



ADVANCING EU MEDIATION EFFORTS IN AN UNPREDICTABLE WORLD

CSDN Meeting Report

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European Peacebuilding Liaison Office (EPLO)

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

Civil Society Dialogue Network

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



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Background

The current mediation landscape is increasingly oriented towards short-term, transactional and top-down peacemaking, coinciding with a decline in multi-track and long-term approaches. Multilateral frameworks, which the European Union (EU) has traditionally championed in its role as a mediation actor, are also losing ground as vehicles for conflict resolution.

This context is directly relevant to the ongoing negotiations on the EU's next Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF). Through the Service for Foreign Policy Instruments of the European Commission (FPI), the EU has invested approximately €120 million in mediation and dialogue processes across the world over the past five years. In the context of the budget negotiations, donors and practitioners are under mounting pressure to demonstrate tangible outcomes from this investment, and to make better efforts to connect this strand of work to the rest of EU external action. The mediation community, including the relevant departments within the EEAS and the Commission, as well as mediation supporting Member States, is increasingly asked to make the case for peace mediation to political leadership and to prove why it is important to keep investing in this sector.

Another challenge concerns the linkages between peace mediation and security. The two are not incompatible, but are traditionally developed on separate tracks, and further reflection is needed to understand how they can be better integrated. Advancing the mediation agenda raises questions on institutional adaptation and footprint, including the delicate balance between values-based and interest-based engagement, and the calibration of lower versus higher visibility in different contexts.

The EU is also seeking to expand partnerships. Multilateralism is increasingly put into question by major powers, but the EU remains not only a staunch supporter but also an embodiment of it. Accordingly, the EU is reinforcing partnerships worldwide with value-aligned state partners across different continents, as well as with security partners, such as Türkiye and the Gulf states.

Through the Civil Society Dialogue Network (CSDN), EPLO and the EU have organised several meetings that contributed to shaping EU policy on mediation and its implementation, including:

- [EU support to women mediators](#) (2019)
- [Strengthening the EU's role on mediation – gathering input for the drafting of the Concept on EU Peace Mediation](#) (2020)
- The EEAS Peace Mediation Guidelines (2020) and their revision (2023)
- [Strengthening inclusion and participation in EU peace mediation support](#) (2023)
- [Building Partnerships to Secure Peace](#) (2025)

This CSDN Policy Meeting brought together 22 participants from leading mediation organisations and EU institutions, with the objective of discussing the changes in the global landscape and exploring ways to further advance EU mediation. This meeting report gathers key observations and recommendations from the discussions. No attempt was made to reach consensus on the issues discussed.

| Global trends in mediation

Participants identified a series of global trends currently reshaping the international peace mediation landscape.

■ Geopolitical interests are increasingly visible

Participants highlighted that geopolitical interests are an increasingly determining factor in international relations, including in peace mediation, where actors tend to pursue tangible, self-interested outcomes from the processes they are involved with. **Great-power competition** is reflected downward even on highly localised mediation initiatives, and efforts addressing narrow and technical issues can no longer be insulated from developments at track 1 level. The **prioritisation of an interest-based approach** carries some risks to conflict prevention: engagement may inadvertently exacerbate structural drivers of conflict, for instance in relation to energy provision or access to natural resources, while also fostering a more short-term, reactive approach of engagement that rushes to respond to developments rather than anticipating and preventing them.

In relation to this trend, participants noted that although the EU has institutional capacity to engage in conflict contexts through multiple channels and instruments at the same time, and has done so in multiple contexts (e.g., combining CSDP missions and support to IGAD and the African Union in the Horn of Africa, and leading the nuclear negotiations in the context of the JCPOA while also using sanctions), there is widespread perception of inconsistent standards in affirming norms and principles in certain contexts versus a more transactional posture in others.

■ The erosion of the United Nations and multilateral authority

Participants stressed the continuing trend of marginalisation of the United Nations and other multilateral institutions. This is reflected in the rising demand for mediation in inter-state conflicts, probably due to the perception of **diminished capacity of international fora to solve disputes** through established channels. Similarly, demand for mediation in intra-state conflict, including on negotiations with non-state armed groups, is in decline, as **states increasingly favour repression and other authoritarian responses to negotiated settlements**. Participants noted that this erosion is also visible through a diminished pressure on states to comply with international law and human rights obligations, and less international accountability, in itself symptomatic of the weakening of multilateral actors. As a consequence, institutions such as the UN, OSCE and the EU itself are

struggling to play a major role in the resolution of many contemporary conflicts, from Palestine to Iran and Ukraine.

