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**The EU's Approach to Nexus Issues
in Conflict Resolution, Prevention
and Mediation:**

Climate, Development and Gender

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**ENVISIONING A NEW
GOVERNANCE ARCHITECTURE
FOR A GLOBAL EUROPE**



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Executive Summary

This working paper conducts an in-depth analysis of the European Union's (EU) approach to nexus issues in conflict prevention, mediation, and resolution. In the realm of gender and conflict, it emphasises the EU's commitment to mainstreaming gender in its peacebuilding efforts in Guatemala. The EU aims to tackle gender-based violence and enhance women's political and economic participation. Despite its clear objectives, there is a level of ambiguity regarding the alignment of these actions with transformative gender principles, particularly regarding indigenous and rural communities in Latin America. With the case of Serbia, the paper delves into the EU's strategy concerning the security-development nexus. The Union employs the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance to fund development projects that align with its priorities for the Western Balkans. However, challenges arise due to Serbia's financial constraints and administrative capacity. Meanwhile, the Arctic, characterised by its fragile environment and geopolitical significance, presents the EU with intricate challenges in the face of climate change. Past disputes over jurisdictional issues exemplify the complexities the EU's encounters in the region. Yet, the EU's efforts to fortify its Arctic presence signal its commitment to the region with a fast-changing geopolitical landscape.

Throughout these analyses, China's growing global presence surfaces as a recurrent theme. In the Arctic, China's growing interests pose challenges to regional governance and sustainability. In Serbia, Chinese investments, though beneficial in infrastructure development, raise sustainability and debt concerns. In Central America, China's economic and geopolitical engagements contrast with the EU's emphasis on human rights, democratic governance, and gender mainstreaming. The paper concludes by highlighting the multifaceted nature of the EU's approach to these nexus issues, stressing the need for coherence across various EU instruments and adaptation to local realities in partner countries and regions. In addition, it underscores the significance of aligning the EU's strategies towards individual countries with broader regional approaches.

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1 Introduction

This working paper analyses the approach of the European Union (EU or Union) to nexus issues in the interconnected fields of conflict prevention, mediation and resolution. It relies on the conceptual and theoretical framework elaborated in ENGAGE [Working Paper 14](#) (De Man et al., 2022) to look into the EU's governance structures, policy process and actions in relation to three nexus issues in three different (potential) crisis situations. Nexus issues are here understood as factors that influence a specific policy, in this case the EU's conflict prevention, mediation and resolution.

This working paper zooms into three sets of nexus issues: gender in peace building and conflict prevention, climate change, and the security-development nexus, while taking into account parallel work in the ENGAGE project. For each nexus, one particular context has been selected, which allows the paper to shed light into concrete examples of the EU's approach, or lack thereof, to nexus issues with the goal of coherence, sustainable and effective external action as defined by Sus et al. (2021 (ENGAGE [Working Paper 3](#))). In analysing the nexus issues and the EU's engagement, attention is given to the EU's involvement vis-à-vis civil society organisations (CSOs), as CSOs can have a considerable impact in changing internal dynamics that affect one or more of the nexus issues under study.

The issue of *climate change and environment* is assessed with the case of EU's approach to the Arctic region. The EU's Strategic Compass highlights that the "region is changing rapidly, in particular due to the impact of global warming, geopolitical rivalries and increased commercial interest including on natural resources" (EEAS, 2022a, p. 19). The issue of climate is therefore closely associated with the region, which is also geographically close to the European Union, including territory of its Member States. The nexus issue of *gender in conflict* is analysed in the context of EU's policies and approach to peacebuilding in Central America, a region defined as "fragile" in the EU's Strategic Compass, with a particular focus on the case of Guatemala. Hence, the paper sheds light on how the EU mainstreams gender via interconnected policies to the country, itself embedded in region-to-region policy and institutional frameworks. Finally, the *security-development nexus* is explored in the EU's approach to conflict prevention and mediation in Serbia, a country of the Western Balkans, a region where "security and stability is still not a given, also due to increasing foreign interferences" (EEAS, 2022a, p. 18), and that further represents a region of potential enlargement of the EU.

Therefore, these three cases have been selected based on their relevance to the EU's external action and its goals as well as on how suitable they are to the analysis of nexus issues. While the Arctic is a region in itself, the cases of Guatemala and Serbia are placed within broader EU approaches to their regions, and region-to-region relations to various degrees of institutionalisation. These three regions also see increasing presence of extra-regional actors, from traditional countries and institutions like the EU itself, to rising powers that contest regional and world orders with various degrees of assertiveness, like China. Taking into account the broader goals of the ENGAGE project to evaluate the foreign policy of the EU, also



with regards to other international actors, this working paper details how China is present in these regions and how it interacts with the selected countries, particularly with regard to the nexus issues. In all cases addressed in this working paper, the Chinese presence and engagement in the nexus issues impact or could impact the effectiveness of EU activities across different policies to various degrees. For instance, in the Serbian case, the Chinese presence and investment in strategic infrastructures is recognised to be an influencing factor in the country's path towards EU accession, as it provides an easier alternative to the EU conditionalities. Similarly, the Chinese claims in the Arctic could lead to the exploitation of the Arctic's resources and space in a way that further affects the climate change nexus, and that further complicates the balance of powers in the region. Finally, in Central America, growing economic Chinese presence in the region offers alternatives to the EU's commercial and development policies, which are well-established channels to promote gender mainstreaming.

Each of the three case studies presents a short description of the conflict, zooming in on the chosen nexus issue; the EU's engagement in the conflict with a particular focus on the nexus issue (including governance structure and most recent policies); the EU's engagement with civil society, when appropriate to the case itself; and a description of China's engagement in the context and the EU's response to this presence. Before the description and analysis of the three case studies, the following section places nexus issues in the literatures of security studies and conflict management.



2 Nexus Issues in Conflict Resolution, Prevention and Mediation

Conflict resolution, prevention and mediation are all overlapping phases of what can be referred to as conflict management. Conflict itself can be seen as a situation where two or more parties perceive that they have incompatible goals in relation to their values, resource claims, power, or status (De Man et al., 2022, (ENGAGE [Working Paper 14](#))). Given different factors, conflicts might turn violent, compromising the security of the parties involved. However, it is worth mentioning that, in scholarship and in discourse, *conflict* is often used interchangeably with *violent conflict*. Therefore, an existing conflictual situation that can potentially turn violent might simply be referred to as a *potential conflict*.

So-called nexus issues can positively or negatively affect a specific policy. In the context of this paper, the nexus issues under consideration impact all different phases of the conflict cycle and conflict management, from prevention to resolution. The climate change nexus in the Arctic has a negative spillover effect on the environment, its protection and use of local resources, and it could lead to an increasingly contested and congested geopolitical environment in which states extend their powers and influence the peaceful use of the region. The nexus of gender can appear as a tool to promote positive peace in affected areas with the empowerment of women or can negatively impact the situation when violence against women is used as weapon. Finally, the security-development nexus considers the interconnection between the level of (sustainable) development and the level of security of a country, that is considered to be directly influencing the effectiveness of conflict mediation and resolution efforts.

Given the relevance of several, concomitant, nexus issues, international actors like the EU, OSCE, UN and NATO have increasingly embraced a more holistic strategy for conflict management, the often-called comprehensive approach, which integrates different tools to tackle a wide spectrum of factors in conflict or conflict management, beyond military means. This understanding is central to the notion of human security, which determines that any actor's intervention in a given conflict should target issues in three intertwined security domains: physical, economic and political security (Vogelaar et al., 2014). Therefore, a comprehensive approach, tied to the notion of human security, aims at "coordinating and integrating the entire subsets of civilian and military tools at the disposal of all relevant actors, from international to the local level, in order to enhance the effectiveness of interventions in all phases of the conflict cycle" (De Man et al., 2022, p. 8 (ENGAGE [Working Paper 14](#))). The EU itself adapted a 'comprehensive approach', later recast as 'integrated approach in the 2016 Global Strategy, taking into account a variety of nexus issues in security and, more narrowly, in conflict management. An approach of this type is said to engage multiple phases (all stages of conflict cycle), dimensions (civilian and military), levels (from local to global and all in-between) and sides and stakeholders (broad and deep international partnerships) (De Man et al., 2022, (ENGAGE [Working Paper 14](#))).



Non-traditional security studies have shown that many issues and policy areas are intimately connected to conflict management, including resource scarcity and energy, migration and demographics, human health and wellbeing, climate and environmental degradation, economic development, and gender dimensions. Hence, many of these issues are part of multi-layered and complex securitisation processes. They may become themselves perceived threats against which exceptional measures in the security realm can or should be taken. The securitisation processes of migration and of climate change are examples of such dynamics, together with the more recent securitisation of the health threat of the COVID-19 Pandemic. In addition, nexus issues can also be turned into “referent objects” whose existence, wellbeing or good functioning should be preserved and maintained against potential and existing threats. In international relations, referent objects have traditionally been nation-states, but the erosion of established borders of discipline and practice has expanded this group to include human security, the environment, cultural and linguistic heritage, national and global economies and financial systems, vulnerable social groups, and many others.

Finally, nexus issues also play a role in more traditional understanding of security and conflict as inter and intra-warfare, armed confrontation and physical violence. As such, nexus issues might be root causes of conflict like underdevelopment, or food, water and resource scarcity. In other contexts, violence against more vulnerable social groups, like women and children, is turned into weapons of war. At the same time, women have a multidimensional role in conflict prevention, mediation and peacebuilding. Globally, fast-changing processes of climate change and technological development are often considered to have a threat-multiplier effect. The EU’s Strategic Compass (EEAS, 2022a), the Union’s most recent and comprehensive strategic document for its external action, takes stock of these nexus issues and non-traditional security elements and proposes activities for their marginalisation. The document highlights the understanding that security threats, conflict drivers, and a comprehensive approach to conflict management often result from the complex interactions among nexus issues, requiring all-encompassing strategies and policies to help prevent, solve and manage crisis situations.



3 Climate and Environmental Degradation in the Arctic

International relations in the Arctic region over the last half-century have been marked by the absence of violent conflict amongst actors that were, at the same time, involved in conflict situations elsewhere in the world. In view of this 'negative peace', the idea of an 'Arctic exceptionalism' has emerged (Hoogensen Gjørsv & Hodgson, 2019, pp. 218–220). This is not to say, however, that the region is completely devoid of (non-traditional) conflict situations. The case of the Arctic shows how the attainment of the Union's goals can be thwarted by misalignment with a partner's (Canada) interests, or its stance towards another actor's (Russia) behaviour in distant regions; and on the other hand, how they can – and should – be moulded to respond to the increasing presence of a previously absent power (China).

The Arctic region refers to the northernmost space of the planet and encompasses the whole of the Arctic Ocean and the North Pole. However, there is no uniform definition for its southern borders, which can be set following diverse criteria, such as certain physical geographic boundaries (e.g. the Arctic Circle,¹ the so-called tree line,² or climatological descriptions), as well as human geographical boundaries (e.g. considerations of culture, politics or economy, inter alia) (Han et al., 2020, p. 1; Nuttall, 2005, pp. 117–121). Regardless, the region comprises territories of the Arctic Ocean riparian States – Canada, Denmark/Greenland,³ Norway, Russia and the United States (the so-called Arctic 5, or simply A5. Rothwell, 2018, p. 277) – and further three States: Finland, Iceland and Sweden. Together, they are known as the 'Arctic 8', or simply 'A8' (Kobza, 2015, p. 9).

The European Union does not have a direct territorial presence in the Arctic Ocean, since Greenland left the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1985 (Raspotnik & Stępień, 2020, p. 133) – thus falling into the category of Overseas Countries and Territories (OCT), pursuant to art. 198 TFEU. Following the 'Northern Enlargement' in 1995, however, the EU expanded to the north of the Arctic Circle. It then became necessary to develop a policy for its

¹ Located approximately at 66°33'N, it is the '...southern limit of the "midnight sun"[, north of which] there is at least one day per year when the sun does not set,' (Stern, 2005, p. 115).

² The term designates the '...major global biogeographic boundary [that] separat[es] the circumpolar boreal forest (Subarctic) from the Arctic tundra'. It can follow a variety of different criteria, e.g. '...the limit of continuous forest, the limit of tree-sized individuals, or the limit of any individuals of the tree species' (Gajewski, 2005, p. 2054).

