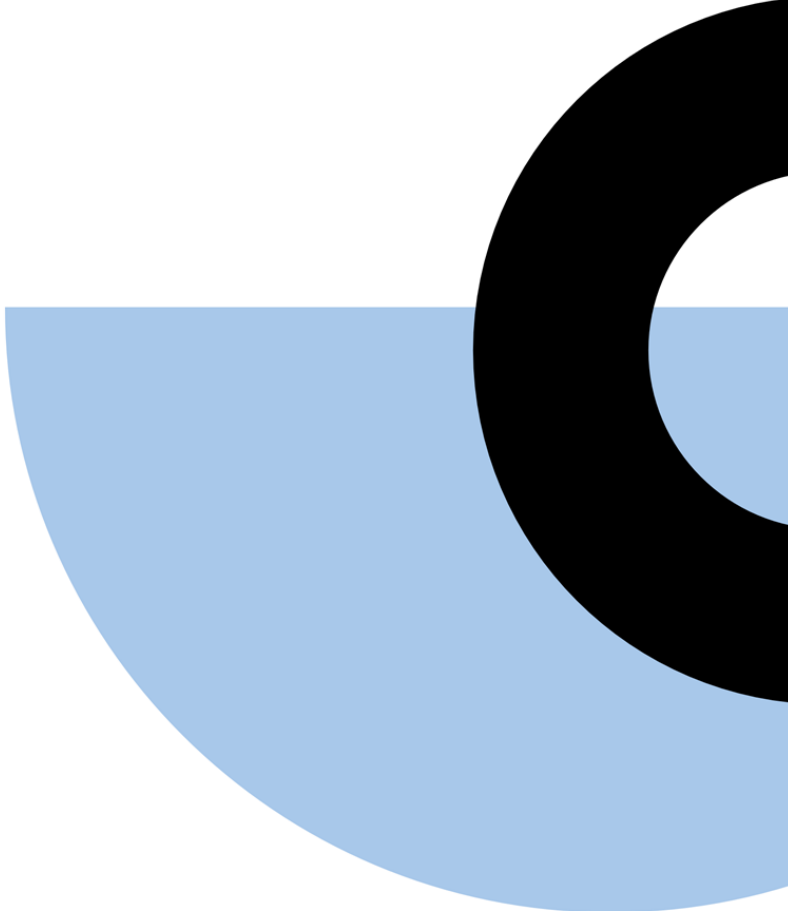




MAINTAINING A STRONG CIVIL SOCIETY ENGAGEMENT IN A REVAMPED EU DELEGATION NETWORK

CSDN Discussion Paper

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European Peacebuilding Liaison Office (EPLO)

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Executive Summary

The planned restructuring of the EU Delegations (EUDs) is due to start during the rotation of staff this summer. Since the document describing the restructuring was leaked and published by Politico,¹ there have been no public announcements and very little internal information made available to Brussels-based EU staffers.

The decision to restructure, or modernise, the EUDs came at a time of increased global instability and before the U-turn in US policy of supporting civil society globally and the abolition of USAID, which have violently accelerated repression of civil society worldwide. These factors do not appear to have caused a re-think, or even an impact analysis of the proposed restructuring.

The withdrawal of the US means that the EU is well-positioned to become a leader in championing civil society, particularly in conflict-affected and fragile contexts. This would not require any divergence from the priorities set out in the leaked document. However, even if the EU does not do this, engagement with civil society organisations (CSOs) remains crucial to advance the EU's peace and security policy objectives.

As the restructuring advances, the EU should proactively analyse and communicate how it will maintain and advance meaningful civil society consultation on peace and security issues in the new set up. Drawing on best practice of EU-CSO engagement, including in the complex context of Syria, this paper makes the recommendations included in the box below.

¹ Towards a Revamped EU Delegation Network : EEAS Proposal for Guiding Principles September 2024' available at https://www.politico.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/25/doc_1.pdf

Recommendations

1. Building trust

The EU should invest in conflict-sensitive mapping and exercise exceptional care in choosing interlocutors going beyond tick-box exercises; the CSO focal point (or equivalent) in fragile contexts should usually be an international hire.

2. Accessibility

In contexts with a minimal diplomatic presence, the EEAS should integrate ongoing consultation with civil society into staff job descriptions to ensure more structured dialogues happen regularly, including thematic consultations (e.g. WPS/YPS) with staff from regional hubs.