It was noted, however, that great-power politics is not a new phenomenon in international affairs. The key distinction lies in the fact that some “imposed” settlements in earlier periods had a higher degree of legitimacy because they were embedded within multilateral frameworks (e.g., the Dayton Agreement), whereas arrangements today lack this legitimising architecture.

Participants also identified a **growing demand for low-visibility channels**, such as informal dialogues, backchannel diplomatic contacts, informal working groups and ad hoc regional platforms, which multilateral organisations are currently unable to provide and which can create new opportunities to engage on sensitive transnational issues (e.g., irregular migration and organised crime).

■ **A more crowded, diverse and fragmented mediation landscape**

Participants depicted the mediation landscape as increasingly crowded, fragmented and diverse, with smaller and middle powers (e.g., Oman, Qatar, Pakistan, Türkiye) seeking a more prominent role. This shift is driven in part by the **reframing of peace mediation as a component of national security policy**, and is illustrated by the fact that despite the overall diminishing financial resources for mediation worldwide, a growing number of states are institutionalising mediation and increasing training within their diplomatic corps.

A significant shift is also the involvement in mediation of individuals – political figures or private-sector representatives – who lack formal training or professional experience in mediation and often operate within small and closed advisory circles, which provides very few entry points for practitioners to influence decision-making. This has contributed to the **shift from structured mediation towards more improvised, transactional dealmaking**.

In a crowded mediation space, questions of complementarity among actors become crucial. Participants underlined how a **proliferation of mediation actors does not necessarily correlate with improved capacity** to identify the actor that is best positioned to take the lead at the most appropriate moment. For example, it was noted that no actor has replaced the UN in managing transitions between the different phases of a process.

Some participants noted that some established **mediation actors are gradually recalibrating their approaches**. Oman and Qatar were cited as having become more accessible interlocutors for practitioners, which is leading to more medium to long-term partnerships. However, some participants also observed that the growing prominence of non-traditional actors is contributing to the **marginalisation from policy discussions of civil society** and some of important policy frameworks, such as the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda.

■ Increased volatility and pace of change

Participants noted how current international relations are increasingly volatile and the (real or perceived) pace of change in global dynamics is making it more difficult for the mediation community to adapt. A major consequence of this volatility is the **near-total disappearance of conflict prevention from the policy agenda**. The stronger focus on securitised approaches has reduced the space for diplomacy and traditional mediation, with mediation NGOs increasingly struggling to identify effective entry points into a policy discourse more focused on hard security. Decision-making processes appear to be growing more top-down, making it **increasingly difficult for practitioners to connect policy discussions to field-level engagement**. For this reason, participants highlighted the imperative need for the mediation community to identify entry points within the momentum generated by top-down processes.

Value-based actors, including NGOs and the EU, have been particularly slow in responding to these changes due to their **lower risk appetite** and concerns over reputational exposure. Participants noted that, while understandable, this caution carries the cost of getting increasingly sidelined from key processes and consequently losing rhetorical and normative influence in shaping them.

These dynamics also raise fundamental questions concerning the concept of neutrality and scope for EU engagement. Participants observed that due to the diversity of instruments at its disposal, the EU is well positioned to assume roles extending beyond that of a traditional mediator, including as convenor or guarantor.

■ Strategic importance of narrative framing

Participants highlighted that as mediation processes become more top-down and high-level, their narrative framing becomes more important, often exceeding the importance attributed to actual results (for instance, a major peace conference becomes more politically salient than its outcomes). Consequently, **narrative framing and strategic communication are seen as increasingly central to mediation practice**.

Participants noted that disinformation and misinformation are deployed not only by conflict parties, but also by mediating actors themselves, as instruments for shaping external perceptions of a given process, at times generating significant consequences at the local level despite it being theoretically disconnected from high-level negotiations.

Some participants argued that the perceived crisis of traditional mediation and peacebuilding is partly due to an excessively negative framing, and that a widespread pessimism contributes to further risk aversion and constrains innovation within the sector. As a response, it was suggested that a more expansive narrative framing of security, transcending the narrow language of peace and conflict, could generate positive effects for the practice of mediation. On a similar note, one participant

suggested that the increased emphasis on deterrence, while at odds with the foundational logic of mediation and peacebuilding, could strengthen the EU's confidence as an international actor, thus encouraging it to deploy its full foreign policy toolkit, which includes mediation and peacebuilding.

