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The EU's role in conflict prevention and peacebuilding: four key challenges

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ABSTRACT

Over the past two decades, the European Union (EU) has become increasingly involved in preventing conflict and promoting sustainable peace beyond its borders. The EU's potential to contribute to conflict prevention and peacebuilding is said to be particularly promising given the wide range of instruments and resources that can be mobilised under the EU's external action. Yet, the EU continues to face key four key challenges in this area: (1) bridging the early warning-response gap; (2) improving cooperation with other international partners in conflict prevention and peacebuilding; (3) enhancing civil–military coordination; and (4) ensuring local ownership. This article introduces these four issues which frame the articles in this Forum. By addressing these four challenges, this Forum sheds light not only on the EU's role and limitations as a peacebuilding actor, but also on how other international actors might learn from the EU's engagement in conflict prevention and peacebuilding.

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Introduction

Although the number of total armed conflicts has declined in recent years (Themnér & Wallensteen, 2013), the consequences of ongoing conflicts remain devastating, as illustrated by the cases of Syria, Libya or Ukraine. Given the scale and the nature of conflicts in the countries concerned and beyond their borders, it is no surprise that the EU has sought to strengthen its capabilities to prevent and respond to conflicts. The Lisbon Treaty provided the strongest mandate yet for the EU and its member states to engage in conflict prevention and peacebuilding.¹ According to the Treaties the EU aims to “preserve peace, prevent conflicts and strengthen international security” (Article 21(2)). Building peace therefore constitutes one of the EU's core values (Manners, 2002). The EU's potential to contribute to conflict prevention and peacebuilding is said to be particularly promising given the unique mix of instruments that the Union can bring to these situations (Blockmans, Wouters, & Ruys, 2010).

Yet, despite the legal and rhetorical commitment to preventing and responding to conflicts, the EU's record so far leaves room for improvement (Juncos, 2013; Rodt,

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2014). Scholarship on this issue has found a gap between rhetoric and practice, with the EU expressing a commitment to, for instance, local ownership and fostering civil society engagement, but failing to do so (Ejdus & Juncos, 2018; Pogodda, Richmond, Tocci, Mac Ginty, & Vogel, 2014). Moreover, while the lack of political will has been at the heart of some of the EU's policy failures, inadequate or insufficient capabilities continue to be a structural problem affecting EU peacebuilding (see Council of the EU, 2011). In other words, the "capability-expectations gap" described by Hill (1993) more than two decades ago continues to hinder the EU's role in conflict prevention and peacebuilding, in particular, when it comes to civilian capabilities (Juncos, *forthcoming*; Pirozzi, Venturi, & Marrone, *Forthcoming*; Tardy, 2017). While current efforts to strengthen EU civilian crisis management, including the establishment of a Civilian Compact (Council of the EU, 2017), are encouraging they will remain hollow unless the Member States are willing to support them. This Forum aims to shed light on the potential, but also the challenges the EU currently faces as a peacebuilding actor.

When it comes to the EU's role in preventing and responding to external conflicts, much of the literature has, and remains, focused on the development of Brussels-based institutions, policies and procedures (Dijkstra, 2013; Smith, 2017). We know less, however, of how EU conflict prevention and peacebuilding is implemented in practice. Furthermore, the focus has predominantly been on the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) (see Chivvis, 2010), rather than on other areas of EU external action. Moreover, not enough attention has been paid to the interactions between the CSDP and other EU policies such as development or internal security policies. This is particularly important given the renewed emphasis on an integrated approach to external action in the EU Global Strategy (EUGS) (European Union, 2016).

The articles in this Forum seek to fill some of these gaps by examining EU conflict prevention and peacebuilding *in action* in particular key regions for the EU: the Western Balkans and the Horn of Africa. The Western Balkans has been, and remains, a key area of engagement for the EU since the dissolution of the Yugoslavian Federation in the 1990s (Blockmans, 2007; Juncos, 2013). It has also become a testing ground for CSDP capabilities and the EU's integrated approach. The Horn of Africa has become a focus of activity for the EU more recently, especially given the rise in maritime piracy and terrorism in the region (Germond & Smith, 2009). By analysing and comparing the EU's role in these two regions, important insights into the development of EU capabilities for conflict prevention and peacebuilding can be generated.