3. Strategic Engagement

EUDs should continuously update Civil Society Roadmaps, in collaboration with civil society, in order to ensure an up-to-date mapping, and better reading of civil society needs, priorities, and dynamics, which leads to more meaningful consultations.

4. Transition assessments

EUDs should carry an urgent assessment with meaningful consultation of CSOs on the potential impact of the change in the EUDs status quos on EUD-CSO engagement, including how engagement with a regional hub might work in practice and which risks this entails for civil society.

5. Knowledge management

EUDs should set up structured handover processes of EUD-CSO relations to accompany any restructuring, including clear guidelines, handbooks, and institutionalised requirements in staff job descriptions and reporting.

6. Increasing EUD analytical capacities

EUD should identify context-appropriate ways to integrate civil society consultation into Conflict Analysis Screening, ongoing political monitoring and reporting, and framing for strategic communications.

7. Managing changing EUD priorities

EUDs and regional hubs should design and introduce civil society consultation mechanisms that connect directly with the new policy areas while safeguarding space for peace and security dialogue.

8. Programming without EUD direction

Regional hubs will need to design consultation mechanisms that are able to identify relevant priorities within the broader programming objectives so that programming is tailored to the context, and design mitigation strategies to address potential bias in selection criteria.

9. Digital engagement limitations

Regional hubs should not replace in-country in-person civil society consultations with online platforms, except on specific and targeted policy questions.

Background

EUDs operate as the external frontline for EU diplomatic engagement. They play a crucial role in designing, programming, and implementing EU peacebuilding and conflict prevention policy, as well as in shaping priorities for EU external funding. EUDs are responsible for EU programming at the country level and act as primary interlocutors to civil society, providing financial and technical support as well as political space.

At the end of 2024, the EEAS and the European Commission (EC) proposed a plan to overhaul the EU Delegation network, including the downsizing of a number of EUDs and the reinforcement of key regional hubs. The objectives of this restructuring are to modernise the Delegation network, adapting it to the EU's new political priorities, such as the growing role of the Global Gateway, and the changing geopolitical landscape, within a context of budgetary constraints. This plan will be rolled out in multiple phases, slated for completion by 2027.

This restructuring takes place at a time of instability and change in the multilateral order. The abrupt abolition of USAID in July 2025 and the narrative assault on 'civil society' domestically in the US and worldwide has radically altered the contexts in which EUD-civil society engagement takes place.

While it is too early to determine the full impact of these changes on the EU's engagement with civil society, the restructuring of the EU Delegation network, coupled with the global trend of shrinking civic space, might expose some vulnerabilities in the EU's current efforts to advance localisation and civil society support, especially in the countries where the EU's presence will be reduced.

The objective of this discussion paper is to reflect and stimulate debate on the potential impact of the restructuring of the EU Delegation network on EU engagement with civil society and identify opportunities for maintaining high-level engagement under the new setup. It is far beyond the scope of this paper to assess the current state of EU-civil

society engagement on peace and security in Delegations in fragile and conflict-affected contexts. Instead, it draws on desk research, interviews with key informants from inside the EU institutions and from civil society, and the experience of the author to identify key areas for reflection. It also offers a case study on Syria, which offers interesting examples for EU-civil society engagement, even in highly contested and complex environments.

EU-Civil Society Engagement at EUD level

■ What is civil society?

In its Communication *The roots of democracy and sustainable development: Europe's engagement with Civil Society in external relations*, the EU defines civil society organisations (CSOs) as:

a wide range of actors with different roles and mandates. Definitions vary over time and across institutions and countries. The EU considers CSOs to include all non-State, not-for-profit structures, non-partisan and non-violent, through which people organise to pursue shared objectives and ideals, whether political, cultural, social or economic. Operating from the local to the national, regional and international levels, they comprise urban and rural, formal and informal organisations. The EU values CSOs' diversity and specificities; it engages with accountable and transparent CSOs which share its commitment to social progress and to the fundamental values of peace, freedom, equal rights and human dignity.²

As the Communication makes clear, CSOs in a given context may include international non-governmental organisations (INGOs), non-governmental organisations (NGOs), civil society organisations (CSOs), which may or may not be formally constituted, and may or may not operate at various levels, from local communities to sub-national, national, transnational, regional and/or international levels. They may or may not be aligned to a political party, the government, or opposition movement. The enabling environments for CSOs are very context-dependent, and CSOs representing different population groups, regions or values may have very different experiences of the same legal and administrative frameworks. Civic space shrinks asymmetrically.

