) – has incentivised EU Delegations to move beyond repetitive project cycles and explore new programming approaches.<sup>32</sup>

This approach has empowered delegation staff working in fragile contexts – where informal systems dominate, formal structures are weak and local political economy dynamics are fast

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<sup>30</sup> Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). (2025). *States of Fragility 2025*; Interviewees, 2026.

<sup>31</sup> Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). (2025). *States of Fragility 2025*. OECD.

<sup>32</sup> Interviewee, CODEV-PI Delegate, 2026.

changing – to have greater freedom and flexibility to design programmes that work for their context.<sup>33</sup>

Similarly, the **use of fragility- or crisis-specific funds and accompanying internal assessment tools** helped EU institutions, including Delegations, identify priority contexts and tailor their engagement. Such targeting also allowed for the recruitment of thematic and contextual experts in EU institutions, further enhancing the EU's expertise in fragility and peacebuilding.<sup>34</sup> In the eventual Global Europe regulation, the EU should leverage years of investment in knowledge, skills building and networking on these topics and redirect them towards productive use.

When operating in fragile and conflict-affected settings, the **operationalisation of the HDP nexus** since 2017 – including mandatory conflict analysis and the creation of institutional hubs – was seen as a useful entry point.<sup>35</sup> Some interviewees noted that the HDP nexus, as an approach, still offers value for operating in fragile contexts - even if the peace angle in the nexus is less actualised.<sup>36</sup> However, going forward, the EU needs to ensure that **conflict sensitivity**, including in the Global Gateway, is a minimum requirement that applies in all contexts, not only those deemed fragile. In addition, the EU should fully apply conflict sensitivity, not solely upholding do-no harm principles, but ensuring engagement maximises peace dividends.<sup>37</sup>

The EU may not be able to “do more with less”, however, positive outcomes can be achieved through greater intentionality in pursuing new, context-driven programming, rather than merely repeating legacy projects.

## Policy coherence across instruments: from documents to practice

**Policy coherence is not absent from EU external action; it is unevenly applied.** The legal and strategic foundations already exist. What remains uncertain is whether fragility will consistently shape decision-making across instruments at a time when external action is more explicitly aligned with competitiveness, defense and interest-based approaches.

The proposed Global Europe instrument recognises fragility within its general principles and geographic programming. Yet **the growing emphasis on flexibility, combined with the absence of earmarked funding for fragile and conflict-affected contexts, creates ambiguity.** In highly politicised budgetary environments, flexibility can enable responsiveness – but it

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<sup>33</sup> Interviewee, EU Delegation, 2026.

<sup>34</sup> European Think Tanks Group (ETTG). (2024). *A joint European approach in fragile settings: Team Europe and Global Gateway*. Collective report. ETTG, p.8

<sup>35</sup> Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). (2025). *States of Fragility 2025*. OECD; Interviewees, 2026.

<sup>36</sup> Interviewee, EEAS, 2026; Interviewees, EU Delegation, 2026.

<sup>37</sup> European Peacebuilding Liaison Office (2025.). *EPLO statement — Global Europe: ensuring the EU continues to fund conflict prevention and peacebuilding*. EPLO.; Interviewee, NGO, 2026.

can also shift resources toward more visible or politically salient priorities, to the detriment of long-term legal commitments to human development, peace and poverty alleviation.

The Global Gateway illustrates this tension. As a strategy programmed around infrastructure and strategic visibility, it introduces new dynamics into EU engagement. Nearly half of its partner countries experience high levels of fragility. In such contexts, **investment initiatives cannot operate independently of governance conditions, institutional capacity and social cohesion.** Where private capital is unlikely to operate sustainably, grant-based support and regulatory engagement should be relied upon more significantly. Without this balance, the risk is not only that investment will have negative effects on conflict dynamics, but EU investments will be exposed to instability.

**Coherence therefore requires more than coordination across services.** It requires that conflict sensitivity, inequality dynamics and institutional capacity assessments inform investment design and political dialogue. Aligning incentives and timelines across humanitarian, development and investment instruments is particularly important in fragile settings, where structural change rarely follows short political cycles.