Last but not least, in order to understand the EU's role in conflict prevention and peacebuilding, it is necessary to place this issue in the wider context of international peacebuilding and the key challenges that the international community faces in this area (see Paris & Sisk, 2009). From this perspective, it is possible to identify four key challenges that still affect the EU's practice. These four issues, which are then used to frame the articles in this Forum, include the following: (1) bridging the early warning-response gap; (2) fostering cooperation with other international partners; (3) enhancing civil-military coordination in conflict prevention and peacebuilding; and (4) how to ensure local ownership. By addressing these four challenges, this Forum sheds light not only on the EU's role and limitations as a peacebuilding actor, but also on how other international actors might learn from the EU's engagement. In the remainder of this Introduction, we provide a brief overview of how each of the articles in the Forum contribute to advancing

our knowledge about how these challenges shape the EU's role in conflict prevention and peacebuilding.

Four key challenges in EU conflict prevention and peacebuilding

Challenge 1: bridging the gap between early warning and early response

Because of the harmful consequences of conflict, international actors have increasingly focused on the early stages of a conflict with a view to prevent the outbreak, escalation or recurrence of conflict. In his first speech as UN Secretary General, António Guterres (2017) claimed that the UN system had to become more effective at preventing conflict and sustaining peace. For its part, the EUGS also emphasizes the need to focus on prevention or, as it calls it, “pre-emptive peacebuilding and diplomacy” (European Union, 2016, p. 29). Over the past few years, the EU has invested in developing early warning indicators and capabilities for monitoring and analysis to keep a close watch on the root causes of conflict. In an institutional sense, these capabilities are located in the European External Action Service, namely in the INTCEN (EU Intelligence and Situation Centre) and PRISM (“Prevention of conflicts, Rule of law/SSR, Integrated approach, Stabilisation and Mediation”) divisions.

Despite policy consensus that prevention is always better than managing the consequences of conflict (European Union, 2016, p. 29), failures continue to affect international responses to violent conflict. To a great extent, problems go back to the “warning-response gap” identified by George and Holl (1997; see also Meyer, Otto, Brante, & Franco, 2010). As summarized by the EUGS, “[e]arly warning is of little use unless it is followed by early action” (European Union, 2016, p. 30). This Forum thus investigates how EU conflict prevention capabilities could be strengthened in order to close that gap. In particular, the contributions examine the following questions: are EU conflict prevention capabilities fit for purpose? How can these capabilities – to lead, engage, fund and cooperate with other actors – be enhanced in order to narrow, or even close, the warning-response gap?

In their analysis, Pirozzi et al. (Forthcoming) show that despite the fact that Member States have invested significant resources in developing capabilities in the area of satellites and drones, these are still not fully utilized when it comes to EU conflict prevention and peacebuilding, especially in the area of civilian CSDP. To a great extent, the Member States surveyed (France, Italy, Germany and Sweden) are still unaware of the potential of new technologies for early warning and conflict analysis. Problems also extend to the area of personnel, both in terms of training and recruitment. While member states remain committed to the EU's goals in conflict prevention and peacebuilding, they are not always willing to match those goals with the appropriate level of resources or with suitably trained personnel. This hinders the EU's ability to effectively respond to conflicts and crises.

For her part, Davis (Forthcoming) argues that the EU has extensive capabilities to engage, fund, and coordinate and cooperate with third parties in preventing conflict. However, Davis identifies two key problems in relation to EU conflict prevention. First, there remains a conceptual confusion among EU policy-makers who understand conflict prevention both as a way-of-doing-things in relation to the outside world *and* as a set of distinct activities (e.g. conflict analysis, early warning and mediation). Secondly, this conceptual confusion compounds the problem of a lack of leadership in this area, which hinders the effectiveness of EU conflict prevention. More generally, the EU

continues to prioritize early preventive action over response, which constitutes an obstacle to bridging the early warning-early response gap.