³ Pursuant to the 2009 Act on Greenland Self-Government (*Lov om Grønlands Selvstyre*), which replaced the 1972 Home Rule arrangement, several competences affecting the daily lives of Greenlandic citizens are the responsibility of the Self-Government institutions (*Inatsisartut*, the Greenlandic Parliament; and *Naalakkersuisut*, the Greenlandic Government). While the local Greenlandic authorities are consulted on matters of security, defence and foreign policy, they may not be transferred to them – pursuant to the Danish Constitution – and remain with the central authorities of the Realm (i.e. the *Folketing* – Danish Parliament – and the Government) (Staatsministeriet, [n.d.]



neighbourhood in the northern region (Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland, 2009, p. 1). With the aim to strengthen the EU-Russia cooperation in the Arctic, Finland put forward in 1997 the groundwork for the 'Northern Dimension' (ND) – then a joint policy of the EU, today a 'joint policy of four equal partners', namely the EU, Russia, Norway and Iceland (Northern Dimension Institute, [n.d.]). The policy further developed during the first Finnish Presidency of the EEC/EU in 1999, approved the year after and revised in 2006 (Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland, 2009, p. 1). As part of this effort, a series of thematic partnerships have been developed, so as to provide 'a platform for practical cooperation' in the areas of environment, culture, public health and social well-being, as well as transport and logistics (Northern Dimension Institute, n.d.). Furthermore, it builds upon the work of other regional cooperation fora, namely the Council of the Baltic Sea States, Barents Euro-Arctic Council, Arctic Council and Nordic Council of Ministers (Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland, 2009, p. 10; Northern Dimension Institute, 2020).

In terms of (overall) Arctic governance and cooperation, the forum of the Arctic Council (AC) enjoys a central role (Bjerkem, 2017, p. 4). Following the adoption of the 1991 Arctic Environmental Protection Strategy (AEPS), the AC was created by the Arctic 8 to '...facilitate international cooperation in the Arctic and to promote sustainable development of the region' and soon absorbed the AEPS (Huntington, 2005, p. 116; Koivurova, 2010, p. 147; Koivurova, 2018, p. 284–285). The 1996 Ottawa Declaration stipulates that issues of military security remain outside of the AC's scope (Arctic Council, 1996, footnote to art. 1 para. (a); Lukin, 2014, p. 71; Koivurova, 2018, p. 285; Barrett, 2016, p. 305). As explained by Koivurova, the creation by means of a Declaration '...effectively [keeps] the cooperation as a type of soft law arrangement', since it doesn't have the characteristics of an international treaty (Koivurova, 2010, p. 148), unlike its meridional counterpart – the Antarctic Treaty. Instead, the AC was conceived as '...high-level intergovernmental forum...', unable to enact rules binding on its Member States (Koivurova, 2018, p. 285).

In terms of AC membership, it is reserved for Arctic States exclusively (i.e. the A8), offering the possibility for 'permanent participation' to Arctic organisations of indigenous peoples, as well as observer status to non-Arctic states that show interest in the region,⁴ non-governmental organisations (NGOs),⁵ and inter-governmental and inter-parliamentary organisations (IOs),

⁴ Currently, 13 non-Arctic States have permanent observer status: France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the Netherlands, China (PRC), Poland, India, South Korea, Singapore, Spain, Switzerland and the United Kingdom.

⁵ Currently, 12 NGOs have permanent observer status: Advisory Committee on Protection of the Sea (ACOPS), Arctic Institute of North America (AINA), Association of World Reindeer Herders (AWRH), Circumpolar Conservation Union (CCU), International Arctic Science Committee (IASC), International Arctic Social Sciences Association (IASSA), International Union for Circumpolar Health (IUCH), International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs (IWGIA), Northern Forum (NF), Oceana, University of the Arctic (UARctic), and World Wide Fund for Nature, Arctic Programme (WWF).



both regional and global⁶ (Ottawa Declaration, arts. 2 and 3; Lukin, 2014, p. 72–73; Koivurova, 2018, p. 286). One of the latest institutional developments was the creation in 2012 of a permanent AC Secretariat at the Fram Centre in Tromsø (Norway), that replaced the previous model in which the State holding the biannual Chair of the Council of Ministers provided the secretarial services. Its functions are limited to administrative and organisational support, as well as communication and outreach, excluding any decision-making (AC, [n.d.] (a); Koivurova, 2010, p. 147). The Council of (foreign) Ministers meets biannually (Ottawa Declaration, art. 4), and during the intersessional period the Committee of Senior Arctic Officials (SAO) meets at least twice a year, in order to deal with the AC's current activities (Lukin, 2014, p. 71; Huntington, 2005, p. 116). To execute the AC's projects and programmes, as mandated by the Council of Ministers, Working Groups have been established.⁷ Following the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, in the Arctic Council – at the time chaired by Russia – the remaining member states announced that they would temporarily pause their participation in all of their meetings. In June of the same year, a limited resumption was announced, involving only projects that didn't require Russian participation; while this seems like a reasonable interim solution, it doesn't take away from the fact that the AC is a coordination forum working on the base of consensus. In May of 2023, Norway assumed the rotating chairmanship; however, the exclusion of Russia and the halt on the projects with Russian involvement remains an important obstacle (Smieszek, 2023).

In May of 2008, the A5 signed in Ilulissat (Greenland) a declaration that addressed a series of governance challenges, as well as their common approach and commitments to face them (Yeager, 2008). There, the spotlight was directed prominently on the effects of climate change as the driving factor for the 'significant changes' the Arctic Ocean region would face, with '...a potential impact on vulnerable ecosystems, the livelihoods of local inhabitants and indigenous communities, and the potential exploitation of natural resources' (Arctic Council, 2008, para. 2). As the name indicates, the declaration is a political instrument, and has no legally binding effect. Nevertheless, it was an expression of the Arctic coastal States' approach to the future governance of the region – and its resources (Winkelmann, 2008, p. 1). Furthermore, the signing States declared that they saw no need for '...a new comprehensive legal regime to govern the Arctic Ocean...', since the same is subjected to the extensive regime of the law of the sea, currently crystallised in the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea

⁶ Currently, 13 IOs have permanent observer status: International Council for the Exploration of the Sea (ICES), International Federation of Red Cross & Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), International Maritime Organization (IMO), International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN), Nordic Council of Ministers (NCM), Nordic Environment Finance Corporation (NEFCO), North Atlantic Marine Mammal Commission (NAMMCO), OSPAR Commission, Standing Committee of the Parliamentarians of the Arctic Region (SCPAR), United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), World Meteorological Organization (WMO), West Nordic Council (WNC).

⁷ Currently, there are six Working Groups – focused on fields identified in the Ottawa Declaration and in Ministerial Declarations – where Member State agencies and Permanent Participants are represented.



(UNCLOS) (Barrett, 2016, p. 333). This is despite the fact that one of them, namely the US, has yet to ratify UNCLOS.

The Ilulissat Declaration was preceded by a series of events that flowed into the signatories' discourse. Notably, the diminishing amount of sea ice in the Arctic Ocean offered new opportunities for navigation in the boreal waters. The focus was further attracted to the region by the prominent episode triggered by the planting of a titanium Russian flag on the seabed at the North Pole: despite the consensus over the action's lack of legal effects, the global media speculated over an imminent arms race for the region and its natural resources (Koivurova, 2018, p. 286). Additionally, the perceived lack of coherent regulation for environmental protection and Arctic governance – at least in the areas beyond national jurisdiction, i.e. the high seas – led several voices to call for the negotiation of an Arctic Treaty following the example of the then-five-decades-old Antarctic Treaty. The European Parliament (EP) joined these shortly after the Ilulissat Declaration was signed (European Parliament, 2008, para. 15; Koivurova, 2010, p. 152).

In this sense, the Ilulissat Declaration was both an eloquent expression of support for the system in place and a reassurance of the undisputed sovereignty the Arctic States exert over their territories in the region (Winkelmann, 2008, p. 2). The commitment to the model in place meant that membership continues to be restricted to the A8, allowing only for observer status to other interested States and organisations.

Also in 2008, the EU put forward an application to improve its AC observer status from 'ad hoc' to 'permanent', the main difference being that it wouldn't need to apply each time to attend the Council of Ministers' meeting. In the Tromsø (Norway) meeting the following year, however, the attempt was thwarted by Canada as a reaction to the – then projected – EU ban on trade in commercially-hunted seal products⁸ (Depledge, 2015; Garcés de los Fayos, 2015, p. 2; Sellheim, 2015a, p. 274). The Canadian view was that the ban negatively affected the livelihood of Arctic indigenous peoples, particularly the Inuit (Sellheim, 2015b, p. 9; Depledge, 2015). While at the 2013 Kiruna (Sweden) meeting several observers – including China – were granted permanent status, the decision on the Union's application was again put off; instead, it obtained a 'de facto' observer status.⁹ Eventually, the differences were resolved through the incorporation – in the context of the EU-Canada Comprehensive Trade and Economic Agreement (CETA) negotiations – of an indigenous peoples exception into the EU regulation,¹⁰ however, at the 2015 Iqaluit (Canada) meeting the decision to grant permanent status was prevented by Russia, presumably based on 'geostrategic considerations' (Garcés de los Fayos, 2015, p. 2). Today, the European Union remains active as an observer to the AC, as evidenced

⁸ Regulation (EC) No 1007/2009 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 16 September 2009 on trade in seal products

⁹ The EU obtained the right to attend all Arctic Council meetings – both high-level and in working groups – without the need to be invited to them each time (Garcés de los Fayos, 2015).

¹⁰ Incorporated by means of Regulation (EU) 2015/1775, of 6 October 2015.



by its observer report to the latest Council of Ministers meeting, held in Reykjavík (Iceland) in May 2021 (Arctic Council, 2021).

3.1 The EU's Engagement

3.1.1 Zooming into the Nexus Issues from the EU's Perspective

By means of successive communications to the European Parliament and the Council, the Commission has expressed the Union's interests and approaches to the Arctic region, centring its proposed actions to its institutions and Member States around three main policy objectives: the environmental protection of the Arctic, sustainability in the use of the region's resources, and enhancing the multilateral governance of the Arctic (European Commission, 2008, p. 3; European Commission and High Representative 2016, p. 4; European Commission and High Representative, 2021, p. 2). There, the EU highlights its presence in the region "by a unique combination of history, geography, economy and scientific achievements" (European Commission, 2008, p. 2), recalling the Arctic territories of three Member States, as well as the close and strategic relations with the remainder of the Arctic states. Furthermore, it acknowledges the vulnerability of the region's ecosystem and the changes it is currently going through, including the increased access to more areas and resources due to melting of sea ice and new technologies (European Commission, 2008, p. 1; Raspotnik & Stepień, 2020, p. 135).

Considering that it is "one of the regulators of human activities in the European Arctic" (Raspotnik & Stepień, 2020, p. 132), it set itself the objective to mitigate and prevent the impact of climate change, and contribute to the adaptation to changes that are now inevitable; likewise, environmental considerations are to be integrated at all levels of the management of human activities (European Commission, 2008, p. 3). Nonetheless, this needs to take place with due consideration of the rights of the local population and indigenous communities, who are protected by special provisions under EU law (European Commission, 2008, p. 4). Further elements specifically mentioned are the growing concern about animal welfare, as well as the preservation of biodiversity and the challenges posed by invasive alien species (European Commission, 2008, p. 4; European Commission & High Representative, 2016, p. 5)

In terms of sustainable use of resources, strict environmental standards ought to be implemented in the exploitation of hydrocarbons, having due regard of the region's vulnerability. Similarly, sustainability is to be a central factor in tourism and fishery activities, implementing efforts to minimise the environmental footprint and remain mindful of the ecosystems' state (European Commission, 2008, pp. 7–9; European Commission & High Representative, 2016, p. 16). Lastly, in view of the prospective development of new sea routes, the EU's policy is to focus on one hand on the defence of the principle of freedom of navigation and the right of innocent passage, as well as on the promotion of stricter environmental and safety standards in Arctic (European Commission, 2008, p. 8; European Commission & High Representative, 2016, p. 16). Moreover, the latter aspect is linked to the development of 'space-based services' for telecommunications, so as to offer "surveillance and monitoring services"



(European Commission & High Representative, 2016, p. 12; European Commission & High Representative, 2021, p. 15).

As regards the aspect of multilateral governance, the EU identified a series of objectives. One important aspect relates to the vast marine areas of the Arctic, aiming at the development of a cooperative governance system based on UNCLOS, ensuring open and equitable access to resources which are to be used in a sustainable manner, and a strict environmental management. Furthermore, existing obligations are to be fully implemented, and new arrangements reached through dialogue and negotiations, taking care that Arctic Member States and EEA partners are not excluded. Closely related to this, all options at international level ought to be explored so as to agree on measures for the protection of marine biodiversity located in areas beyond national jurisdiction (BBNJ), as well as efforts made to successfully negotiate the creation of marine protected areas (MPAs) in the high seas (European Commission, 2008, p. 8; European Commission & High Representative, 2016, pp. 7–8; European Commission & High Representative, 2021, pp. 7). Importantly, the EU explicitly recognises the framework provided by UNCLOS for the management of the Arctic Ocean (European Commission & High Representative, 2016, p. 14; European Commission & High Representative, 2021, p. 11), following the discourse of the Ilulissat Declaration.