Who and what constitutes 'civil society', particularly legitimate civil society, is central to EU engagement (this is developed more fully in the case of Syria, below). The

² Communication From The Commission To The European Parliament, The Council, The European Economic And Social Committee And The Committee Of The Regions *The roots of democracy and sustainable development: Europe's engagement with Civil Society in external relations* Brussels, 12.9.2012 COM(2012) 492 final p.3

Communication makes clear that the EU may not engage with all CSOs, but those that are committed to ‘social progress and to the fundamental values of peace, freedom, equal rights and human dignity.’ What ‘social progress’ and these values may look like in practice may vary considerably between contexts.

Since 2014, EUDs have produced Civil Society Roadmaps, 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.³

In fragile contexts, understanding and navigating the heterogeneity of the CSO landscape underpins meaningful CSO engagement, and is necessary for understanding how the EU can engage with marginalised or dissenting voices that are legitimate in the eyes of (parts of) the population.

■ EUDs, CSOs, peace and security

EUDs play an important role in designing, programming and implementing EU policies, including on peace and security, peacebuilding and conflict prevention, and in coordinating efforts with Member States.⁴ Engagement with civil society, through all aspects of the policy-making and programming cycle will therefore directly influence how the EU perceives peace and security in a given context, as well as how it formulates, implements and evaluates all of its responses – and not just those that finance civil society activities.

EU policies and interventions in ‘peace and security’ are cross-sectoral, even if the narrative increasingly leans towards Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and particularly Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). In development cooperation, the fragility marker is a blunt instrument to distinguish different forms of fragility (e.g. repressive authoritarianism as opposed to widespread multi-actor conflict) but in the absence of a more sophisticated marker, it can act as a proxy for indicating contexts at risk of violent conflict. The cross-sectoral nature of conflict prevention and peacebuilding means that, depending on the context, relevant EU interventions (including political monitoring) may span development cooperation, defence and diplomacy, as well as support to civil society peacebuilding initiatives, and may include a range of EU instruments, from the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument – Global Europe (NDICI-GE) through CSDP missions and EU Special Representatives (EUSRs). The extent of coherence and coordination, including on civil society engagement, between the EUD and these other tools and instruments

³ EPLO, [*The Role of EU Delegations on Peace and Security: Background Paper Brussels, February 2025*](#)

⁴ For a more detailed explanation, see : EPLO, [*The Role of EU Delegations on Peace and Security: Background Paper Brussels, February 2025*](#)

may vary widely, and indeed EUSRs may consult CSOs with or without the active engagement of the EUD.

The Civil Society Roadmaps are rarely published. They have facilitated structured dialogue and improved alignment of EU programming with civil society priorities. Some EUDs have gradually updated their roadmaps to incorporate new priorities that inform ongoing programming cycles.⁵

Specific thematic areas – such as Women, Peace and Security (WPS) and Youth, Peace and Security (YPS) – also commit EUDs to civil society engagement, (e.g. in the drafting of Gender Action Plans) although the extent to which civil society priorities in these fields are integrated into EUD peace and security priorities remain unclear. Similarly, the EU's Conflict Analysis Screening (CAS) process allows for civil society participation, but this is rarely taken up and where separate civil society consultations take place, it is unknown to what extent they influence the analysis.

The extent to which EU Delegations engage strategically with civil society depends on multiple factors. Beyond the cross-sectional nature of conflict prevention/peacebuilding, each EUD's operational capacity, staff motivation and ability to translate policy into practice varies. Typically, an EUD will have focal points for civil society, and also for human rights and WPS/gender equality. An individual staffer may be tasked with more than one, or indeed all, of these portfolios at once; the position is often junior in the EUD hierarchy. The staffer may be national or international, which is relevant in the context of the ongoing restructuring.

These focal points are generally expected to engage with civil society; in some contexts, the positionality and/or connections of the individual – particularly if a local agent – may pose a threat to certain parts of civil society, because of their links to the regime, for example. However, the Heads of Delegation, Cooperation and Political Sections should also all be in regular consultation with civil society to prevent their ongoing analyses of the context resulting from an echo chamber. EU insiders have too many anecdotes about “Brussels being caught by surprise...” because EUD staff were not listening to a wide enough range of views in-country.