Institutionally, **fragmentation continues to complicate this alignment.** Responsibilities related to fragility are dispersed across services, and no single actor consistently tracks fragility-sensitive engagement across the full spectrum of instruments. While some fragmentation is inherent in the EU system, clearer analytical frameworks and stronger internal coordination would reduce the risk that fragility considerations are sidelined when other priorities dominate.

**Conceptual clarity is equally relevant.** As noted earlier, fragility, conflict and political estrangement warrant specific approaches. Blurring approaches risks inappropriate responses or disengagement from politically complex contexts. A differentiated approach will only be credible if its criteria and implications for financing modalities are clarified.

### **Effectiveness beyond the mere integration of fragility**

Effectiveness in fragile contexts depends on a large number of variables. Outcomes are often incremental, non-linear and shaped by domestic power dynamics. Still, the EU could ensure its approach to fragility is more effective by making long-term investments in prevention and strengthening its conflict-sensitive approach. It should also ensure its approach is context-driven and that it acts in coalition with other actors.

**Long-term investments in prevention are key to address fragility in a more effective way.** These investments, already limited, may suffer from growing pressure if not deliberately protected. Recent declines in funding for peace, security and governance suggest that rhetorical commitment alone is insufficient. These trends may be further

reinforced if competitiveness-driven engagement and geopolitical alignment marginalise longer-term investments in governance reform and peacebuilding.

**The EU should therefore encompass governance support and peacebuilding in the 360-degree approach of the Global Gateway.** The 360-degree approach of the Global Gateway strategy will be tested precisely in fragile states. If it is to move beyond a ‘do no harm’ interpretation, it must incorporate governance support, regulatory strengthening and inequality considerations, alongside infrastructure investment.<sup>38</sup> Connecting governance, development and resilience will prove central to the effectiveness of the EU’s engagement. In this sense, peacebuilding can represent a key approach in highly fragile contexts.<sup>39</sup>

**As it increases investments in prevention, the EU should also retain a conflict sensitive approach.** As widely argued in statements by civil society, conflict sensitivity should apply across programming, including investment initiatives.<sup>40</sup> In fragile contexts, this requires repeated and context-specific analysis rather than one-off assessments. Delegations need the capacity and incentives to integrate political economy analysis into programme design and to adapt as conditions evolve.<sup>41</sup>

**Retaining a context-driven approach will be key to the effectiveness of the EU’s approach to fragility.** Fragile contexts vary in drivers, institutional capacity and political constraints. Avoiding standardised programming will require regionally tailored approaches and sustained country-level engagement. EU Delegations, often the primary European presence in fragile environments, remain central to maintaining political dialogue and contextual responsiveness. Ongoing reforms to the EU’s external architecture should preserve this function.

**Ultimately, an effective EU response to fragility requires a coalition approach.** EU institutions, member states and civil society each bring distinct capacities — diplomatic reach, financial resources, local legitimacy and contextual knowledge. Connecting these roles within a shared strategic framework will determine whether the EU’s engagement in fragile contexts remains credible, coherent and effective in the next programming cycle. Expectations and programming cycles need to reflect this reality.

### **The centrality of civil society organisations on fragility**

In fragile contexts, civil society organisations frequently sustain social cohesion and accountability where state institutions are weakened. Despite rhetorical recognition, support remains uneven and funding procedures complex. **If resilience and conflict**

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<sup>38</sup> Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). (2025). *States of Fragility 2025*. OECD.

<sup>39</sup> Mariani, B. (2026). *Fragility and peacebuilding: Will the EU succeed or fail?* Policy commentary, 19 January 2026. Conflict Management Consulting.

<sup>40</sup> European Peacebuilding Liaison Office (2025). *EPLO statement — Global Europe: ensuring the EU continues to fund conflict prevention and peacebuilding*. EPLO.

<sup>41</sup> Interviewee, NGO, 2026.

prevention are to be operationalised, support to civil society must be treated as a strategic investment.

Civil society actors contribute not only through implementation, but also through advocacy, policy innovation and accountability.<sup>42</sup> Showcasing effective peacebuilding and social cohesion initiatives would strengthen the political case for sustained engagement in fragile contexts.