On the other hand, on a 'macro level', the Union set itself the objective to increase its input to the Arctic Council and achieve an 'official' observer status therein (European Commission, 2008, p. 11; European Commission & High Representative, 2016, p. 14; European Commission & High Representative, 2021, p. 3). With a more specific approach, the EU is mindful of Greenland's OCT status and the financial assistance foreseen for the Danish autonomous territory, and intends to enhance the cooperation, with an aim to collaborate in the management of its fragile environment, strengthening of the economy and the education system (European Commission, 2008, p. 12; European Commission & High Representative, 2016, p. 15; European Commission & High Representative, 2021, pp. 4–5).

The Arctic policies of the Arctic EU Member States reveal a good level of coherence with the Union's approach, in all three cases containing the elements of international cooperation – including their commitment to UNCLOS in the region's governance –, environmental matters and sustainable development. As is to be expected, however, their individual concern over security and safety reveals that their sovereign status is not forgotten (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark 2011; Government of Sweden, 2020; Finnish Government, 2021).

3.1.2 Governance Matters

In November 2009, the EC Regulation on trade in seal products entered into force, justified by the fragmentation in the EU market – while some Member States had no rules in place, others did or had announced their intention to create them –, as well as on the public concern over animal welfare (Regulation (EC) No 1007/2009, recital 4 et seqq.). This stirred heavy opposition from Inuit organisations, given the importance of subsistence seal hunting and the role it plays in their culture (Sellheim, 2015b, p. 9), in turn leading to tensions with one of the Union's (Arctic) partners: Canada. In response, the Canadian government used its veto power



to prevent the EU from being granted permanent observer status in the Arctic Council. On the other hand, given the trade implications of the ban, Canada initiated dispute settlement procedures in the World Trade Organisation (WTO), with the support of Norway (Sellheim, 2015b, p. 9). Despite considering the EU regulation to be in line with the exception to protect public morals, the WTO Appellate Body judged the EU document to be discriminatory, thus in breach of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) (Shaffer & Pabian, 2015, p. 156–158). In 2015, the Regulation was amended,¹¹ incorporating the exemptions defined in the CETA negotiations on the seal products ban for indigenous population, leading Canada to lift its veto. However, the decision hit yet another obstacle: Russia's objections, reportedly in response to sanctions following the 2014 annexation of Crimea (Haines, 2015). The EU has participated as a de facto observer to the Arctic Council ever since, still unable to see its policy goal become reality.

Against this backdrop, in recent years, another situation involving an EU partner in the European Arctic has remarkably not been branded an 'Arctic issue'. In 2017 and 2018, the EU Council allocated amongst Member States 20 licences to catch snow crabs in the waters surrounding the Svalbard Archipelago,¹² despite a ban introduced by Norway in 2015. The latter is considered by the EU and its Member States to be discriminatory, since the Norwegian regulation foresees a limited number of licences for Norwegian vessels to the exclusion of foreign fishermen. Two main factors lie at the core of the matter: firstly, the understanding that snow crab – a relatively new species in the Barents Sea – is a sedentary species and thus subjected to the regime of the Continental Shelf (as opposed to the Exclusive Economic Zone and the High Sea). Secondly, the actors have opposite opinions on the applicability of the Svalbard Treaty to the maritime zones surrounding the archipelago: whereas Norway sees the Treaty regime covering only to the extension of the archipelago's territorial waters, the EU and its Member States interpret it to reach up to the limit of the (extended) Continental Shelf (Østhagen & Raspotnik, 2018). The fact that the Norwegian Supreme Court decided in favour of the country's position in a judicial process earlier this year reveals that this matter – officially a 'fisheries', and not 'Arctic' issue – has not yet been resolved (Bye, 2023).

In further maritime matters, while not a member of – but an observer to – the International Maritime Organization (IMO), the EU has supported the implementation of the 'Polar Code', as well as participated in the development of mandatory measures for the planning and navigation in polar waters. Furthermore, it continues to elaborate on common standpoints for the further negotiation of the so-called phase 2 of the Polar Code (European Commission & High Representative, 2021, p. 4; European Commission, 2023a; Council Decision 2023/1082), which was implemented by the Member States as recently as June 2023: at the 107th session

¹¹ Regulation (EU) 2015/1775 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 6 October 2015 amending Regulation (EC) No 1007/2009 on trade in seal products and repealing Commission Regulation (EU) No 737/2010

¹² Under a special regime set by the 1920 Treaty of Paris (Spitsbergen Treaty) providing access to the islands and their natural resources to all treaty parties, where the archipelago is placed under Norwegian sovereignty.



of the IMO Maritime Safety Committee, the proposed amendments to the Polar Code were adopted by unanimity, i.e. with the affirmative vote of all 23 EU Member States present at the meeting¹³ (IMO Secretariat, 2023a; IMO Secretariat 2023b, p. 31).

As regards the 'space-services', the Copernicus Emergency Management System offers in the region capabilities for monitoring and early warning of disasters, as well as for mapping and coordination. The Galileo system, on its part, offers services for pilots and sailors in their operations in hostile environments, contributing to the Search and Rescue capabilities in the region and beyond (European Commission & High Representative, 2021, p. 5).

Since its 'northern expansion', the European Union has played attention to the Arctic, it has developed strategies and made an effort to position itself as a player in the region. While its relations with its Arctic Member States don't display major signs of friction, the same cannot be said about its external action, due to different factors. Firstly, a lack of internal coherence stirred the waters when the European Parliament issued a declaration in 2008 calling for the development of an 'Arctic Treaty' – even while one of its own Member States asserted its sovereign rights in the Ilulissat Declaration. Later, it has failed to achieve one of its most prominent Arctic goals, included in multiple iterations of its policy for the region, namely being granted permanent observer status at the Arctic Council. First, its ban on seal products (acting in a display of internal coherence; see Busch, 2023, pp. 9–11) cost it the support of Canada. It even had two partners opposite to its position when Norway backed Canada's claim before the WTO. Then, a display of external coherence (the sanctions imposed to Russia; see Busch, 2023, pp. 11–12) produced a new obstacle to attain its objective. More recently, the EU has managed to present a more unified front, as evidenced by the issue of the snow crab surrounding the Svalbard Archipelago: while individual MEPs voice their concerns and would like to start again a general debate over Arctic governance, the actors (and institutions, i.e. Norway, the EU Member States and the EU Commission) involved have diplomatically kept it as a matter of fisheries (Østhagen & Raspotnik, 2018, p. 63).

3.2 Most Recent EU Policies in the Arctic Region

Through the EU-PolarNet (now in its second iteration), the EU brings together 25 partners from the Member States and Associated Countries with well-established polar research programmes. Supported by Horizon 2020, its aim is to coordinate and develop advanced Arctic and Antarctic research to provide sound policy-making evidence-based advice, especially to the European Commission. During the first period (2015-2020), the consortium was financed with EUR 2 million, and the current iteration (2020-2024) has already been awarded over EUR 3 million (AWI, 2022; CORDIS, 2022; RUG, 2023).

With regard to its contact points to the Arctic region, the EU created in 2017, the position of 'Ambassador-at-large for the Arctic'. Ms. Clara Ganslandt, named in September 2022, is the third Special Envoy for Arctic matters, as the position is now officially known. The role entails

¹³ Only Austria, Bulgaria, Hungary and Slovakia were absent.



the development of the EU Arctic policy, as well as dealing with the Union's visibility in the Arctic (international forum) and the Arctic's position within the EU (Canova et al, 2021; EEAS, [n.d.]). In consideration of the increased relevance of the Arctic, the EU further announced the creation of a Representation Office in Nuuk, Greenland's capital. It is expected to contribute to strengthening the ties with Greenland by streamlining the dialogue, and possibly prevent a decidedly stronger presence of other actors, such as the United States or China (European Commission & High Representative, 2021, p. 4; Bye, 2002).

3.3 China's Presence in the Arctic and the EU's Response

The above-mentioned permanent observer status granted to China by the AC in 2013 is but a further milestone in the country's Arctic engagement: before the turn of the century, there was little to no Chinese activity to speak of in the Arctic. This started to change two decades ago with research expeditions aboard the *Xuě Lóng* (Snow Dragon) icebreaker and the construction of the Yellow River station (*Huánghé Zhàn*) in Svalbard. Since then, some milestones of Chinese presence in the Arctic have been its first commercial transit through the Northeast Passage in 2013, the navigation by five Navy ships of US territorial waters off the coast of Alaska and release of a navigation guide of the Northwest Passage in 2016, and *Xuě Lóng*'s first crossing of the Central Arctic Area in 2017 (Grieger, 2018, p. 2). In 2019, *Xuě Lóng 2* – the first Chinese-built, nuclear-powered polar research ice-breaker – was launched, and recently set course to the high North, breaking through sea-ice at a latitude of 84°N in August 2023 (Staalesen, 2023).

In 2008, China expressed its opposition to the 'exclusion of non-Arctic states from Arctic affairs and developments', arguing the following year that 'every country [has] the same rights to use Arctic resources' (Reinke de Buitrago, 2020, p. 99). In the Chinese narrative, the Arctic is framed as a global common; while statements by high-ranking officials describing the region as common heritage of humankind appear to be inaccurate English translations, the fact remains that China has been explicit about having Arctic interests. This is made clear by its self-denomination as a 'near-Arctic State', 'continental State close to the Arctic Circle' and 'Arctic stakeholder' (Grieger, 2018, pp. 2–4; Reinke de Buitrago, 2020, pp. 98–100). While China does recognise the Arctic States' sovereign rights under the terms of UNCLOS – a requirement to be granted permanent observer status at the AC –, it defends the position that non-Arctic States have rights and freedoms to carry out legal activities in the region, which are to be respected by the coastal States (Grieger, 2018, pp. 3–4). China's Arctic interests have been identified as being related to the access to mineral resources (notwithstanding the fact that they are largely located in territories subjected to state sovereignty or the [claimed extended] continental shelf), fishing and alternative maritime routes. The latter fits into the context of the 'Belt and Road Initiative', where the Northern Sea Route would be shorter than the navigation through the Suez Canal by 40% (Ciolan, 2022). Additionally, Chinese Arctic tourism is expected to increase in the future, in a similar manner as in Antarctica over the past decade, so as to 'offer the expanding Chinese population places with clean air' (Reinke de Buitrago, 2020, p. 99; Grieger, 2018, pp. 5–7). To this point, alleged military interests are mainly based on the



development of dual-use technology; commentators however claim that the actual presence is less than it appears to be (Ciolan, 2022; Van Brunnersum, 2022).



4 The Security-Development Nexus in Serbia

After the dissolution of the Federal People's Republic of Yugoslavia, the EU decided to intervene in the Western Balkans region to restore security on the ground. At that time, the EU structures for crisis management were mainly inappropriate to conduct meaningful crisis management activities, which led to the NATO's Operation Deliberate Force with large scale bombing of Serbian targets. The 1995 Dayton Peace agreements halted the war in the region but did not provide a solution to the independence requests advanced from Kosovo. At the beginning of 1998, the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) launched attacks against the Serbs authorities, starting the Kosovo war. After failed negotiations, the results of the Rambouillet talks - which included the proposal for high degrees of autonomy to Kosovo, international supervision and presence of NATO contingents in the region – became an ultimatum for Serbia. The refusal from president Milošević to accept it led to NATO airstrikes of Yugoslavia and to the subsequent withdrawal of Serbs troops from Kosovo. With Serbs soldiers out of the country, the UN Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) was activated. UNMIK created a de facto protectorate in the Yugoslav republic with the aim to bring the Kosovo region to hold elections and solve the status issue of Kosovo. According to some statistics, more than 200.000 people fled to Serbia from Kosovo in 1999 and it is reported that only a part “of them are able or willing to return to their places of origin due to insecurity, marginalisation and other concerns” (UN General Assembly, 2023, p. 7).

The relevance of the Serbian case resides in the outcomes that followed the Kosovar war in 1998. The EU inability to be a relevant and capable actor in crisis management triggered the St. Malo declaration between France and the United Kingdom (UK), in which they recognised the inability of the EU to “play its full role on the international stage” and committed to work towards the development of the capacity for autonomous action to be mobilised rapidly in case of risks (Heads of State and Government of the UK and France, 1998). Furthermore, the EU felt a moral obligation to stabilise the Western Balkans, partly in consideration of the atrocities committed by both sides involved in the conflict and due to the region's geographical proximity.

Against this background, in 2001 the Union promoted the Community Assistance for Reconstruction, Development and Stabilisation Programme to help in the implementation of reforms and to sustain development in the region (EEAS, 2021), then replaced by the Instrument for Pre-Accession (IPA) that since 2007 became the major instrument to support reforms in the enlargement region (European Commission, n.d.,a).