In addition to consultations at EUD level, there may be other relevant regional engagements that connect EUDs with civil society. The [Civil Society Dialogue Network](#) project is an important example. Others may be parts of projects such as [EU4Dialogue: Support to Conflict Transformation in the South Caucasus and the Republic of Moldova](#) that connect EUD (and other EU actors) with civil society experts on peace and security-related issues.

Fora such as the Brussels Conference on Supporting the Future of Syria and the Region may also bring civil society actors together with EUD staff, as well as other actors. Where the EU has regional approaches – to the Sahel, for example – and where there is an

⁵ EPLO *Ibid.*, p. 7

EUSR, there may be consultation mechanisms of varying formality, which may or may not routinely engage EUD as well as other actors. Worldwide, the [EU SEE project to support an enabling environment for civil society](#) can act, for example, as an interface between EUDs and CSOs in contexts where civic space is shrinking or at risk.

On the face of it, therefore, there are multiple platforms through which EUDs can engage with civil society organisations on key issues around peace and security. Regional, or transnational platforms may also enable EUDs to connect with crucial CSOs based outside the state and/or engage on transnational conflict dynamics. The existence of multiple consultation fora is often the result of civil society consultations that have identified the need to create them. With multiple fora, however, comes the risk that consultation on peace and security issues may fragment or duplicate.

Additionally, civil society actors and some EU officials point out that informal, ad hoc and confidential consultations and ongoing discussions between trusted partners are particularly important in conflict-affected contexts, and that this culture of ongoing consultation is not routine in all EUDs.

Civil society consultations can sometimes feel entirely predictable; everyone, from civil society and the EUD, knows what will be said and by whom. This leads to frustration, sometimes, on the part of EU officials. This could be due to several reasons. Firstly, it could be that only the ‘usual suspects’ (on both sides) may be in the room. Secondly, the agenda may be too broad or too narrow. Thirdly, the space might not be safe enough for sharing detailed information. Fourthly, it may not be clear to CSO actors what the information they may share will be used for, and for whose benefit. Extensive consultation would identify who should be present, and which issues may and may not be considered. If we consider how different stakeholders consulted – a confidential focussed lunch or dinner meeting with a specific agenda between senior EUD staff and business leaders, or a large, day long consultation for CSOs with a loose agenda of ‘women’s issues’: it is hardly surprising which is likely to illicit more ‘useful’ information.

■ EUD Restructuring: the state of play

After the leaked internal document from September 2024 outlining the rationale for restructuring the EUDs,⁶ there has been very little public or internal (at headquarters) information and communication⁷ other than the knowledge that many locally-hired EUD staff contracts have not been renewed, or have been terminated. The restructuring is expected to take place during the regular staff rotations in the summers of 2026 and 2027, when international staff are routinely transferred between international and Brussels-based posts, and when temporary international and national contracts begin and end.

⁶ ‘Towards a Revamped EU Delegation Network : EEAS Proposal for Guiding Principles September 2024’ available at https://www.politico.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/25/doc_1.pdf

⁷ Interviews, headquarters and EUD officials, June 2026

According to Generation 2004, a trades union for EU staff, 11 delegations will be reduced to only an EEAS ‘minimal diplomatic’ presence. These are EUDs in Eritrea, Guinea Bissau, Eswatini, Lesotho, South Sudan, Papua New Guinea, Trinidad and Tobago, Haiti, Kuwait, Timor Leste and Belarus. These will be supported by reinforced regional hubs in South Africa, Senegal, Ivory Coast, Kenya, Fiji, Barbados.⁸ Standard Delegations, attached to a hub, will see reduced INTPA⁹ operations. Local staff will remain, but international staff will be transferred to hubs. Finally, there will be Status Quo Delegations, not yet serviced by a regional hub, which will continue as normal.

The 11 contexts where the EUDs are due to be reduced to a ‘minimal diplomatic presence’ have little in common. The EUD in Kuwait, is, reportedly, newly-refurbished. Belarus is a Neighbourhood country, so it falls within one of the areas where ‘the EU needs a strong presence.’¹⁰ South Sudan, and Guinea-Bissau are fragile contexts that surely also fall within the priority grouping of ‘countries where instability poses a threat to the EU’s interests.’¹¹ Travel within some of these countries is hard enough; let alone from a regional hub with infrequent connections. It is difficult to see how reducing these EUDs is likely to be ‘cost efficient’ in the medium term.