Recommendations and opportunities

Participants discussed opportunities for EU engagement in peace mediation and provided recommendations oriented towards strengthening the EU's role as a mediation actor and supporter worldwide.

■ Addressing fragmentation by leveraging the EU's diversity in approaches

Participants noted that the breadth of instruments at the EU's disposal allows it to have a strong vantage point from which to engage in this increasingly fragmented mediation landscape. The EU is well positioned to leverage this diversity by advancing **different approaches through multiple entry points**, engaging with other regional blocs as well as individual states. Depending on the circumstances, the EU could assume the role of lead mediator or support one or more parties. The EU can also draw on the expertise of individual Member States or partners, supporting them in contexts where they take the lead, and look for complementarity and synergies with its own mediation and dialogue efforts.

Participants highlighted that the possibility of combining the use of multiple instruments could spark deliberate reflection on the footprint the EU seeks to establish through its mediation engagement. Beyond its role as coordinator, convenor and supporter, the EU could further capitalise on its expertise in specific sectors (e.g., peace tech, counter-disinformation, youth inclusion and participation, etc.) using it as strategic entry point for broader engagement. At the same time, the EU could focus more on connecting the different initiatives it leads or supports across different contexts, ensuring that transferable best practices are identified, adapted, and applied, so that the EU's engagements ultimately become more interconnected and consistent.

■ A sustained focus on partnerships

Some participants argued that an excessive preoccupation by the mediation community with the EU's diminished visibility and presence in key conflict contexts has overlooked the extent to which many global actors would in fact **welcome a more substantial EU presence**, and that many entry points for partnership with linkages to peace mediation remain underexploited. The Gulf region was brought in as an example, with Gulf states generally very receptive to an expanded EU role in mediation, both in the provision of training and technical expertise and in a more consultative role. Regional connectivity in the Mediterranean was also mentioned. Participants also pointed to the Indo-Pacific,

noting that the EU could draw on its experience in regionalism to support the efforts of states like Japan and Malaysia in advancing mediation of sovereignty-related disputes within the ASEAN framework.

Participants also discussed the extent to which **development cooperation frameworks could potentially serve mediation and conflict prevention** objectives, for example by mainstreaming conflict prevention within Global Gateway initiatives or using conditionality to put political pressure on partner governments.

■ **Creating more space for dialogue**

Participants highlighted the **lack of informal spaces and channels** through which actors can convene and engage in dialogue, not necessarily to address conflict-related issues directly, but to build the foundation for mutual trust and understanding conducive to more formal processes at a later stage. It was noted that where such dialogues have taken place, their impact was ultimately limited due to their disconnection from broader political processes.

Participants agreed that the EU is well placed both to establish more of these low-visibility informal spaces (for example, in the Great Lakes region and Asia-Pacific) and to strengthen the linkage between existing informal dialogues and formal political processes, like the EU is trying to do in the Middle East and Sudan. Participants underlined the EU's strong track record in engaging and convening diverse actors, and in this spirit, invited the EU to adopt a less strict approach towards engagement with non-state armed actors.

Participants also agreed on the need to create more in-person spaces in which **practitioners, donors, implementing partners and other stakeholders can exchange perspectives**, discuss emerging trends and outcomes, and identify opportunities for complementarity. It was noted that the EU is the ideal actor to convene these discussions due to the diversity of its initiatives and its generally inclusive orientation. Participants stressed the importance to **maintain these discussions insulated from funding-related considerations**, which can introduce bias and reduce the frankness of the conversation, although pressure on funding will make these types of exercises increasingly difficult. Some recommended **clearer communication channels** between practitioners in conflict-affected countries and EU representatives and called for improved coordination across relevant EU services and departments. Finally, some participants noted the potential value of establishing online spaces for communities facing severe exclusion, with Myanmar cited as an example.

■ **Exploiting the momentum generated by transactional deals**

While participants stated that the EU should not seek to compete directly with more transactional actors in the mediation space, they emphasised that the EU should nonetheless **capitalise on the momentum created by such quick, high-level deals** to operate on more sustainable mediation opportunities and to identify entry points to

address gaps that inevitably arise from top-down processes. Transactional deals are often imperfect and at times harmful but have in some instances unlocked progress in contexts that had remained static for long periods (e.g., Armenia-Azerbaijan, Western Sahara).

The EU, due to its comparatively longer-term orientation toward peace and conflict, can play a proactive role in capitalising on such momentum, and work towards converting such deals into more long term, sustainable agreements, creating the conditions and flexibility needed for their implementation. Participants noted that such a role would necessarily entail a degree of risk, including the possibility of friction with major powers, for example due to the **need for engagement on sensitive issues that top-down mediators typically avoid**, such as transitional justice and reconciliation.