Funding for development purposes were further backed-up by the political willingness of the EU Member States to have the eventual potential membership of the Western Balkans, demonstrating coherence of external policies, as defined by Sus et al. (2021 ([ENGAGE Working Paper 3](#))). The 2003 Thessaloniki EU Council summit identified the stabilisation and association process (SAP) as the path for the Western Balkans towards their eventual EU membership (EEAS, 2021). Nonetheless, due to the specificities of the region, Western Balkan



countries must ensure regional cooperation and good neighbourly relations, in addition to the Copenhagen criteria for EU membership (Stanicek, 2020).

Given difficulties to solve the Kosovo issue, in 2005 the EU became part of a mediation effort together with Russia and the US, that however did not lead to any tangible results (Bohnet & Gold, 2011). Following this effort, the UN proposed the Ahtisaari plan in 2007 (UN Security Council, 2007), but it was never endorsed by the UN Security Council and Kosovo unilaterally declared independence in 2008. In that year, the EU also deployed one of the most relevant civilian missions under the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) framework, the European Union Rule of Law mission in Kosovo, (EULEX) Kosovo, still ongoing after 15 years of deployment. In the same year, Serbia and the EU signed a stabilisation and association agreement (SAA), but it was only in 2012 that Serbia received a candidate status for EU membership (EEAS, 2021).

For the resolution of the Serbia-Kosovo issue, the EU inaugurated the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue in 2011 (Stanicek, 2021), sponsored by the EU through the activities of the HR/VP and, since 2020, those of the Special Representative for the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue. After less than two years from the inauguration of the Dialogue, the two countries signed the so-called Brussels Agreement that constitutes the first step for the normalisation of relations. After years of stall in the Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue, Kosovo and Serbia signed agreements on free movement across borders in August 2022 abolishing the need for exit/entry documents (EEAS, 2022b), and on the issuing of car license plates in November 2022. Nonetheless, as a protest for the lack of sufficient guarantees for the Serb minority, Kosovar Serbs in northern Kosovo quit their jobs (Radio Free Europe, 2023), demonstrating how profound differences and divergences between the two countries are (Preussen, 2022).

The Serb part of the population further boycotted the local administrative elections in early 2023. Their results, in favour of Albanian Kosovar representatives, have been declared valid despite the 3.5% support from the population. The social unrest that followed required the intervention of NATO KFOR troops whose contingent was increased of 700 after injuries of personnel in May (Deutsche Welle, 2023). The protests of the Serbs in northern Kosovo originates from the lack of implementation of the 2013 Brussels Agreement that included the creation of Association/Community of Serb-majority municipalities. Specific guidance on the creation of association were provided by the Kosovo constitutional court, but the draft statute of such associations was only first discussed in May 2023 as reported by the EU HR/VP (European Parliament, 2023a). Serb police also arrested three Kosovar policemen that supposedly crossed the border, and that were subsequently released (Lynch, 2023). Discontent on the status and guarantee given to the Serbs in Kosovo is also a matter of Serbian national stability. For instance, the political party of President Vucic is considered to be in decline of support, due to inability to address the Kosovo-Serbian issue (Bell-Davies & Dunai, 2023).

In parallel to social demonstrations, at the beginning of 2023 Kosovo and Serbia succeeded in finding an agreement on the path to normalisation of relations, or Ohrid Agreement, and on its implementation annex. Despite both the agreement and the annex constitute integral part of



the requirements for future accession of both countries into the EU, there was no formal signing of the document, if not an oral agreement (EEAS, 2023). The social unrest that continues to characterise the Northern part of Kosovo further prevented to take steps forward under the EU sponsored dialogue. Following a September 2023 high-level meeting, the EU HR/VP urged both parties to come to terms and work towards the EU path (Council of the EU, 2023). Nonetheless, the EU capacity to effectively influence both state's actions through the halting of specific meetings or the provision of sectoral aid remains limited. As noted by Santopinto et al. (2023 (ENGAGE [Working Paper 27](#))) the effectiveness of the EU engagement in the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue can be considered as dependent on the US capacity to operate political leverage, thus questioning the EU capacity to be effective.

In the specific case of Serbia, further dynamics come into play. Neither Russia nor China, both permanent members of the UN Security Council, recognised Kosovo as an independent state. In both cases, historical proximity and shared understanding of principles in international politics make Serbia a potential pawn at the international level. Furthermore, connections in the economic, trade, energy and infrastructure sectors make the Serb position even more complex. In terms of foreign direct investment (FDI) in the region, although the EU remains the main investor in the country, China's and Russia's FDI represented respectively 9% and 7% of the total FDI in Serbia for the period 2010-2022 (EU in Serbia, n.d.).

Examples on the influence of Russia are further provided by the recent Serbian stances on the Russia's war in Ukraine. Serbian vote against Russia in the UN General Assembly for Moscow's suspension from the Human Rights Council was welcomed by the international community and by the EU. However, Brussels questioned Belgrade's decision to not adopt any sanctions against Russia. As part of the process for the EU membership, Serbia is expected to progressively align with all positions of the EU, including in foreign and security policy (European Commission, 2022a). The misalignment on sanction policy towards Russia made the Serbia rate of alignment to EU positions drop from a 64% rate in 2021 to 45% in 2022. Serbian non-alignment further generates problems in the circumvention and attempted circumvention of sanctions, with potentially relevant repercussions on the conflict in Ukraine. Consultative meetings as well as cooperation in the military field between Serbia and Russia are reported to be continuing since February 2022 and are seen as alarming from the EU (European Parliament, 2023b). Coming to China, a source of EU concern interests China's influence in the country and in the region. The amount of investment from China, the increasing use of intergovernmental agreements, as well as the planned free trade agreement between the two countries and cooperation in the military field are seen as potential destabilising factors for the region and as alternative paths to the EU support and conditionalities (European Parliament, 2023b).

In addition to the resolution of the Kosovo-Serbia issue, Belgrade has to satisfy other requirements to become member of the EU, such as having a functioning, stable, and competitive economy, as well as low levels of disparities and poverty, that are also priorities in the development policy of the EU. Despite the gradual adoption of reforms to adapt to the EU system, Serbia's income gap with the EU was attested at 44% in 2021 (European



Commission, 2022a) and it was estimated that region would have needed between 60 to 200 years to reach the same level of gross domestic product (GDP) per capita of the EU (Bonomi, 2019). Moreover, the prominent level of foreign direct investment in the country – at around 7% GDP in 2022 (World Bank, n.d.) - while helping in the performance of the country, does not necessarily allow for internal reforms for a sustainable development of the country. In terms of social disparities, in 2020 21.7% of the population was at risk of poverty while 6.9% was living in absolute poverty (IPA III Programming Framework, 2023).

4.1 The EU's Engagement in Conflict Prevention and Mediation

4.1.1 Zooming into the Nexus Issue from the EU's Perspective

Development policy of the EU is defined by article 21(2) TEU, for which poverty eradication constitutes the primary goal. Article 208 TFEU further specifies that Member States and EU sponsored initiatives in development policy complement each other, provided coherence of action is ensured (Szép & Wessel, 2022 (ENGAGE [Working Paper 6](#))). Member States will use development cooperation as a tool to “manage and help resolve conflicts and crisis, avert humanitarian needs and build lasting peace and good governance” (European Commission, 2017, point 65). Coordination of action is ensured by the commitment “to Policy Coherence for Development (PCD), which requires taking into account the objectives of development cooperation in policies which are likely to affect developing countries” (European Commission, 2017, point 109).

The scope of development cooperation has been widened from that of the treaties, and now includes other policy areas that do affect the development path of a country but that are part of the broader EU external action (European Commission, 2019). For instance, there is the understanding that improving fundamental democratic, rule of law, and economic reforms will foster a solid and accelerated economic growth and social convergence (European Commission, 2017, point 64) as stated in the 2017 European Consensus on Development. The consensus represents a collective understanding on the approach to development of the EU and defines the EU response to the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its Sustainable Development Goals (2015).

Furthermore, emerging priorities for development are increasingly focusing on different policy areas, like environmental sustainability and resilience, transition to low-carbon economy, health, migration, or good governance emphasising the humanitarian-development-peace nexus (Christou et al., 2022 (ENGAGE [Working Paper 17](#))). The widened range of activities under the development policy, are a sign of the EU increased attention to the security-development nexus, as already identified in the 2013 Comprehensive Approach which prioritised long-term development goals to other assistance measures (Szép & Wessel, 2022 (ENGAGE [Working Paper 6](#))), “to enhance the effectiveness of interventions in all phases of the conflict cycle” (De Man et al., 2022, p. 8 (ENGAGE [Working Paper 14](#))).



As Christou et al (2022, p. 26 (ENGAGE [Working Paper 17](#))) point out, “when linkages are made between development policy and other policies, political conditionality [...] often becomes a feature of aid agreements” and this is particularly true and relevant in the case of potential memberships to the EU. With the 2020 EU new methodology for enlargement in the Western Balkans, the EU tried to engage in a more credible, predictable and dynamic enlargement process in the Balkans, through stronger attention to the clarity of conditionalities and to dialogue with the candidate country to overcome potential difficulties in the implementation process (European Commission, 2020a). An increased political dialogue with candidate countries is expected to improve the effectiveness of the EU action. As highlighted by De Man et al. (2022 (ENGAGE [Working Paper 14](#))), a higher sense of ownership of the reforms to implement at national level raises the likelihood of complete reforms implementation.

4.1.2 Governance of the Security-Development Nexus

The governance of cooperation in the security-development nexus evolved during the years, to reflect the evolution of the policy areas affecting the development of a country. If the plurality of actors can generate difficulties in both the horizontal and vertical coherence of engagement (Sus et al., 2021 (ENGAGE [Working Paper 3](#))), the broad set of tools is in line with the “whole of the EU” approach pursued particularly since 2016 (European Commission, 2019).

In the specific case of the Western Balkan region and of Serbia, the EU engagement in the security-development nexus is performed at different levels and by several actors, and further serves the purpose of helping Serbia advancing in the EU’s accession process. Actors therefore belong to both the Commission and the External Action Service and activities fall under the common foreign and security policy (CFSP), CSDP and enlargement policy.

The activities and financing included in the IPA III 2021-2027 and IPA Rural development programme (IPARD) are managed by the Directorate general for neighbourhood and enlargement negotiations, the DG for agriculture and rural development for the IPARD programme, and DG for regional and urban policy for cross-border cooperation between Serbia and EU Member States (European Commission, no date, a). Further actions are conducted by DG international partnerships (INTPA), the service for foreign policy instrument (FPI), NDICI global Europe, the External action service, the European Investment Bank, the Western Balkans Investment Framework (WBIF).¹⁴ Given the high number of ongoing initiatives, the role of the EU delegation in the country is, theoretically, particularly relevant as it is the structure that is involved the most in political dialogues with the country, thus gaining information of the impact of the development policy (Szép & Wessel, 2022 (ENGAGE [Working Paper 6](#))).

¹⁴ The WBIF is a joint initiative of the EU, financial institutions, bilateral donors and beneficiaries, all working in line with the Team Europe approach to support the short- and mid-term investments in the energy, environment, social, transport, and digital infrastructure sectors. For more information, please see <https://www.wbif.eu/about/about-wbif>



An impact assessment report on the heading 4 (external action) of the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) 2014-2020 identified the potential overlapping of activities and plurality of actors as a problem for coherent action, despite the relevance for the recipient countries of the instruments available (European Commission, 2018a). A first simplification of the structures was operated through the new structure of the MFF 2021-2027, that gathers different activities under the Global Europe umbrella and maintains the IPA assistance separate from other types of cooperation, although under the same heading (European Commission, 2021a). Moreover, Member States and EU institutions are required, according to the new IPA III regulation to coordinate activities as much as possible (Bartlett et al., 2022).

4.1.3 Most Recent Policies and Engagement in the Country

Activities to improve the security-development nexus in Serbia are placed at the interception between development/external policies and enlargement policy. Furthermore, activities are in line with the six “flagship initiatives” that resulted from the 2018 strategy *A credible enlargement perspective for and enhanced EU engagement with the Western Balkans*. These initiatives target transport and energy connectivity, a digital agenda, socio-economic development, rule of law, security and migration, as well as reconciliation and good neighbourly relations (European Commission, 2018b).

The major instrument for support to Serbia is represented by the IPA III (2021-2017), in which framework Serbia can receive up to 200 million euro per year (Agatonović, 2022). As table 1 shows, the financial engagement of the Union with Serbia is expected to remain steady for the period 2021-2027, although in the years 20014-2015, Serbia was the 3rd recipient of bilateral official development assistance from EU institutions (Szép & Wessel, 2022, p. 27 (ENGAGE [Working Paper 6](#))).