The regional hubs concept has been operating for some time in the conflict prevention and peacebuilding sphere, but with the marked difference that in the past, the process was two-way, with these hubs were reinforced by local and international staff on the ground. Regional (conflict) hubs have advantages and disadvantages, but a clear disadvantage is that they are (usually) out of touch with national, local and community-based CSOs in conflict-affected areas. The regional hubs lack the time and networks to connect to these key actors, and the CSOs lack the time and resources to engage with officials in a far-off city.

A significant challenge inherent in the regional hub approach is how that city is perceived by different population groups in the countries concerned. For example, civil society actors raise concerns that due to poor relations between the military juntas in the Sahel and Côte d’Ivoire, engaging with a regional EU hub in Abidjan, either through consultation or receiving funds, could put civil society actors under even more pressure.¹²

Perhaps this ‘modernisation’ process might be better understood as alignment with the Global Gateway and/or a focus on migration management. If the latter, EU-based civil society is more engaged with the EU institutions over migration policies than over peace

⁸ Generation 2004 ‘EEAS: Modernisation of the Delegation Network: What’s really happening?’ 1 July 2025 <https://generation2004.eu/eeas-modernisation-of-the-delegation-network-whats-really-happening/>

⁹ INTPA: the European Commission’s Directorate-General for International Partnerships, which is responsible for international development policy.

¹⁰ Towards a Revamped EU Delegation Network’ *ibid.* paragraph 2.

¹¹ Towards a Revamped EU Delegation Network’ *ibid.* paragraph 2

¹² Participant observation, CSDN Geographic Meeting ‘Climate, Peace and Security: Entry points for EU engagement in complex partnership contexts’ 3 June 2026, online.

and security, but in third countries, the EU, including EUDs, is far less engaged with CSOs on migration than on conflict prevention and peacebuilding.¹³

Whatever the motivations, it appears to be undoing important components of the deconcentration process in the early 2000s, when EUDs acquired decision-making authority over programming and administration, thus receiving far more power in budgeting and financial allocation and to speed up implementation. Deconcentration motivated civil society organisations to engage with EUDs, rather than rely on INGOs or international networks at Brussels level. It also meant that – in theory at least – CSOs could engage with EUD staff who were familiar with the political, social, cultural and economic contexts in which they operate, spanning from large political trends to the details of context-specific challenges with banking or accountancy.

The restructuring is also intended to improve EUDs' analytical capacity through 'political and sectoral expertise and where relevant security expertise.'¹⁴ While this is welcome, these experts will rely on civil society organisations, among other sources and stakeholders, for quality analysis. The quality of data available is directly proportional to relationships of trust (including indirectly, via reputation) built up over time, and a communication that is not strategic can cause reputational damage. For example, posting on social media about delivering humanitarian assistance in one part of a country, while there is no communication about human rights violations that may happen in another part of the country, carries significant reputational risk. Civil society consultations can provide great help in framing strategic communications.

Another aspect to consider is whether the EUD restructuring is likely to lead to greater reliance on national governments and local authorities, through more emphasis on partnerships on a whole range of policy areas, including stemming migration to the EU. In conflict-affected areas and where civic space is under pressure, this is hazardous for civil society – and arguably, for the EU in the longer term.

■ Case study: Examples from Syria

Since the outbreak of the civil war in Syria, the EU has sought to engage with civil society despite the complexity and violence of the conflicts, and the fast-changing transition since the fall of Assad. The EUD has variously been based in Damascus, Beirut and Brussels, and has now returned to Damascus. The civil society focal points have, during this timeframe, been international staff.

Unlike other key donors, notably the US, the EUD is seen positively by outsiders for deliberately engaging with a wide range of civil society actors from across the political spectrum, and not only those opposed to the Assad regime. They have engaged with civil

¹³ Civil society migration expert. June 2026

¹⁴ Towards a Revamped EU Delegation Network' *ibid.* paragraph 2

society outside as well as inside the country, and have a more nuanced understanding of the range of civil society voices than some other external actors.

Until 2025, the EUD was seen as a convenor who could enable dialogue between the government and civil society on crucial questions of peace and security. The EU was seen as a guarantor of a (relatively) safe space including through side events at the Brussels Conference on Supporting the Future of Syria and the Region. This position was only possible through long-term, sustained and wide-ranging consultation with a broad spectrum of civil society voices. This meant that the EUD could identify issues where necessary progress could be made, and the most effective interlocutors to engage with. Careful preparation of agenda items and participants, including through extensive consultation, meant that concrete progress could be made.