Challenge 2: ensuring cooperation with other international partners

Problems relating to the effective response to conflict are not exclusive to the EU. Since the end of the Cold War, conflict prevention and peacebuilding have risen to prominence on the agendas of governments and international organizations (OECD, 2012; OSCE, 2011; UN, 1992, 2004). These actors have been faced with similar problems regarding achieving a comprehensive approach and/or promoting local ownership (see NATO, 2010; UN, 2000). However, despite the existence of common problems, there are relatively few studies comparing the practice of different international organizations in peacebuilding. This Forum assesses the efforts of the EU, the United Nations (UN), the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), and NATO in conflict prevention and peacebuilding (see Dijkstra, Mahr, Petrov, Đokić, & Zartsdahl, [Forthcoming](#); Faleg, [Forthcoming](#)). More specifically, the Forum examines a key challenge that affects most international actors operating in this area, that of inter-organisational coherence. In what constitutes a very crowded environment, different actors have different institutional rationales, mandates, procedures and resources making coordination difficult. While many efforts (and resources) have been aimed at creating and exploiting synergies between different activities and actors in a peacebuilding context as part of a “comprehensive” or “integrated” approach, problems remain.²

The need to ensure cooperation with a wide range of international partners has been well-recognised by the EU (see Commission and HR, 2013; European Union, 2016). The European Security Strategy placed a lot of emphasis on the need to pursue “effective multilateralism” (Council of the EU, 2003). The EUGS calls specifically for the need to “pursue a multi-lateral approach engaging all those players present in a conflict and necessary for its resolution” (European Union, 2016, p. 29). The EU has sought to strengthen its partnerships with key international organizations involved in peacebuilding, including the UN, the OSCE and NATO. While a number of joint initiatives have aimed at improving communication and coordination, including a recent EU-NATO Declaration (NATO and EU, 2016), synergies have not always been forthcoming, particularly on the ground. It is still not clear whether the renewed impetus with the EUGS and a new “integrated approach” to external conflicts and crises will change things on the ground (EEAS and Commission, 2017).

This Forum examines some of these issues in relation to the implementation of the EU’s external action in different contexts (Caucasus, Western Balkans, Sahel) and between different partners (UN, OSCE, NATO). For instance, key questions that the contributions investigate include: how can the EU learn from others to achieve a more integrated and comprehensive approach to international conflicts and crises? how can the EU improve coordination with other international actors? How can the EU enhance complementarities and synergies with others working in conflict prevention and peacebuilding?

In his article, Faleg ([Forthcoming](#)) looks at what can be learned from the EU, UN and NATO’s implementation of a comprehensive approach and what the comparative advantage of the EU is in this regard. The analysis shows that the EU and the UN display the most comprehensive approach to dealing with conflict and crises, with NATO and the OSCE remaining more focused and less strategically driven in their initiatives. The article also

shows that the EU's efforts to achieve a more integrated approach as set out in the EUGS (European Union, 2016) will not be sufficient to take a "whole-of-EU" strategy to the next level. In order to achieve this, the EU should continue to foster complementarity and synergies with other actors, especially with the UN, NATO and the OSCE, who have invested in integrated frameworks for managing risks and responding to conflict.

Following from this point, Dijkstra et al. (Forthcoming) provide an in-depth analysis of complementarities and synergies among the EU, UN and OSCE. Firstly, a comparative analysis of deployments and mandates show that the role of these organizations remains in principle largely complementary. However, an investigation of interactions on the ground in the cases of Armenia, Kosovo and Mali shows a different picture. Despite relatively few conflicts between these organizations, Dijkstra et al. (Forthcoming) find that these organizations continue to work in parallel, focusing on their narrow mandates and competences. By contrast, more permanent exchanges and synergies have proved challenging.