Table 1: Financial Allocation to Serbia under the IPA I, II, III in Billion Euro

IPA I (2007-2013)	IPA II (2014-2020)	IPA III (2021-2027)
1.2	1.4	e. 1.4

Source: own elaboration

IPA fundings are assigned according to a programming framework that better reflects the EU priorities for engagement in the Western Balkans and replaces the country-specific strategy papers (European Commission, n.d.,b). Programmes can be revised following an annual evaluation of the achievements (Regulation (EU) 2021/1529, Art 7), although conditionalities were evaluated to be marginally used, causing a loss of grip in the country (Bartlett et al.,2022). IPA II allocations were mainly focused on socio economic development and investment in human resources, as well as on reforms in areas of rule of law, democracy, and public administration (Ministry of European Integration, no date). These priorities were largely confirmed in the 2021 and 2022 annual action plans for Serbia, with the addition of specific annexes on the implementation of the green agenda and the improvement of state’s resilience (European Commission, n.d.,c).



As part of the IPA III, Serbia received a total of around 449 million euro for the years 2021, 2022, and 2023 (European Commission, 2021b; European Commission, 2022c; European Commission 2022d) and until 2027 it will receive 288 million euro under the IPARD funds for projects mainly related to the development of physical assets of agricultural holdings and processing and marketing of fishery and agricultural products (IPARD III).

Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic and until 2021 the EU devoted an unprecedented 3.3 billion euro to the Western Balkan region to support the socio-economic tenure (Council of the EU, 2021). As Dursun-Ozkanca (2021) points out, socio-economic problems originating from COVID are directly related to the level of development of a society. Against this background, the EU activated further initiatives to counter the effects of COVID on the economy and more closely tie the economies of the Western Balkan countries to the levels and standards of EU Member States (European Commission, 2020b). It was the case of the Economic and Investment Plan (EIP) for the Western Balkans agreed at the end of 2020, that totals 9 billion euro grant funding and 20 billion euro in investments leveraged by the Western Balkans Guarantee Facility (Council of the EU, 2021). One of the flagship projects under the EIP is the construction of a highway (of Peace) connecting Nis to Kosovo, a part of which has been recently inaugurated (EU in Serbia, 2023). Together with the Western Balkans Investment Framework and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), the European Investment Bank (EIB) dedicated Serbia around 2.2 billion euro to this project in consideration of the positive spillover effects the road could generate in the country and the region (EU in Serbia, 2021). Further investments in the sector interest the Railway Corridor X, a pan-European corridor connecting Central Europe with Greece that will be built based on EU standards.

Since the 1990s and until 2020, the EU devoted 11 billion euro to the Western Balkans' transport and energy infrastructural development, that resulted in investment of around 22 billion euro (European Commission, 2020b). In the energy sector, as potential future member of the EU, Serbia committed to green transition and climate neutrality as part of the *acquis communautaire*, and Belgrade is working towards the 2050 target for carbon-neutrality (World Bank, 2022). Required activities in this sector are defined in the Staff Working Document setting out a Green Agenda for the Western Balkans. Nonetheless, statistics show that in 2019 the country used only 25% of energy from renewable energy sources and that the green quality of sustainable market economy in 2022 was below the lowest level among EU Member States (Bartlett et al., 2022).

The reduction of dependency from coal is a further priority included in the WBIF and agreed at state level. Energy transition from coal to greener energy caused in the first part of 2010s the halting of funding for coal energy related projects from the EBRD and the EIB (BankWatch, 2014). When it comes to transition from coal, EU funding support the Trans-Balkan Electricity Transmission Corridor, that aims at providing electricity distribution throughout the region and with the markets of Romania and Italy, with potential positive repercussions on the capacity of the local market to integrate with the EU market (Bartlett et al., 2022).



In its effort to make the candidate country comply with EU policies and standards, the EU Commission would like Serbia and Western Balkan countries to reduce their dependencies from Russian gas and Chinese investment in the energy sector, to work towards more sustainable energy resources (European Parliament, 2023b, point 98). Financial support in this direction has been given through the 2022 1-billion-euro energy support package for the Western Balkans (European Commission, 2022b), of which 165 million euro directed to Serbia (European Parliament, 2023b, point 98). The recently changed Serbian approach towards energy and oil supply from Russia can be considered more a result of the wider international community pressure, than a consequence of the EU engagement and financial support towards Serbia. When it comes to the necessary funding to implement reforms and allow Belgrade to align with the EU standards in the environment and climate sector, estimations were expected in 2015 to amount to 11 billion euro for the entire region and to 165 million euro for Serbia. Although the 2022 financial allocation for these reforms matches the 2015 estimations, inflation, and technological development would have likely required higher investments.

Turning to the way IPA III projects are conducted, the regulation necessitates recipient states to financially contribute to projects, a requirement that might prove difficult given the limited financial availability of the country (Bartlett et al., 2022). The co-financing demand is not the only potential obstacle, as the projects' selection favours activities already at the implementation stage. However, the slow reform process of the public administration might risk not having the required skills to implement projects for the improvement of development in the country (Bartlett et al., 2022). To reduce this problem, assistance is directed almost entirely to support administrative and institutional reforms, but it marginally takes into account the consistent development gap between the Western Balkans and the EU (Bonomi, Reljić, 2017). For instance, Serbia was unable to spend 230 million euro of IPARD funding in the period 2014-2020 due to a lack of administrative capacity (Agatonović, 2022). More generally, IPA II funding were assessed as not having been used effectively due to "the insufficient capacity of the national administrations, both at central and local level, for strategic design, planning, permitting, inspection, enforcement, monitoring, and project management of large investment projects" (European Commission, 2018c, p. 4).

4.2 The EU's Engagement with Civil Society

The IPA III regulation included considerations on the involvement of civil society organisation (CSO) and regional administration in the delineation of activities to improve the development of the country. CSO should therefore be involved in the definition of national programmes. Nonetheless, the limited inclusion of CSO led them advance a request for clarification to the Regional Cooperation Council and the European Commission (Bartlett et al., 2022).

Among the initiatives that had an involvement with CSO, the EU PRO Plus programme aims at creating a more balanced socio-economic development of the Šumadija and Western Serbia regions, through the involvement of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), local self-governments, tourism infrastructures and CSO (EU PRO Plus, n.d.). Activities funded through



this programme prepare the ground for negotiations under Chapter 22 of the integration package and are based on the country's National Priorities for International Assistance until 2025.

Moreover, under the initiative of the Berlin Process, the Civil Society Forum and the Secretariat of Chambers of Commerce of six Western Balkan economies were created to foster more inclusive activities. The Berlin process has also promoted dialogue among academia and think tanks, including in the framework of the Western Balkans Reflection Forum (Bonomi, 2019).

4.3 China's Engagement in Serbia and in the Western Balkans and the EU's Response

The involvement of China in the country and the region, has been considered worrisome and potentially having negative repercussions on the accession path of Western Balkan countries (Bartlett et al., 2022), as well as a potential way for China to circumvent the EU rules on market.

When it comes to the engagement of China in the region, the year 2009 signed the activation of the 16+1 cooperation framework between China and 16 countries of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), including the Western Balkan countries. The 16+1 can be considered the platform for cooperation on regional economic development, thanks to the economic and financial support of China, particularly for the development of infrastructures in the transport and energy sectors. The economic power China was able to exercise was particularly relevant, considering the deep economic crisis that was investing Europe at the end of the 2000s. Moreover, through this cooperation framework China intended to improve its image abroad and later started investing in the Belt and Road initiative on the basis of a 2015 Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the countries of the region (Belt and Road Portal, 2015). To improve activities coordination, Beijing further appointed a special representative of the ministry of foreign affairs to the China-CEE Cooperation in the same year (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China, 2015). After a peaking in 2019 with 17 European members, the cooperation framework became a 14+1 format, following the withdrawal of the three Baltic republics. The loss of appeal of the initiative caused a substantial increase in bilateral linkages, that constituted already the Chinese preferred way to advance cooperation.

In the case of Serbia, bilateral relations are further based on the sharing of a socialist past, and most importantly of the same stance on territorial integrity. For instance, China never recognised the independence of Kosovo and Serbia always welcomed the One-China policy over the status of Taiwan. These positions were further strengthened through the 2009 Sino-Serbian Strategic Partnership that explicitly included the reciprocal commitment not to intervene or take positions against the countries' understanding of national sovereignty (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China, 2009).

Strategic relevance of bilateral relations was further reaffirmed in 2016 through the establishment of a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (Republic of Serbia, 2018). This type of partnership constitutes an improvement in the strategic relevance Serbia has for China, as



comprehensive strategic partnerships reveal a higher level of engagement of Beijing towards the strategic partner.

Relations between Serbia and China are not limited at the political level, but interest cooperation in the economic, infrastructure, energy, culture and education, local governance, security sectors, as shown in table 2.

Table 2: Selected Agreements between Serbia and China per Area of Cooperation

Year	Agreement	Area
2009	Joint Statement Between the People's Republic of China and the Republic of Serbia on Establishing a Strategic Partnership	Political relations
2009	Framework agreement on economic and technological infrastructure cooperation	Infrastructure, economy
2009	Agreement on scientific and technical cooperation between Republic of Serbia and People's Republic of China	Education and science
2015	Agreement between the Government of the Republic of Serbia and the Government of the People's Republic of China on Mutual Establishment of Cultural Centres	Cultural cooperation
2016	Joint Statement of the Republic of Serbia and the People's Republic of China on the Establishment of a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership	Political relations
2017	"Smart City" project agreement, Ministry of Trade, Tourism and Telecommunication	Security
2019	"Safe City" project agreement, Ministry of Interior Affairs	Local governance

Source: own elaboration

Coming to the level of investment, although EU funding still represent the main source for foreign financial support, investments from China (including Hong Kong) surpassed investment from any individual EU Member State in 2021- it is estimated that China alone invested in the country more than 10 billion euro in the period 2009-2021 (Stanicek & Tarpova, 2022). The two countries are further working on the delineation of a Free Trade Agreement in consideration of the high trade volumes – in 2022 bilateral trade is said to have increased of 10% year-on-year (Ministry of Commerce of China, 2023).

In the cultural field, Serbia was the first regional country to host a Confucius Institute in 2006. Moreover, China started the construction of a 6.000 square meters cultural centre in 2016 on the site of the bombed former embassy, meant to become one of the largest centres in all of Europe (Standish, 2022). People to people exchange and agreements between and with universities further complement cooperation on culture.¹⁵

¹⁵ Consider for example the agreement between the Serb city of Kragujevac and the Chinese company Dahua Technology signed in 2020 to cooperate on video-surveillance technology.



If cooperation in the cultural sector helps increasing the Chinese soft power and grip at the level of society, it is in the transport and energy sectors that the Western Balkan and Serbian strategic relevance become more evident. Serbia strategic position, in the centre of the Western Balkans, is crucial for Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative connectivity projects, as evidenced by the 2014 inauguration of the Pupin Bridge in Belgrade, the first Chinese main construction project in Europe (Government of the Republic of Serbia, 2014). Since then, infrastructure endeavours have extended into rail construction and modernisation and building of new motorway sections. China is a key partner in the government's ambitious road infrastructure construction programmes. One of these is the Budapest - Piraeus railway through Belgrade that would connect the Greek port under the management of the Chinese Cosco company to Hungary. The project is also an important part of the European transport corridor and of the China-Europe Land-Sea Express Route. The construction costs of the Serbian railway section between Belgrade and Budapest are estimated to be around 1.3 billion euro of which 85% are provided by China under the form of loans (Brînză, 2020). Interesting to highlight, is that part of the railway was originally a priority investment of the EU that wanted to support the construction of the Novi Sad-Subotica section. The Belgrade decision to award the project to Chinese companies reflects the higher attractiveness of the Chinese option over the EU money that would have been assigned with conditionalities.

The profitability, from a Serbian perspective, of Chinese investments is even more evident in the energy sector, where the vacuum left by the change in approach of the EU on investments in the energy field provided more room for manoeuvre to other international actors (BankWatch, 2014). This facilitated the signing of a 2012 agreement on the restructuring of the Kostolac power plant and thermoelectric central in north-east Serbia. The China's National Machinery and Equipment Import and Export Corp (CMEC) were given allowances to restructure and implement the central megawatt capacity without tender procedure. For instance, according to a 2009 MoU between Beijing and Belgrade, economic and technical cooperation in the field of infrastructures does not require any public tender procedure if projects are in line with the memorandum. Such an approach would have not been possible under the European legislation, should have Serbia been member of the EU. Furthermore, the fact that Serbia is not an EU member allowed the activation of the project without previous proper analysis of the environmental impact of the projects (BankWatch, n.d.). The lack of such estimations is source of concern particularly for the second agreement on the Kostolac power plant that foresees its expansion and connection to the Drmno lignite mine.¹⁶

Steel production is also part of a "friendship" cooperation between Belgrade and Beijing since 2016, when China's Hesteel Group acquired the Smederevo steel mill for a total of 172 million euro for its acquisition and modernisation (Xinhua, 2019). This project is particularly problematic in consideration of the mill's impact on the quality of the environment and levels of air pollutions (Prelec & Chrzová, 2021), that could negatively affect the health of the population, and consequentially its development. Nonetheless, Chinese investment in the

¹⁶ The estimated total value of the project is of 608 million USD.



energy sector also involve greener projects, like the construction of the first wind farm in Serbia (Bloomberg, 2014).