Another lesson from Syria, and one that is recognisable across conflict zones across the world, is that civil society is not only heterogenous and varied, but dynamic. As conflicts evolve, so do the memberships, positions, interests and priorities of civil society actors. If only the loudest voices, particularly those apparently on the 'same side' as an external actor have access to decision-makers, there is no incentive for collaboration within civil society, nor for outliers to move to a more centrist position where progress on key issues is more likely to happen.

However, the sectoral differences between civil society actors are often underestimated. For example, the interests and priorities of civil society actors that provide extensive basic services may not align neatly with those of the human rights, justice or women's movements. These differences are noticeable in formal consultations where human rights activists and representatives of the women's movement find it difficult to access speaking slots.

In conflict-affected situations, there is always the risk that civil society actors may become co-opted by a new government or regime, which may use them in their new positions to gatekeep or shrink civic space. Regimes may also appropriate key mechanisms in order to shrink civic space and control civil society, effectively operating secret police-like structures under a different name. These developments may not be readily understandable by external actors; only ongoing consultations with a wide range of voices will help actors navigate changing positions and loyalties within as well as beyond civil society.

According to key informants interviewed for this paper from inside and outside the EU, the EUD currently risks being perceived as co-opted by the transitional authorities. When the Brussels conference moved to Damascus in 2025, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs was seen to have far more influence on the programme and speakers of the Day of Dialogue than previous editions convened in Brussels. The result was that certain key human rights activists were barred from participating, and there were absences of senior civil society participants from key regions (e.g. Sweida). Some civil society actors also found they had greater access to EU policy-makers in Brussels than during the conference in Damascus.

In the run-up to the earlier Brussels conferences, in contrast, senior EU officials in EUD and in Brussels consulted widely on whom to invite. The consultations included 5-6 sessions involving civil society actors from the Northeast, Northwest and regime-held areas, actors in neighbouring countries and the Diaspora more generally. This included a multi-track process to create a platform purposefully designed to engage directly with Syrian CSOs rather than mediated through INGOs, which was unusual for donors in Syria at this time. This platform was particularly important for ensuring meaningful participation by appropriate women members of civil society, but it has somewhat fallen into abeyance since the fall of Assad.

Civil society consultation also informed the Civil Society Roadmap for Syria (updated in 2026), which provides the strategic orientation for the EUD in its relationships with civil society, including the framing of calls for proposals. The Roadmap is reportedly a useful tool (the 2026 update more than earlier iterations) as it gives a clear understanding of civil society priorities, including peacebuilding.

Just as civil society is not a homogenous group in any context, different parts of civil society have different experiences of changing (in)security. Some previously exiled members of Syrian civil society have returned, others are yet to do so either temporarily or for the longer-term. Women civil society activists (and women more broadly) have been increasingly targeted in person and on-line, and subject to a horrific array of human rights violations, including murder and disappearance, as well as other forms of sexual violence. The EUD, in contrast to other donors, deliberately engaged with different sectors of civil society inside and outside Syria.

In addition to the consultations on the Brussels Conference, the EUD also held information sessions on calls for proposals and future programming. Engaging civil society on the programming cycle, from design onwards, allows the EUD to map organisations' priorities, geographic reach and operational methods before the calls are published. This avoids creating a set of 'entitled' (I)NGO beneficiaries that are more experienced in writing proposals and winning grants than in delivering results. This consultation also helped the EUD understand patterns of grant allocation: for example, because many strong proposals came from organisations registered in the opposition-held Northwest, the EUD requested that these organisations form consortia with organisations from regime-held areas, which might struggle to meet formal registration criteria. By understanding how the standardised selection criteria would unintentionally create bias in selection in practice, the EUD was able to mitigate this risk. Similarly, while other donors focussed exclusively on Sweida and the coast, the EUD, informed by civil society consultations, wanted to build social cohesion across and between different parts of the country and framed the calls for proposals accordingly.

The Head of Delegation and Head of Political Section would also hold occasional dialogues with civil society. In Syria, as elsewhere, digital platforms have played a role, during and beyond the Covid pandemic in EUD-CSO engagement. A digital platform helps mitigate some security, financial, and accessibility challenges, but it is not without

its own security risks. Sustainability after the end of a project seems more of a challenge than in-person networking.

The EUD in Syria is unusual as there are no local project managers, who would be seen as too politically sensitive. EUD staff in Damascus, like many in conflict-affected zones, have to operate within strict security protocols, which limits travel and contact with civil society organisations, and which are noticeably stricter than for DG European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (ECHO) and some Member State colleagues.

