

RETHINKING A GLOBAL EUROPE

Ideas to make the EU
a stronger global actor



ENGAGE

ENVISIONING A NEW
GOVERNANCE ARCHITECTURE
FOR A GLOBAL EUROPE

POLICY BRIEF 6

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HARNESSING THE EU'S COMPARATIVE ADVANTAGES IN CONFLICT MANAGEMENT

The EU must capitalise on its unique strengths in a highly competitive global arena. Its comparative advantages lie in areas where it has ample experience, know-how, legal competence, and institutional capacity. This policy brief offers recommendations to harness these strengths in conflict prevention, mediation and resolution. By doing so, the EU will be able to act more proactively, assertively and effectively on the international stage.

1. Leverage the expertise of EU agencies for external action

The European Commission and the EEAS should further involve EU agencies – particularly those with traditionally internal mandates like the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) – in shaping the EU's foreign policy. This integration would ensure that domestic achievements and know-how inform and enhance the EU's external role in conflict management.

2. Empower and expand the corps of EU Special Representatives

The Council and the EEAS should bolster the EU's diplomatic front by relying to a greater extent on EU Special Representatives (EUSRs) for thematic areas, countries and regions, and particular crises. This would be both cost-effective and strategic. It would heighten EU presence and influence in key crisis zones and policy areas, such as human rights advocacy. Enhanced visibility and streamlined coordination between EUSRs – and special envoys – would reaffirm the EU's commitment to tackling regional and global challenges head-on.

3. Intensify support for civil society engagement

The European Commission, in collaboration with the EEAS and EU delegations, needs to prop up national and local civil society organisations as part of its conflict management activities. By providing these groups with the necessary tools and support, the EU would help them effectively address the multifaceted aspects of conflict management. The comprehensive participation of civil society would advance the EU's objectives in gender mainstreaming, economic development and environmental protection. Moreover, it would accommodate EU policies to the realities of those they impact the most. It is imperative for EU actions to be shaped by and for the communities they serve, ensuring relevance, sustainability, and mutual respect in peacebuilding efforts.

HARNESSING THE EU'S COMPARATIVE ADVANTAGES IN CONFLICT MANAGEMENT

To strengthen its role in global conflict management, the EU must strategically harness its unique capabilities. These include addressing core drivers of conflicts through a rights-based approach, combined with diplomatic expertise and a focus on economic development. By integrating internal agencies into external action, reinforcing the corps of Special Representatives and Special Envoys (hereinafter, EUSRs), and amplifying civil society participation, the EU can channel its comparative advantages into proactive, region-specific, and effective conflict management strategies.

Introduction

In the face of intensifying geopolitical rivalries, the EU can enhance the effectiveness, coherence, and sustainability of its external action by further leaning on its comparative strengths: substantial expertise in grappling with root causes of conflicts, a rights-based approach, and its economic leverage. This policy brief outlines targeted recommendations to underpin the EU's proactive contributions to conflict prevention, mediation, and resolution. It calls for the 'mainstreaming' of external action across EU agencies, the strategic reinforcement of EUSRs, and enhanced collaboration with civil society. This would align the Union's distinct capabilities with the multifaceted demands of modern conflict management.

Why does this matter?