The Global Europe instrument provides a basis for supporting democratic resilience. Translating this into practice will notably require **embedding peacebuilding and conflict prevention more consistently within geographic programming** and strengthening analytical capacity in Delegations and headquarters.

**Flexibility remains a central issue.** While recent reforms enhance the EU's ability to reallocate funds, partners on the ground often face rigid contractual conditions. In volatile contexts, adaptive funding mechanisms, simplified procedures and locally managed funds are essential to preserve local agency.

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<sup>42</sup> Interviewee, International Organisation, 2026.

## Key takeaways and recommendations

The preceding analysis highlights both the opportunities and risks in the EU's evolving approach to fragility and underscores the role civil society can play in shaping its engagement. The key takeaways below draw directly from this research, highlighting what must happen to ensure the EU not only commits to addressing fragility but does so effectively through its strategies and financial instruments, even within political, financial, and operational constraints.

**1. Fragility must be treated as a cross-cutting foreign policy priority, not a thematic add-on.**

The analysis shows that fragility remains inconsistently operationalised across EU external action. While referenced in programming documents, it does not systematically shape political dialogue, investment strategies or security engagement. If fragility continues to sit primarily within development or humanitarian silos, the EU risks undermining its own geopolitical objectives.

**Recommendation:** The EU should formally anchor fragility as a cross-cutting priority across the Global Europe regulation, Global Gateway, and diplomatic engagement, ensuring that fragility considerations inform political dialogue, resource allocation and risk assessment across instruments.

**2. The next MFF should balance flexibility with thematic and context-specific earmarking to ensure predictable and sustained engagement in highly and extremely fragile contexts.** Greater budgetary flexibility can enhance responsiveness, but given the heightened politicisation of development cooperation and shrinking resources, it may also redirect resources toward short-term geopolitical returns. Addressing fragility and its conflict drivers requires predictable, long-term investment that cannot be subject to constant reallocation.

**Recommendation:** The next MFF should include safeguards, including thematic earmarking or protected envelopes for highly and extremely fragile contexts, ensuring sustained funding to address fragility and its conflict drivers.

**3. Conflict sensitivity and analysis should be embedded in all EU external action, including Global Gateway initiatives in fragile and conflict-affected settings, and they should be encouraged as continuous, rather than one-off activities.** Nearly half of Global Gateway partner countries experience high levels of fragility. Infrastructure and connectivity projects implemented without robust conflict analysis, inequality assessments and institutional capacity reviews risk exacerbating tensions or failing altogether. Conflict sensitivity must be understood as a continuous process, not a one-off assessment.

**Recommendation:** All major investment and connectivity initiatives in fragile settings should integrate, at a minimum, ongoing conflict analysis, inequality markers and

governance diagnostics into programme design, monitoring and political dialogue, aligning incentives and timelines across humanitarian, development and investment actors.

4. **A differentiated approach for fragile contexts is a welcome and necessary framing but it should be accompanied by conceptual clarity and tailored financing modalities, including grant-making.** Countries experience fragility on a spectrum and their state of fragility is dynamic. The EU should also factor in the possibility that a partner country's level of fragility can change, including during Global Gateway project implementation.

**Recommendation:** The EU should adopt a clear analytical framework distinguishing types and degrees of fragility and translate this into differentiated financing modalities, including sustained grant-based support, in particular where market-based instruments are not viable.

5. **The EU should not lose sight of its comparative advantage in fragile contexts – its sustained political engagement – in favour of short term, visible and finance-only approaches.** The Union's added value is its capacity to combine funding with diplomatic presence, regulatory standards and long-term political dialogue grounded in governance and accountability. Reducing engagement to investment or transactional partnerships would erode this strength.

**Recommendation:** EU institutions and Member States should prioritise sustained political dialogue in fragile contexts – accompanying funding with engagement on governance reform, accountability and social cohesion – and protect this political dimension within increasingly interest-driven external action. Doing this effectively requires empowering EU Delegations, sustaining support to civil society, and genuine alignment with Member States whenever possible.