■ **Key elements for successful civil society consultation at EUD level**

Best practice from Syria and other contexts suggest that, in fragile contexts:

- A whole range of EU policies, programmes, tools and instruments contribute to peace and security, which carries the risk that inclusive civil society consultation falls between the cracks (in comparison for example, with basic service delivery where both the CSO sector and the EU interlocutors tend to be more predictable).
- Ongoing, expert input from civil society is a prerequisite for adequate conflict and context analysis, and therefore for framing EU interventions in fragile contexts. Where there is adequate consultation, a Civil Society Roadmap can provide a strategic orientation, but must be refined through ongoing consultation specific to different policy and programming areas. If the Roadmap is itself the product of effective consultation, it can provide the necessary framework to prevent multiple consultations from fragmenting.
- Civil society is heterogenous and dynamic and the loudest voices are not necessarily the most likely to contribute collaborative, solution-oriented consultation.
- WPS consultations may help engage women's diverse views, so long as they are engaged on broader peace and security issues and not siloed as WPS frameworks only; likewise for YPS.
- Interventions shaped by civil society consultations are more likely to meet real needs on the ground. Potential biases as unintended consequences of standardised criteria (where, for example, the authorities may make it impossible for CSOs from a particular region or population group to complete formal registration processes) can – through consultation – be identified and mitigation plans developed.
- In fragile contexts, EUD focal points may be enablers of excellent civil society consultation. They may also be gatekeepers or potentially put peacebuilders at risk.

- Beyond the focal points, the culture of long-term, confidential consultation of civil society actors is driven (or hindered) by individuals.
- In some contexts, local agents pose too much of a potential security risk for civil society activists to work as civil society, human rights or gender focal points.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The U-turn in US policy and the abolition of USAID has violently accelerated repression of civil society worldwide, but the EU is well-positioned to become a leader in championing civil society, particularly in conflict-affected and fragile contexts.

The global and multilateral context has changed considerably since the publication of the leaked memo on EU restructuring; this alone should be cause to review the decision.

On reflecting on best practice from a very challenging context, and on EUD-civil society engagement more broadly, this paper offers the following conclusions and recommendations.

1. Building trust

Civic space is shrinking globally. Civil society actors working on human rights, peacebuilding and conflict prevention in situations affected by conflict are under increased pressure, from armed groups and authorities, on- and off-line. Women and minority groups are usually disproportionately targeted. The Syria case demonstrates that even in highly complex contexts, diverse and inclusive civil society consultation is not only possible but was a priority for senior EU officials.

Meaningful consultation depends on trust, which is built over time. Tick-box consultation with the same (capital-based) interlocutors is not going to necessarily build the EUD's reputation as a trusted partner, especially when local civil society actors may share important information at significant personal risk.

EUD staff generally assume that their buildings or regular meeting places (e.g. hotels) are safe spaces for civil society actors, which is not necessarily always the case. EUD staff are increasingly restricted in where and how they can travel, meaning that their networks are reduced and that the burden of travel usually falls to civil society actors. In fragile contexts, local agents may pose particular challenges to meaningful EU-CSO engagement.

Recommendation: the EU should invest in conflict-sensitive mapping and exercise exceptional care in choosing interlocutors going beyond tick-box exercises; the CSO focal point (or equivalent) in fragile contexts should usually be an international hire.

2. Accessibility

Trust and safety concerns are likely to be compounded if EUDs are restructured in such a way that consultation is concentrated in regional hubs. Even if these regional capitals are seen as neutral (which is not a given), EUD staff travelling into the context will have a reputation for absence and a weaker network to rely on. Only more privileged civil society actors will be able to travel. Ongoing, informal consultation will be very difficult to maintain. Communication and consultation may be even more difficult in regions where several different languages are used.

Recommendation: in contexts with a minimal diplomatic presence, the EEAS should integrate ongoing consultation with civil society into staff job descriptions to ensure more structured dialogues happen regularly, including thematic consultations (e.g. WPS/YPS) with staff from regional hubs.

3. Strategic engagement

Effective civil society can contribute to effective EU interventions in peace and security so long as the consultations engage a broad range of voices, which are legitimate in the eyes of (different) conflict-affected populations.

Conflict prevention and peacebuilding, or ‘peace and security’ can often fall between different EU policy areas and tools.