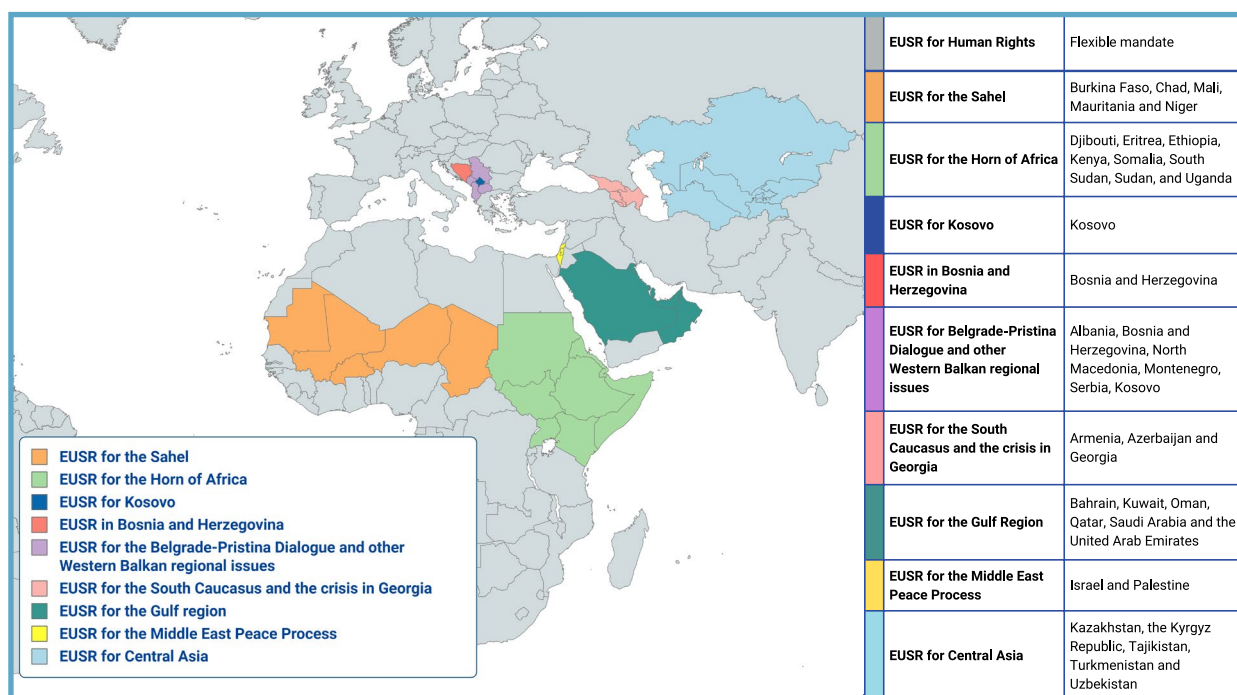
The EU finds itself in a bustling global stage where many players are trying to manage and offer solutions to crises and violent conflicts. To stand out and make a real impact, the EU should do what it can do best: **combine its economic and diplomatic leverage with a track record in upholding democracy and human rights, protecting the environment, and fostering gender equality.** By focusing on these areas, the EU can utilise its distinctive toolbox to build stronger, lasting partnerships that tackle the underlying challenges that represent hotbeds of conflict.



Case studies conducted as part of the ENGAGE project underline the EU's positive contributions to conflict management, while also providing a blueprint for concrete improvement. In the Balkans, EU support has helped countries like **Kosovo** and **Serbia** move away from conflict towards a more stable future, using economic growth and diplomacy as tools for peace under an enlargement framework. In Central American countries, such as **Guatemala**, the EU's push to include women's voices in peace talks is making a difference in healing post-conflict societies. These examples demonstrate that the EU can do well by focusing on its comparative advantages, but also point to where it can do better by further investing its resources, as well as clarifying mandates and overall objectives of its involvement. **The EU's challenge is to tailor its approach to each unique situation, understanding local needs and responding effectively** – which entails working with partners on short-term solutions while offering a long-term perspective of cooperation and prosperity. By sharpening these strategies, the EU can ensure it is not just responding to crises, but actively shaping peace and stability in selected partner countries.