China's technological outreach plays an important role in Serbia's digital ecosystem, where smart city and safe city projects are being carried out. In 2019, the Government of Serbia also signed a MoU with Huawei Technologies to establish Smart Cities projects in Belgrade, Novi Sad, and Niš (Vladisavljev, 2021). Huawei's significant role as contractor, supplier, and advisor for digital connectivity resources highlights China's influence on Serbia's critical digital infrastructures. This project is looked at with deep scepticism from Europe, as guarantees on the protection and proper use of data are not considered satisfactory. In view of the future accession of Serbia in the EU, the country should work towards the compliance to the *acquis Communautaire* and therefore avoid investments and activities that diverge from it.

Chinese investments in these sectors, if on the one hand they provide a substantial financial support for the development of critical and strategic infrastructure and knowledge, they pose some questions on their sustainability and support to Serbian development. Production standards of the different projects do not satisfy the EU standards, that instead should be the guiding principle for development, in consideration of the Serbian commitment to become an EU member. These considerations are particularly important in the energy sector, as investments that do not consider their environmental impact might have serious repercussions on the environmental resilience of the region, risking to only temporarily improve the conditions for Serb nationals. From a financial sustainability point of view, the projects usually foresee a loan portion or acquisition of enterprises from Chinese actors that might generate dept-traps, empty the national capacity, and tie the country closer to Beijing. Finally, the acceptance of funding, particularly those not satisfying EU requirements, risk misaligning the country from the conditionality path at the basis of the accession process.

The EU is aware of the potential repercussion Chinese investments in the country might have, particularly in consideration of the enlargement fatigue that the country might experience after years of ongoing reforms and limited results (Stanicek & Tarpova, 2022). Such awareness increased over the last years, as it is possible to observe in strategic EU documents. In the 2022 Strategic Compass, the EU recognised that the instability of the Western Balkans is "also due to increasing foreign interferences" (EEAS, 2022a). Furthermore, with specific reference to China, the 2023 Strategic Foresight Report recognises the use of the Chinese economic influence as a foreign policy tool that led to a "battle of offers" of initiative and instruments previously non-existent (European Commission, 2023b).

When it comes to reactions to the increased Chinese influence, EU resolutions and EU Parliament's documents call for the creation of alternatives to the Chinese investment and full exploitation of EU mechanisms and institutions, such as the EIP for the Western Balkans, the EBRD, and the WBIB. As an example, the 2022 Tirana declaration included a specific section on "reinforcing security and building resilience against foreign interferences", although there was no specific mention to China (EU-Western Balkans Summit, 2022). The Global Gateway, of which the EIP is part, can also be considered a response to the Chinese investments in the BRI framework, as it attempts to provide a more structured response to the needs of candidate



countries (Bartlett et al., 2022). However, the EU reaction to the almost 15-year long Chinese engagement in the region has been limited and slow. According to De Man et al. (2022 (ENGAGE [Working Paper 14](#))) slow-paced action reveals incapacity to act. A potential acceleration of the EU response to China in the region could derive by the EU participation in the rail and transport infrastructures corridors to connect India, the Middle East and Europe with the support of the US. Announced at the sidelines of the September 2023 G20 Summit, the project could represent a step forward in countering Chinese activities also in the Western Balkans, although there is uncertainty on whether, and when, the corridor will affect the Western Balkans regional infrastructures. Regardless of its potential direct impact on western Balkans infrastructures. the project is considered a potential alternative to the Chinese BRI, capable to unlock several opportunities among participating countries and counter the Chinese footprint (White House, 2023).

Nevertheless, and despite the most recent activities announced at the international level, the EU should increase its effort in countering the Chinese influence. A sector in which the EU has not been sufficiently effective is on the strategic communication of its engagement in Serbia. Despite being the first supporter for development in the country, the EU is not seen by the wider public as such, that tends instead to prefer or more easily accept, among others, Chinese investments, and support, or to disregard the EU activities despite their relevance and financial volumes.



5 Gender Dimensions in Conflict Prevention in Guatemala

The Central American country of Guatemala experienced a prolonged and devastating armed conflict that spanned over three decades, from 1960 to 1996. This conflict was characterised by political and socio-economic divisions, leading to widespread violence and human rights abuses. Also placed within the context of the Cold War's ideological struggles in Latin America, the Guatemala Civil War primarily pitted government forces against leftist guerrilla groups, resulting in significant civilian casualties. Gender was a significant factor throughout the conflict, with violence and inequality having a particular impact on women. The government, as established by the Guatemalan Commission for Historical Clarification, systematically used sexual violence as a weapon of war (Boesten, 2021). As a matter of fact, the nexus between gender and conflict is evident in Central America's history (Destrooper, 2014).

The culmination of the armed conflict came with the signing of the Guatemalan Peace Accords in 1996, facilitated by international mediation, which included multilateral institutions such as the Organization of American States (OAS) and the United Nations as well as individual countries such as Colombia Mexico, Norway, and the United States. The 'Agreement on a Firm and Lasting Peace' marked a turning point in Guatemala's history, as it aimed to address the root causes of the conflict, including social inequality, ethnic discrimination, and human rights violations. The agreement and the overall peace process framework anchored peace on participatory socio-economic development and indigenous rights. They also called for enhanced participation of women in economic and social development and for land-related rights for women and, in particular, indigenous women (Hauge, 2017).¹⁷

External actors played crucial roles in supporting the Guatemalan peace process and, more broadly, the region of Central America from the 1980s onwards. The international community recognised the importance of stabilising the country and the region and preventing a return to violence. The European Community and later the EU provided diplomatic support, humanitarian assistance, development aid, support for efforts of democratisation and promotion of good governance, and engagement with civil society. This "facilitating role of external actors was leveraged through their capacity to 'reward' Guatemala with external assistance (and, conversely, apply some pressure through the spectre of withholding such assistance)" (Rosenthal, 2001).

Despite the formal end of the armed conflict, Guatemala remains a volatile and fragile state. Several challenges continue to impede the country's progress towards sustainable peace and development like high levels of crime and violence, including gang-related activities and drug trafficking, all of which has a disproportional impact on vulnerable or marginalised groups of society. Overall, there is widespread impunity for human rights violations committed during

¹⁷ See in particular: the Agreement on Identity and Rights of Indigenous Peoples (1995) and the Agreement on Socioeconomic Aspects and the Agrarian Situation (1996).



and after the civil war, which in turn hampers the reconciliation efforts. Guatemala also remains on the most unequal countries in Latin America with social disparities affecting indigenous and rural populations that are also plagued by land disputes. The volatility stemming from these challenges underscores the importance of ongoing international engagement, including from the European Union, in supporting Guatemala's efforts to consolidate peace, promote development, and address the nexus issue of gender in the post-conflict context.

5.1 The EU's Engagement in Peacebuilding in Guatemala and Central America

5.1.1 Zooming into the Nexus Issue from the EU's Perspective

The concept of gender mainstreaming (GM) emerged in the international arena during the 1990s in a series of declarations and plans for actions, most notably the Beijing Platform for Action and the subsequent transfer to the UN Security Council (UNSC), which culminated in the resolution on Women, Peace and Security (WPS) (S/RES/1325) (Scheuermann, 2020). Participation of women in peacebuilding is increasingly seen as a *sine qua non* condition for enduring peace, justice and human rights (Scheuermann & Zürn, 2020).

The EU's own commitment to gender and women rights grows in parallel with the international level. The evolution includes the addition of gender mainstreaming in the Treaty of Amsterdam in 1997. More than 25 years after the introduction of this policy principle and practice, which calls for the adoption of gender-sensitive lenses in the policy cycle, results are mixed (Guerrina, 2020). When it comes to gender mainstreaming in the EU's external action, the EU integrates women empowerment and gender considerations into its development policies, commercial relations, international partnerships, and in multiple other instruments of its external action, from military missions under CSDP to internal policy areas with external effects (Vandendriessche et al., 2023, p. 50–53 (ENGAGE [Working Paper 21](#))). Recognising that sustainable development cannot be achieved without gender equality, the EU ensures that gender-specific objectives are central to its external action. In its negotiation, monitoring and evaluation of trade deal, for example, the EU aims to promote gender equality by ensuring that trade agreements consider gender implications, emphasising the role of women in economic development and including provisions for gender-sensitive measures.

More narrowly, in the field of conflict and peacebuilding, the EU acknowledges the gendered nature of post-conflict situations, and the particular vulnerabilities women face. Efforts have been made to include gender perspectives in transitional justice mechanisms, ensuring that women play a role in post-conflict reconciliation processes, including points linked to reintegration of former women combatants. The EU also emphasises the importance of integrating a gender perspective into security sector reforms (SSR), but works against a backdrop of “patriarchal and male-dominated hierarchies” (Ansorg & Haastrup, 2018). The Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda, based on several UN Security Council resolutions and notably UNSC Resolution 1325, guides the EU's efforts in ensuring that security



institutions are gender responsive. Ultimately, gender equality and gender mainstreaming are seen as integral to the EU's promotion of human rights and democracy. The EU endeavours to address gender-based discrimination, violence in its diplomatic engagements and policy dialogues.

In 2010, a landmark Council report (Council of the EU, 2010) identified the best practices for mainstreaming of gender for CSDP missions in the phases of planning, deployment and interaction with host society. The report looks both at the internal dimension of the nexus issue, i.e. the equitable composition of the missions themselves, and the external dimension of the mission mandate and implementation properly. By making constant references to 'women-and-children', the report has a near exclusive focus on vulnerability and portrays women as helpless. As such, more elements such as structural violence are silenced in the EU's discourse and practice (Deiana & McDonagh, 2018). Research has also pointed to heterogeneity of interpretation of the WPS agenda within planning and execution of missions, and to a reluctance of "non-specialist CSDP personnel to engage reflexively with WPS" when it concerns dynamics within their own organisation and practice (Deiana & McDonagh, 2018). For the Union, the integration of GM in CSDP operation, including a gender advisor that provides gender training and reporting, is an obligation under different documents. However, as shown by ENGAGE [Working Paper 19](#) (Sabatino et al., 2023), GM implementation in CSDP varies considerably across cases and women remain underrepresented in missions.

The practice of gender mainstreaming in conflict management and peacebuilding, however, is often much more complex and demanding than the discourse. Institutional, discursive and normative structures remain obstacles to effective implementation of gender nexus in a more integrated approach (Ansorg & Haastrup, 2018; David & Guerrina, 2013). Much of the literature agrees that the EU "has largely failed to incorporate gender in its external policies" (Guerrina & Wright, 2016, p. 295). When incorporating gender dimensions and advocating for gender equality in foreign policy and relation to third parties are seen as "likely to hinder progress in international negotiations" (Guerrina & Wright, 2016, p. 295), gender mainstreaming rhetoric will not be fully implemented. In the Union's CSDP, for example, the EU falls short of full commitment and implementation of gender mainstreaming (Deiana & McDonagh, 2018), which is further complicated by the intergovernmental policymaking in this field (Guerrina & Wright, 2016).

5.1.2 The EU's Governance of Gender as a Nexus Issue

The nexus issue of gender in European external action, and in particular in its approach to conflict management and peacebuilding, is identified in a series of policies and strategies in fields such as development cooperation, transitional justice, trade and financial interaction, security sector reform, human rights and democracy promotion. Given the cross-cutting nature of gender mainstreaming, the EU governance structure of gender as a nexus issue includes the entire array of EU institutions, agencies and policies of external action.

The European Commission plays a central role in GM, both as the 'executive branch' of the EU and as the key initiator of legislation. The EC Commissioner for Equality, in particular, leads the portfolio responsible for developing a gender strategy, promote gender equality and



support the flight and gender-based violence. In a communication to other EU institutions, which spans several years, the Commission outlines the Commission's priorities and objectives concerning gender equality, touching upon various domains including economic independence, equality in decision-making, and combatting gender-based violence (European Commission, 2020c). The document also contains the EU's approach to gender mainstreaming in its external relations:

“Gender inequality is a global problem. Gender equality and women's empowerment is a core objective of EU external action. It is important that the EU's internal and external actions in this field are coherent and mutually reinforce each other.” (European Commission, 2020c, p. 17).