Civil Society Roadmaps, when based on, and regularly updated with meaningful civil society consultation, can help EUDs conduct diverse consultations in conflict-affected situations, while reducing fragmentation and duplication.

Recommendation: EUDs should continuously update Civil Society Roadmaps, in collaboration with civil society, in order to ensure an up-to-date mapping, and better reading of civil society needs, priorities, and dynamics, which leads to more meaningful consultations.

4. Transition assessments

Transition assessments will be necessary where there will be a change in the status quos of EUDs due to restructuring, particularly where EUDs will be reduced to ‘minimal diplomatic presence’. These changes may have considerable impacts on women-led organisations, organisations from remote or repressed geographic regions, human rights defenders and representatives of marginalised groups (e.g. LGBTIQ communities), as well as on the quality of consultation due to distance, travel and trust challenges.

Recommendation: EUDs should carry an urgent assessment with meaningful consultation of CSOs on the potential impact of the change in the EUDs status quos on EUD-CSO engagement, including how engagement with a regional hub might work in practice and which risks this entails for civil society.

5. Knowledge management

Knowledge management processes will be necessary where there will be a change in the status quos of EUDs due to restructuring, particularly to ensure that progress made with civil society focal points is maintained.

Recommendation: EUDs should set up structured handover processes of EUD-CSO relations to accompany any restructuring, including clear guidelines, handbooks, and institutionalised requirements in staff job descriptions and reporting.

6. Increasing EUD analytical capacities

It remains unclear to what extent civil society contributions are systematically integrated into EU analytical exercises on peace and security, such as CAS. If the upcoming restructuring makes direct civil society engagement more difficult for EUDs, it is important the EU actively acts to find ways to integrate systematic civil society engagement directly into its core analytical capacities.

Recommendation: EUD should identify context-appropriate ways to integrate civil society consultation into Conflict Analysis Screening, ongoing political monitoring and reporting, and framing for strategic communications.

7. Managing changing EUD priorities

If the newly restructured EUDs have an increased focus on the Global Gateway and migration, rather the development cooperation, the EUDs and regional hubs will need to introduce civil society consultation mechanisms that connect more directly to these policy areas. The EU should also be aware of the potential danger of (perceived) instrumentalisation of civil society consultation, including on WPS and YPS, due to this realignment.

Recommendation: EUDs and regional hubs should design and introduce civil society consultation mechanisms that connect directly with the new policy areas while safeguarding space for peace and security dialogue.

8. Programming without EUD direction

If deconcentration is reversed during this restructuring process, and its accompanying localisation of programming design and implementation re-centralised, either to a regional hub or to Brussels, the EU will have to shift away from local delegation management, with a considerable impact on consultation mechanisms that are able to provide the strategic framework for programming priorities and also guidance for implementation and administration. This could also have implications on the selection of beneficiaries of EU funding, as standardised selection criteria may make it more difficult for organisations active in fragile contexts to apply due to registration issues or repression by the authorities.

Recommendation: Regional hubs will need to design consultation mechanisms that are able to identify relevant priorities within the broader programming objectives so that programming is tailored to the context, and design mitigation strategies to address potential bias in selection criteria.

9. Digital engagement limitations

A range of initiatives that proliferated during and in the aftermath of the Covid pandemic have created opportunities for EU-CSO engagement online. There are many benefits of these platforms, including cost, accessibility, and security. They can be highly effective in bringing together small numbers of experts to engage with decision-makers on specific questions. Yet as a broader consultation mechanism, there are considerable doubts about the sustainability of online dialogue platforms, which also face challenges of accessibility and security, as well as their effectiveness for network-building and information sharing.

Recommendation: Regional hubs should not replace in-country in-person civil society consultations with online platforms, except on specific and targeted policy questions.

List of abbreviations

CAS	Conflict Analysis Screening
CFSP	Common Foreign and Security Policy
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
CSDN	Civil Society Dialogue Network
CSDP	Common Security and Defence Policy
EC	European Commission
ECHO	Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations
EEAS	European External Action Service
EPLO	European Peacebuilding Liaison Office
EU	European Union
EUD	EU Delegation
EUSR	EU Special Representative
FPI	Service for Foreign Policy Instruments
INGO	International Non-Governmental Organisation
INTPA	Directorate-General for International Partnerships
NDICI-GE	Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument – Global Europe
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
WPS	Women, Peace and Security
YPS	Youth, Peace and Security