Figure 1: Geographical coverage of the EU's Special Representatives



Source: own elaboration (MapChart)

EUSRs can showcase the Union's commitment to diplomatic efforts in conflict prevention and post-conflict situations while offering tangible benefits. They can build on the Union's reputation and global standing to perform their assignments. Take, for instance, the EU's appointment of Eamon Gilmore as Special Envoy for the Peace Process in Colombia in 2015. His role has been pivotal in highlighting the EU's dedication to Colombia's path towards sustainable peace, and has been appreciated by government and civil society alike. Gilmore's regular visits to Colombia have allowed him to engage directly with victims, human rights defenders, broader civil society, the government, opposition groups, FARC-EP, and the media. **This hands-on approach makes EUSRs effective mediators who build trust among stakeholders and smoothen the negotiation process.** Gilmore's parallel work as the EUSR for Human Rights also underlines the EU's broader strategy to take a rights-based approach to its external policies, including conflict resolution.

EU agencies have traditionally focused on the Union's internal policies. **Yet their extensive know-how in areas such as human rights, gender equality, consumer protection, economic development, and environmental sustainability holds significant potential for enhancing the EU's ability to tackle root causes of conflict.** These agencies could thus be instrumental in bolstering the EU's diplomatic and peacekeeping efforts abroad. For instance, the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) can offer valuable insights into the mainstreaming of gender perspectives, which should be a cornerstone of any peacebuilding and conflict prevention initiatives. Likewise, the European Environment Agency (EEA) could offer critical expertise in environmental protection – an input that is essential in the context of climate change, which increasingly intersects with security and migratory patterns.

The cross-cutting nature of these agencies' work with EU internal policies makes their potential contribution to external action all the more significant. By tapping into this underutilised expertise, the EU could ensure that its external actions – especially in crisis situations – are undertaken in a manner that mirrors its internal successes.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Leverage the expertise of EU agencies for external action

The European Commission, in coordination with the EEAS, should prompt EU agencies to advise on external policies, especially in areas where the EU had successful internal experiences and that are central to conflict management. EU agencies' expertise in rights promotion and matters that relate to primary drivers of conflict – such as climate change – can provide crucial insights into the EU's development and conflict management strategies abroad. Not only would this help to align domestic achievements with foreign policy goals, but also to strengthen the EU's role as a global advocate in key issues like sustainable development and equality. Examples of agencies with potential to contribute more to the formulation of EU external action include the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE), the European Environment Agency (EEA), the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC), and the Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA). Agencies can be mandated to provide annual reflections connecting their own action field with the EU's external action, and examining the role and place of the Union in global governance.

Empower the corps of EU Special Representatives

The EEAS and the Council should properly equip EUSRs with financial means, expertise, access and support staff to perform their duties, in addition to clearer mandates. EUSRs – with a proven track record that includes supporting tangible breakthroughs in countries like Colombia – can offer specialised diplomatic engagement, facilitate dialogue and build trust in conflict zones. By doing so, the EU demonstrates its commitment to a hands-on approach in managing global conflicts and ensures its values are represented on the ground. EUSRs are cost-effective and can liaise across EU institutions, agencies, Member States and third parties, including stakeholders at crisis-afflicted countries and regions.

Intensify support for civil society engagement

The European Commission and the EEAS, in close collaboration with EU delegations, need to increase support for national and local civil society organisations. These organisations are vital in addressing the complex layers of conflict and can bring local realities to the forefront of the EU's external engagement. By enabling their full participation, the EU can ensure its initiatives are well-informed and implementable, thereby enhancing the effectiveness and sustainability of its peacebuilding and conflict prevention efforts. This support should also extend to transnational projects, fostering a networked approach to conflict management. When it comes to civil society engagement, the EU has solid foundations to build on. Not only has the EU cultivated these ties abroad, but interaction with its own civil society – as well as diasporas in Europe – can serve as an additional catalyst.

This policy brief has been drawn up by Gustavo Müller on the basis of research conducted in the ENGAGE project. For a more in-depth look at the research, please visit the ENGAGE website.

Read
More

Project identity:

The ENGAGE (Envisioning a New Governance Architecture for a Global Europe) project examines how the EU – both the institutions and its Member States – can effectively and sustainably harness all of its tools in joined-up external action alongside the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and its Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) to meet key strategic challenges and become a stronger global actor.”

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