Together with representatives from the EEAS, the Commission put together a Task Force on Equality including all its services to ensure cross-cutting application of gender mainstreaming in policy areas such as the Green Deal, digitalisation strategies and fights against organised crime. The Commission also pens the multiannual Gender Action Plan for the European Union (GAP), currently in its third edition (GAP III). GAP is an initiative aimed at ensuring the systematic and strategic integration of gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls in all external action of the European Union. The document is produced by the DG INTPA in consultation with relevant EU institutions, member states, and civil society. GAP III, like its predecessors, provides a policy framework and operational guidance for the EU and its member states to incorporate gender equality and women's empowerment into their external actions, covering various domains such as development cooperation, enlargement and neighbourhood policies, and foreign and security policy. GAP III introduced the gender transformative and intersectionality approaches to guide EU's external action in addition to the already established approach of gender mainstreaming with human rights (Teevan, 2021).

The European Parliament (EP) frequently engages in discussions concerning the intersection of gender and peacebuilding, resulting in the adoption of multiple resolutions on this topic in the last two decades. These resolutions consistently emphasise the importance of incorporating a gender perspective across various aspects of peace-related endeavours, including peacebuilding, conflict prevention and resolution, peacekeeping missions, and post-conflict rehabilitation and reconstruction efforts. Furthermore, they stress the necessity of ensuring that gender considerations are integrated into all on-ground programs (Mendia Azkue, 2023). The Committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality (FEMM) is responsible for defining the EP's stance on gender issues, drafting reports and overseeing the implementation of gender-related legislation. FEMM helps to shape the EP's stance on global women's rights in the Union's external action and international partnerships.

The Council of the EU, in its different formats, debates and votes on legislation and decisions that can include and offer guidance on gender mainstreaming in conflict management and peacebuilding. Council conclusions can direct the EEAS and the Commission to take specific action to ensure that gender considerations are integrated in the Union's foreign and security policies. The Council, and in particular the Foreign Affairs Council (FAC) format, works in conjunction with the EEAS with the goals of incorporating gender perspectives. The Union's HR/VP, chairing the former and leading the latter, is in position to ensure coherence and efficiency in this field. Depending on the agenda issue, the Council might bring together development or trade ministers, linking gender mainstreaming directly with international partnerships and commercial relations. More recently, in 2023 the Council approved the long-



awaited EU's accession to the Istanbul Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (Council of Europe, 2023), enhancing the Union's international standing in its fight against gender-based violence. The Council Working Group on Human Rights (COHOM) and the UN Council Working Group are also relevant pieces in the Council's gender mainstreaming, working respectively with women's rights and in relations with the UN, including UNSC Resolution 1325. In its most recent conclusions on WPS, the Council set gender-related benchmarks for the Union's action in peace and security:

- "A gender analysis of the causes, consequences and policy implications, using gender statistics based on sex-, age- and disability- disaggregated data, to ensure a more effective, inclusive and sustainable response;
- Women's full, equal and meaningful participation in all phases of the conflict cycle;
- The prevention of and protection from gender-based violence;
- Overall inclusive and gender-responsive leadership in politics and security related decision-making in general." (Council of the EU, 2022)

The European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE), an EU agency created in 2007 and headquartered in Vilnius, supports the Union and its Member States in their efforts to promote gender equality. The institute collects and analyses data on gender-related issues, develops methodological tools, and offers expertise and knowledge to aid institutions in their gender mainstreaming efforts. EIGE is a focus centre for gender-related data, most notably via its Gender Equality Index that covers the state of affairs in all EU Member States. Even if the agency's main focus is inward looking and indirectly related to peacebuilding, there are potential linkages between EIGE and external action, in particular pertaining to external consequences of internal EU policies and instruments and the need to match promotion of GM abroad to the implementation within the Union.

Finally, the creation of the EEAS with the Treaty of Lisbon was supposed to accelerate the widening of the concept of security in the EU's approach to peace and security and, by extension, facilitate the integration of the gender nexus. ENGAGE [Working Paper 21](#) highlights that the implementation of GM in EU's external action is under the "ultimate responsibility of the EEAS" (Vandendriessche et al., 2023, p. 50). In 2009, the EU Informal Task Force on UNSC Resolution 1325 was created. It is chaired by the EEAS and regularly gathers officials from the European Commission, the Member States and other IOs such as NATO, UN Women and OSCE. The symbolic appointment of two women as HRVP to lead the Service also pointed to the direction of enhancing gender mainstreaming (Guerrina et al., 2018, p. 1044) in EU's external action. In 2015, the EEAS appointed a Principal Advisor on Gender and on UNSC Resolution 1325; prior to that, a position of human rights and gender advisor had been established. This position was later replaced by a principal advisor in gender and diversity, signalling what experts would argue is a dilution of the gender focus of the portfolio (Vandendriessche et al., 2023 (ENGAGE [Working Paper 21](#))) The advisor's main function is to ensure coordination of the EU with other IOs, regional and national actors on policies of gender. However, the practical integration of gender mainstreaming at the EEAS, both internally as gender balance and externally as policy planning and implementation, is often considered slow or below expectations and rhetoric (Guerrina et al., 2018). At the moment of its inception, for example, the position of principal advisor on gender was primarily focused on the implementation of UNSC Resolution 1325, limiting the scope of the advisor's actions.



Initiatives such as the 'Agenda for Diversity and Inclusion in the EEAS 2023-2025' attempt to remedy this rather narrow focus and promote coherence between the Service external engagement and its internal work.

5.1.3 Most Recent Policies and Engagement in the Country

The EU's commitment to gender equality globally translates into its external actions. In Guatemala, the nexus issue involves combating gender-based violence (GBV), promoting women's political participation, and facilitating women's economic empowerment. Therefore, the EU's approach to the nexus issue of gender in conflict in Guatemala is indissociable from its action in broader policy areas such as development cooperation, trade relations, and promotion of democracy, good governance and human rights. Overall, the EU has acknowledged the special role of women as agents of peacebuilding and has put emphasis on the vulnerability of human rights defender in the country, including women, in a perennial violent context.

The EU's approach to gender as nexus issue is also embedded in the Union's strategies and actions towards the regions of Central America and Latin America, which include a series of partnership agreements and geographic programmes for development. It is important to state that there is no CSDP mission in Guatemala or, for that matter, in the whole region of Central America. In the recent EU Summit with the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC) in July 2023, both sides commit to "fighting multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination and gender-based violence [...], gender equality, full and equal representation and participation of all women and girls in decision-making". Furthermore, the implementation of the EU-Central America Association Agreement (AA) remains the framework of the EU political, trade and development cooperation with each country in the region. The AA agreement contains references to gender mainstreaming, gender equality and women's maternal, sexual and reproductive health:

Cooperation shall promote the integration of the gender perspective in all the relevant fields of cooperation, including public policies, development strategies and actions as well as indicators to measure their impact [...] Particular attention shall be given to programmes addressing violence against women, in particular through prevention. (Agreement establishing an Association between the European Union and its Member States, on the one hand, and Central America on the other, 2022, article 37).

Nevertheless, primary emphasis in the AA appears to be on women's economic roles rather than striving for a comprehensive and transformative gender agenda (García, 2021). It is therefore uncertain to what degree the actions taken to implement GM align with its fundamental principles (Vandendriessche et al., 2023, p. 52 (ENGAGE [Working Paper 21](#)))

The most recent EU strategy for its relations with Latin America is the joint Commission and HR/VP Communication "A New Agenda for Relations between the EU and Latin America and the Caribbean" from June 2023. In the communication, promotion of gender equality and eradication of gender-based violence are mentioned. It also advocates for the empowerment



of women and tackling of inherent inequalities. There is, however, no mention of gender mainstreaming across and the issue is subsumed under various policy areas (European Commission & High Representative, 2023).

The main instrument to fund development cooperation in regional and thematic areas is the Global Europe funding, running in parallel to the Union's Multi-annual Financial Framework. Within Global European, there are multi-annual indicative programmes (MIPs) for each partner country. In the case of the MIP for Guatemala, emphasis is put on the reducing inequalities that affect broad sector of the population: women, youth, and indigenous people – or a combination thereof. In particular the MIP pushes for the large use of Team Europe initiatives that bring together the work of individual EU Member States (European Commission, 2021c). The MIP directed to Guatemala amounts to little over 140 million euros for the period of 2021-2024, focusing on 3 major areas: green deal, sustainable and inclusive growth and good governance. The MIP also emphasises the transversal nature of gender as a nexus issue in the support to the EU gender action plan:

Of crosscutting importance is building the capacities of institutions and improving women's access and participation to public, political and economic life, placing women in the axis of public policies as the backbone of the country's development, while at the same time bearing in mind high level of femicide and sexual and gender-based violence in the country. This combines with gender equality as one of the core EU's values enshrined in its legal and political framework, under the new Gender Action Plan III. (European Commission, 2021c, p. 3)

In the area of commercial relations, the EU concluded an AA with Central American countries, including Guatemala, in 2012 on 3 pillars: trade, political dialogue and cooperation. Since 2023, the trade pillar is provisionally applied with Guatemala, replacing the unilateral market access granted by the EU via the generalised system of preferences (GSP). Nevertheless, these goals can be undermined by the Union's free trade approach, support for export-oriented agriculture and extractive activities that perpetuate north-south relations, and a comparative advantage based on cheap labour (Bergström, 2014). Therefore, the agreement is criticised by not taking effectively into account the local realities and specificities related to indigenous and rural communities in particular. In addition, the AA might not take into account the market-related realities of women that are not able to fully exercise market choices because of reproductive roles, lack of access to resources such as land and credit, and exclusion from inheritance. Therefore, in the implementation of trade and development cooperation, including relations with local civil society, there is a risk that "peoples' knowledges and cosmologies are hierarchically judged and classified based on a European standard" (Bergström, 2021), which in turn leads to further entrenchment of already existing local inequalities that negatively impact intersectional groups such as indigenous women. In the relations of trade and development cooperation, a focus on 'women in development' rather than the inclusion of *both* women and men in gender mainstreaming is also said to contribute to the perpetuation of hierarchies rather than transformation of gender relations (Debusscher, 2012).



Recent developments on the Guatemala side, promoted by the government, have also been subject to EU's scrutiny. The creation of a Presidential Commission for Peace and Human Rights (COPAEDH) is said to weaken the Guatemalan Government protection of human rights and particularly of women and girls, because it merges previously existing agencies without a proper budget and oversight (European Commission, 2022a). In April 2022, the EP approved the *Resolution on the situation of the rule of law and human rights in the Republic of Guatemala* expressing concern over widespread gender-based and sexual violence against women and girls and, in particular, the March 2022 Law of the Protection of the Life and Family, "which criminalises abortion in all circumstances [and] prohibits gender diversity and sex education in schools".

Peacebuilding actions by the EU in Guatemala also touch upon transitional justice and democracy promotion. The Union co-funded the International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG) (van der Borgh, 2016), a hybrid UN organisation, charged with investigating illegal security groups and clandestine security organisations. In 2019, the Commission was dismantled by then President Jimmy Morales, himself investigated at the time. In 2023, the EEAS oversaw the EU Election Observation Mission (EU EOM) for the general elections in Guatemala, taking place on 25 June 2023 and run-off on 20 August 2023. Amongst other points, the mission was charged with the observation of "participation of women" in the election process and "participation of indigenous peoples, persons with disabilities and the LGBTBI community".

In conclusion, the EU's commitment to gender mainstreaming in peacebuilding in Guatemala is embedded in its broader instruments of its external action, encompassing efforts to combat gender-based violence, support women's political participation, and empower women economically. This commitment extends to its strategies in Central America and Latin America, involving partnership agreements and development programs. The EU closely monitors developments in Guatemala, including concerns over human rights protection and restrictive legislation related to reproductive rights. But while the EU emphasises gender mainstreaming and equality, there's a perception that its focus may lean more toward women's economic roles and equality in the marketplace rather than a comprehensive gender agenda in some policy areas. Challenges include the risk of not fully considering local realities, reinforcing existing inequalities, and prioritising 'women in development' over gender mainstreaming.

5.2 The EU's Engagement with Civil Society

It is generally assumed that in the area of peace and security, civil society has "fewer opportunities to access and influence the policy process" (Guerrina & Wright, 2016, p. 298). Civil society participation, however, is crucial for the effective inclusion of gender in European policy-making (Guerrina et al., 2018). Therefore, the current Guatemala MIP describes support for civil society, specially at the local level, and affirms that the EU will continue funding CSOs via its Global Europe funding instrument and the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights.



Strengthening civil society organisations (including social partners), especially at local level, remains one of the EU's priorities in its relations with Guatemala. The EU will continue to actively involve civil society actors in the different phases of its bilateral cooperation and will ensure a close link between the dialogues established with civil society and financial assistance. (European Commission, 2021c, p. 21).