While a more proactive EU role is broadly welcomed, participants stressed that it should be pursued with acknowledgement of the limits of EU capacity, recognising the **balance needed in acting as a “player” versus a “payer”**, including in the situations where the EU might lack the capacity to engage meaningfully or add value. This raises broader questions on the desirability of a **lower versus higher profile posture** in a given context: a more visible role usually carries reputational risks, more resource mobilisation and deployment capacity, while a less visible role might offload excessive risk to implementing partners.

Participants finally noted that the EU's role need not be limited to filling the gaps left by others, but also being **more proactive in shaping agreements directly**, asserting a stronger role for itself and the broader mediation community, including by expanding civic space and advancing European values, while remaining conscious of the footprint such an approach entails.

In this context, the EU's added value lies clearly in the provision of **technical support**, for example by deploying specialists through the Mediation Support Team, delivering capacity-building and training in areas such as constitution-building, transitional justice, and legal framework development, providing knowledge resources, and supporting inclusive process design.

■ A stronger focus on local needs

Participants identified a focus on local needs and locally led peace infrastructure as a **distinctive strength of the EU's approach to mediation**, particularly in the current environment dominated by transactional, high-level actors. Such focus represents both a viable entry point for dialogue and a genuine long-term commitment, and entails prioritising the issues that are salient at the community level. For example, in certain contexts, communities could consider service delivery and economic opportunities as more urgent than addressing the country's political fragmentation. Such engagements could follow a sequencing logic, moving from intra-community support towards inter-community mediation and dialogue.

A stronger focus on local needs would also facilitate the **inclusion of local communities in mediation processes**, especially in those contexts where the work and perspective of organisations active at community level are critical for implementation. For example, local communities are usually best positioned in observing troop movements, which can be crucial information for the successful implementation of ceasefire monitoring agreements.

This logic extends to the inclusion of actors who, despite possessing substantial experience of mediation in conflict contexts, are not conventionally regarded as peace mediators, and are consequently excluded from consideration in mediation processes. This group includes business actors, commercial mediators, lawyers and trade unionists, who represent large, untapped potential.

Finally, participants noted that there is a large number of grassroots initiatives driven by local civil society (e.g., youth networks working on intergenerational dialogues) that could benefit not only from financial assistance, but also from protection. Support to these initiatives could have important long-term value, including in educating individuals that will play a significant role in shaping their countries' post-conflict trajectories.

■ **Improved mapping and contextual awareness**

Some participants noted that there currently is no universally adopted technological tool capable of consolidating the substantial volume of assessments, early warning data, and conflict analysis generated on conflict-affect countries and regions. This hampers the capacity of EU policymakers to base decisions on solid evidence and data.

Some participants noted that the EU has, in certain conflict contexts (notably Sudan and the Horn of Africa), demonstrated considerable receptiveness to input from NGOs and local communities on which role it could be playing in specific processes or which approach it could pursue on specific policy questions. However, the consistency of this **responsiveness varies considerably across contexts** and depends more on individuals than on specific institutional practices.

Some participants recommended that the EU establishes clearer external-facing communication channels, enabling communities and local organisations to identify the appropriate departments or officials to contact for mediation and conflict-related concerns more easily.

■ **Mainstreaming mediation training**

Participants highlighted the need for the EU to **improve internal training on mediation and the “do no harm” principle, extending to senior diplomats and heads of delegation**. This could have a positive effect in preventing harm and mitigating the risk of missteps, especially in official visits with governmental counterparts in politically contested environments. Additionally, it could ensure a more granular and sophisticated understanding of mediation dynamics more broadly, for instance by bringing officials together in annual convenings to discuss mediation, creating specific learning modules

that integrate the Concept on EU Mediation and the EEAS Operational Guidelines, and overall supporting a more mediation-informed understanding of the contexts in which EU diplomats operate.

Participants stressed the degree of sophistication required in such training, noting that while certain EU mediation principles hold broadly across contexts, their operationalisation could vary considerably from one context to another. In some countries, for example, the most natural interlocutor for the EU could be the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, while in others it could be the Ministry of Defence, which would require a different approach and cultural and institutional awareness.

The incorporation of robust contextual awareness in training would contribute to improving the perceptions of the EU within partner countries and substantially strengthen engagement with civil society, with corresponding benefits for trust-building, information exchange, and mutual support.