Challenge 3: fostering synergies between civilian and military instruments

While the previous discussion pointed at the need to achieve a multi-lateral and sequential integration of different activities, the need to integrate and better coordinate the work between civilian and military actors and capabilities has also been recognized. Civil–military coordination has proven particularly difficult in conflict areas. The phenomenon of "new wars" (Kaldor, 1999) has led to an increasing consensus among policy-makers and academics on the need to address security threats by a mixture of civilian and military instruments. The concept of the integrated approach also seeks to integrate the broad range of civilian and military instruments at the disposal of international actors into a holistic and coherent approach (Zelizer, 2013). This trend has been reinforced by the increased blurring of boundaries between internal and external security (see Tardy, 2017).

In the case of the EU, the need for a more integrated approach between civilian and military instruments has been acknowledged both at the political and operational levels (Council of the EU, 2009). As a result, the EU developed the concepts of civil–military cooperation (CIMIC) and civil–military coordination (CMCO) in the context of the CSDP (Juncos, 2007) and the broader concept of the comprehensive approach, which includes other non-CSDP activities, instruments and actors (Commission and HR, 2013, p. 3). This approach, which was first pilot tested in the EU's engagement in the Western Balkans, has since been operationalized in other regions – see, for instance, the Strategic Framework for the Horn of Africa (Council of the EU, 2011). With the introduction of the integrated approach by the EUGS, the EU has sought to take EU crisis response to the next level by expanding its reach to include a multilevel, multilateral, multiphase and multidimensional dimensions (Faleg, Forthcoming).

However, questions remain regarding the coordination of civil and military actors and capabilities. In particular, how can civil–military synergies within CSDP be improved? What is best practice in civil–military coordination? How can we strengthen synergies between civilian and military instruments and actors on the ground? The article by Zartsdahl (Forthcoming) seeks to address some of these questions by drawing on the cases of CSDP operations and missions in the Western Balkans and the Horn of Africa. Noting that much of the current literature has focused on the strategic and planning levels, Zartsdahl develops a conceptual framework for defining and analysing civil–military synergies

at the operational level. The article concludes that the stove-piped nature of the EU's command structure hampers coordination efforts between civilian and military actors to the extent that synergies are more common with non-EU partners (e.g. UN, NATO) than between EU actors (CSDP missions and operations and other EU actors).

Challenge 4: ensuring local ownership and the sustainability of reforms

Finally, another key challenge identified in the literature refers to the need to fully integrate affected communities in conflict prevention and peacebuilding. The findings in the literature suggest that where communities have been meaningfully involved, conflict prevention and peacebuilding are seen as more legitimate by local actors and tend to yield better and more sustainable results than those that have been imposed by external actors. As a result, "local ownership" has become a prerequisite for conflict prevention and peacebuilding activities which is in line with the objective of supporting human security, which promotes security and peace for the people, rather than the state. The EU has acknowledged the need to incorporate local perspectives in several policy documents, including its new Security Sector Reform Strategy (Commission and HR, 2016) and the EUGS (European Union, 2016). The latter, in particular, emphasizes the need to increase the involvement of the host governments and societies by promoting local ownership, and building the resilience and capacities of the EU's neighbouring countries.

Yet, despite local ownership becoming commonplace in policy discourse, there remain inconsistencies and problems in the way it is approached (Ejdus & Juncos, 2018). A case in point is the EU's engagement with civil society. The EU has co-operated with civil society in a variety of ways on the prevention of conflict, *inter alia*: providing funding for civil society's conflict prevention activities; sharing information and analysis; and working in alliance with civil society to influence peace processes at different levels. There has been an attempt by the Commission to make this more systematic by developing roadmaps for the engagement with civil society at the country level (European Commission, 2012). Other institutions, such as the Council, and EU instruments, such as CSDP missions, are also slowly changing their approach and attitude towards civil society. Yet, there are still problems related to limited public participation, weak local ownership practices, and regarding issues of participation and protection of women in conflict areas (Babaud, Giarmana, Parker, & Rynn, 2009).