The EU's relation with civil society in Guatemala must also be studied in the framework of the broader EU-LAC relationship. In 2023, before the EU-CELAC Summit, the EU-Latin American and Caribbean Forum brought together organisations from civil society and associations of local authorities. The goal was to channel the civil society's input into the EU-LAC partnership and the EU's Global gateway to Latin America. The Forum expressed the view of youth, civil society and local authorities. In all three ensuing documents, gender appears as a cross-cutting nexus in the EU-LAC relationship. From local authority recommendations, gender equality "must be a priority across the board" with women being part of the decision-making, economically independent and safe (European Union, 2023b). From the civil society organisations forum, stronger words and suggestions were offered. The Forum, however, did not include specific recommendations from women.

Gender equality, health and care societies: adopt an intersectional and decolonial feminist approach in all actions in the framework of EU-CELAC relations. Fight resolutely against the fundamentalisms that attack the lives of millions of women in the EU and LAC, violating their rights, especially their sexual and reproductive rights. Without women's freedom and autonomy there is no democracy. (European Union, 2023a, p. 2).

The EU interacts with civil society in Central America, and for gender mainstreaming and peacebuilding in particular, via dialogues and consultations, capacity building, and partnership in projects. The Union has also paid attention to the threats against human rights defenders (HRD) and, in particular, women HRD in context of conflict and/or violence. As such, it attempts to address the issue by means of monitoring, advocacy and, in some cases, material and logistical support. Particularly important in this context are the EU Guidelines on Human Rights Defenders, which serve as the framework for the Union's and its Members States actions for safeguarding the work of HRD. The guidelines, dating back to 2008, do not include particular mentions of gender nor the specific situation of women as human rights defenders.

A key actor in the relationship between the EU and civil society for the Union's relation with Latin America is the EU-LAT Advocacy Network Red de Incidencia. Created in October 2017 with the merger of a previously existing network for Central and South America, EU-LAT is a network of independent European movements and organisations that carry out reflection and political action within the context of EU-LAC relations. The network aims to promote "participatory policies in the EU, with a gender perspective". Amongst its main thematic areas, the network advocates for the protection of human rights defenders by arguing that "women HRD continue to be the main victims of shrinking spaces" (EU-LAC Working Group, n.d., p. 8).



5.3 China's Engagement in Guatemala and Central America and the EU's Response

The EU's policies of GM in peacebuilding for Guatemala and Central America do not take place in isolation from the ongoing geopolitical competition for the region and the EU has been criticised for lagging behind other global players in its connections with Central America (FT Editorial Board, 2023). Most notably, China's foothold in Central America revolves predominantly around economic pursuits, but has also political and geopolitical dimensions (Raza & Grohs, 2022). In Guatemala, Chinese investment in sectors like infrastructure and agriculture is evident, and Chinese imports and exports to and from Guatemala have both tripled in the last 4 years. However, China's approach lacks pronounced gender nexus or peacebuilding perspectives. While infrastructure projects, such as the building of roads, can indirectly benefit women by improving access to markets and services, they don't address gender inequalities directly. The Chinese flagship Belt and Road Initiative prioritises infrastructure projects in the region, but trade is still the main channel of interaction. Trade in products between China and Central America has increased almost tenfold since 2000, surpassing the EU's trade with the region. (Solis, 2021)

A distinctive feature of Central America in its relation to China in an age of renewed geopolitical competition is the Central American countries' historical recognition of Taiwan over the People's Republic of China (PRC). The region as a whole has converged towards Beijing in the recent decade, a move influenced by trade ties and geopolitical considerations. In 2017, Panama and El Salvador joined Costa Rica in diplomatically recognising the PRC instead of Taiwan (Solis, n.d.). In 2021, Nicaragua broke ties with Taiwan in order to recognise Beijing's PRC. This diplomatic shift could be linked to the planned construction of the Nicaragua Canal, which would connect the Caribbean Sea and the Atlantic Ocean to the Pacific Ocean, constituting an alternative to the Panama Canal. To date, however, the project is abandoned. In March 2023, Honduras become the most recent country recognising continental China, a diplomatic move linked to the Chinese promise of investments in water dams and a railway canal linking the country's Pacific and Atlantic coasts (El Heraldo, 2023). Guatemala's recent election reactivated the debate in the country and led to renewed push from Beijing. The country still has diplomatic ties and full recognition of Taiwan, but has been pressured to recognise Beijing (Belt & Road Portal, 2023). While China's increasing trade and investment presence in Central America has with little to no gender nexus and does not offer a direct alternative to the EU's own approach to GM, it might offer an alternative for investment and commercial relations with fewer conditionalities.

In this context, the EU seeks to highlight its distinctiveness and comparative advantages. The Union's holistic strategy emphasises human rights, democratic governance, and importantly, gender equality. The major EU response to increasing external presence in Central America, including China, is the EU-LAC Global Gateway Investment Agenda, linked to the New Agenda for Relations between the EU and Latin America and the Caribbean. In its strategy, the EU emphasises sustainability in growth and investment, digital transition, connectivity in the energy, transport and digital sectors, and strengthening of health, education and research



networks globally. Materials on the strategy include little to no mentions of gender or gender mainstreaming. Peacebuilding is also indirectly touched upon by the Global Gateway, as the initiative is primarily focused on various types of infrastructure (Global Gateway, 2023). The gender nexus is potentially present at the level of projects – there are 18 underway for Latin American and the Caribbean – but information remains limited. Therefore, it remains to be seen whether the Global Gateway’s focus on infrastructures of various kinds will be in position to link investments and projects to issues of peacebuilding and gender nexus.



6 The Challenge of Nexus Issues in European External Action

This working paper conducts an analysis of the European Union's approach to interconnected issues in the domains of conflict prevention, mediation, and resolution. Drawing on the conceptual and theoretical framework of ENGAGE [Working Paper 14](#) (De Man et al., 2022), it explores the EU's governance structures, policy processes, and actions concerning three vital nexus issues that are significantly embedded in its external action. These nexus issues, defined as pivotal factors shaping EU policies, are gender in peacebuilding and conflict prevention, climate change, and the security-development nexus. The paper includes three concrete case studies: the approach to the Arctic region following present and future geopolitical changes brought by climate change; gender mainstreaming in the EU's relations with Guatemala and its support to peacebuilding in the country; and conflict prevention and mediation in Serbia as linked to the security-development nexus. Throughout these case studies, the paper also examines the EU's engagement with civil society organisations on the one hand and underscores the growing influence of China in these three contexts and the EU's response, on the other.

The EU's formal commitment to *gender mainstreaming in conflict prevention, resolution and mediation* is evident in its approach to peacebuilding in Guatemala, where it addresses nexus issues related to gender in conflict by combating gender-based violence, promoting women's political participation, and supporting women's economic empowerment. The EU's approach to gender mainstreaming in conflict contexts extends across various policy domains, such as development cooperation, trade relations, democracy promotion, and human rights. Despite a focus on women's economic roles in trade agreements and development cooperation, there is uncertainty regarding the extent to which these actions align with transformative gender principles. The EU's strategies for Latin America emphasise gender equality and the eradication of gender-based violence but may lack explicit gender mainstreaming across various policy areas. Moreover, the EU's trade agreements have been criticised for not adequately addressing the local realities and specificities affecting indigenous and rural communities, particularly women.

The EU's approach to the *security-development nexus in Serbia* is positioned at the crossroads of development and enlargement policies, aligning with the EU's broader strategy for the Western Balkans. The EU's engagement in Serbia is underpinned by the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA III), which allocates significant funds for development projects based on EU priorities for the region, with a focus on socio-economic development, human resources, rule of law, democracy, and public administration reforms. However, conditionalities within the IPA framework have seen limited use, potentially undermining the EU's influence in the country. The EU has allocated substantial funds to the region, particularly in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, aiming to align Western Balkan economies with EU standards. One notable initiative is the Economic and Investment Plan (EIP), which includes flagship projects such as highway construction and energy infrastructure development. The



energy transition from coal to greener sources is a priority, but Serbia faces challenges in reaching renewable energy targets. However, Serbia's changing approach to its energy supply is influenced more by international pressure than EU engagement. IPA III projects require recipient states to contribute financially, which could be challenging for Serbia given its limited financial resources. Administrative capacity remains a significant hurdle, with slow public administration reforms impeding project implementation. Overall, the EU's engagement in Serbia underscores the importance of addressing administrative capacity issues to ensure effective development and alignment with EU standards.

The EU's engagement in the *Arctic in a context of environmental and climate change* has been marked by complex challenges, including internal EU coherence and external obstacles. The 2009 ban on seal products, driven by animal welfare concerns, sparked opposition from Inuit organisations and strained relations with Canada, leading to Canada's veto of the EU's permanent observer status in the Arctic Council. Disputes over the ban in the WTO and subsequent amendments revealed the intricate balance between environmental goals, indigenous rights, and international partnerships. Similarly, disputes over snow crab licenses around the Svalbard Archipelago highlight the jurisdictional complexities in the European Arctic. However, the EU's active role in shaping maritime regulations, its support for safety measures, and its space services contribute to regional governance. Despite these challenges, the EU's efforts to enhance its Arctic presence, including appointing an Ambassador-at-large for the Arctic and establishing a Representation Office in Nuuk, reflect its recognition of the Arctic's geopolitical importance and the growing need for strategic engagement in the region. While the Arctic seems at first glance to be isolated from the conflicts taking place elsewhere in the world, it is not disconnected from the tensions in the relations between the actors involved. These tensions are augmented by dynamics of climate change and environmental concerns, including changing sea routes and access to natural resources. International cooperation is a tenet of Arctic governance, as evidenced by the different bodies for regional cooperation, with the Arctic Council at the top of the list; however, several events that have occurred in its meetings over the last one-and-a-half decade show that obstacles can emerge based on tensions taking place elsewhere.

In examining the multifaceted nature of *China's assertiveness in all three contexts*, several key takeaways emerge. First, in the Arctic region, China's evolving presence and interests, particularly in resource access and maritime routes, have prompted concerns among Arctic states and stakeholders, including the EU. China's self-designation as a "near-Arctic state" underscores its determination to engage in the region, posing challenges to Arctic governance and sustainability. Despite the EU's efforts to engage in Arctic affairs, such as seeking observer status in the Arctic Council, the Union has faced setbacks and opposition from Arctic players, underscoring the complexity of balancing environmental concerns and geopolitical interests.

In Serbia and in the Western Balkans, China's expanding influence through the 16+1 cooperation framework and infrastructure investments has raised concerns regarding its potential impact on the region's stability and the EU enlargement process. China's economic



prowess in the region, coupled with its ability to sidestep EU regulators, has made it an attractive partner for some countries. Serbia, in particular, has forged relatively deep ties with China, encompassing economic, political, and cultural dimensions. While Chinese investments contribute to critical infrastructure development, such as transport and energy projects, they also raise questions when it comes to sustainability, environmental standards, and debt dependency. The EU recognises the need to counterbalance China's influence in the Western Balkans. For example, it encourages Serbia to reduce its dependency on Russian gas and Chinese investments in the energy sector, but the Union faces challenges in shaping a more effective and coordinated response.

Central America presents another arena where China's economic engagement has grown substantially in recent years, particularly through trade and investments. Despite its predominantly economic focus, China's presence in the region also has geopolitical dimensions, including the recognition of the PRC over Taiwan by some Central American countries. While Central American nations converge towards Beijing due to trade interests and geopolitical considerations, China's approach lacks a pronounced gender nexus or peacebuilding perspective, contrasting with the EU's comprehensive strategy that emphasises human rights, democratic governance, and gender mainstreaming, albeit sometimes with limitation in scope. The EU's response to increased external presence, including China's, is exemplified by the EU-LAC Global Gateway Investment Agenda, prioritising sustainability and infrastructure development. However, the presence of gender considerations in these initiatives remains uncertain.

In all these contexts, the EU faces the challenge of balancing its objectives related to peacebuilding, development, gender mainstreaming, and sustainability with the need to engage constructively with China, a rising global player. As China's influence continues to expand, the EU must adapt its strategies to address these evolving dynamics, ensuring that its values and priorities are not compromised while fostering meaningful cooperation where possible. Ultimately, these cases highlight the complexities and nuances of China's engagement in different regions and the EU's responses, underscoring the need for a dynamic and adaptable approach to global geopolitics.

Finally, this study shows that the EU's approach to nexus issues in conflict prevention, mediation and resolution goes much beyond CSDP missions and encompasses multiple layers of its external action. Issue linkages in conflict management, therefore, as already demonstrated in previous ENGAGE working papers (Christou et al., 2022 (ENGAGE [Working Paper 17](#)); Vandendriessche, 2023 (ENGAGE [Working Paper 21](#))), demand higher degree of horizontal coherence across multiple EU instruments. The cases of Serbia and Guatemala also highlight the significance of the Union's region-to-region relations and yet another kind of coherence: between the EU's strategy and approach to individual countries and to their regions, where most nexus issues are embedded into association agreements, enlargement frameworks, and other actions.



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