The contribution by Edmunds, Juncos, and Algar-Faria (Forthcoming) provides further evidence of the struggles faced by the EU and other international actors when it comes to ensuring local ownership in capacity building activities. In part, the trials and tribulations of the EU, and other international actors, are due to the complex political contexts in which these institutions are parachuted, and uncertainties regarding whether the notion of the "local" captures the diversity of the communities in which capacity building takes place; or else what the outcome to be "owned" at the end of this process is or should be. This, in turn, has led to a "legitimacy deficit" for EU programmes in the Horn of Africa and the Western Balkans, which have had little involvement from local stakeholders and knowledge, and whose goals have often been at odds with local preferences and priorities.

Looking back, moving forward

The articles in this Forum provide evidence of the increasing maturity of the EU as a conflict prevention and peacebuilding actor. This evolution has been closely accompanied

by the development of various learning mechanisms in order to help improve the EU's performance. Michael Smith's contribution thus focuses on the learning culture underpinning the EU's civilian conflict prevention and peacebuilding activities (Smith, [Forthcoming](#)). Drawing on the findings from this Forum and from an extensive online catalogue of lessons identified produced by the EU-CIVCAP project (EU-CIVCAP, 2018), Smith summarizes some key findings regarding the EU's role in conflict prevention and peacebuilding. As a whole, he argues, there is evidence that the EU has developed a complex learning culture and that certain lessons have improved the conduct of peacebuilding tasks by the EU and its partners. Yet, the EU's efforts in civilian conflict prevention and peacebuilding activities have not been as effective as they could have been, and there are still problems relating to the EU's learning system, including the fact that the EU does not always follow its own learning procedures (Smith, [Forthcoming](#)).

Reflecting on some of the issues identified earlier on in this Introduction, one of the key challenges when it comes to the implementation of lessons learned relates to the complexity of the EU as an international actor, as well as the complex nature of international conflicts. Hence, the challenge of coordinating between civilian and military actors also extends to the learning domain, with each of these actors having their own learning cultures. Similarly, learning from others (e.g. UN, NATO, OSCE) has also been inhibited by the multiplicity of learning mechanisms and approaches among these organizations. Not surprisingly, this also compounds the challenge of developing complementarities and synergies among key international actors (see also Dijkstra et al. [Forthcoming](#); Faleg, [Forthcoming](#)). Smith ([Forthcoming](#)) also points to the "mission approach", problems of recruitment, and the high turnover of staff in CSDP operations as additional factors hindering learning processes as it prevents "deep learning" among those involved in EU peacebuilding initiatives. In sum, as a mechanism for institutional reform, learning can play but a limited role in fulfilling the ambitions set out in the EU Global Strategy.

Looking ahead, and despite considerable progress in recent years, there remain considerable challenges for the EU as a conflict prevention and peacebuilding actor. This Forum identifies four such challenges relating to the need to close the gap between early warning and early response, better coordination with other international peacebuilding actors, enhancing synergies between civilian and military actors and, last but not least, ensuring that reforms are locally owned and sustainable. Lessons learned from past failures and from others can contribute to addressing some of these challenges through institutional reform and the improvement of the EU's civilian capabilities. However, renewed commitment at the EU and international level on preventative action and sustaining peace requires the political will – backed by the necessary capabilities – from the member states to ensure that the EU acts as a coherent, comprehensive and strategic actor. Current developments on a Civilian CSDP Compact are a promising start; but only sustained political commitment over the medium and long term can help address some of the key challenges the EU and other international actors face in promoting sustainable peace.

Notes

1. In this article, conflict prevention can be defined as any attempt aimed at reducing tensions and stopping the escalation or outbreak of violent conflict (Ramsbotham, Woodhouse, & Miall, 2011, pp. 123–145). For its part, peacebuilding is understood as a range of activities

aiming to address the roots of conflict and promote sustainable peace in the medium and the long term (see Paris & Sisk, 2009).

2. For a discussion of the concepts “comprehensive” and “integrated” approach, please see Faleg (Forthcoming).

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