



The European Union as a Peace Mediator

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The European Union (EU) has recently emerged as an international peace mediator, but emerging challenges, including the potential exit of the UK from the EU, may prevent it from strengthening its ability to mediate conflicts.

Mediation is an instrument of international conflict management through which third parties seek to contribute to a peaceful resolution of (violent) conflicts. While states are the dominant and most frequent providers of mediation, international organizations are not far behind. Recently, the European Union (EU) has emerged as a relatively new player in the field, acting both as a mediator itself and as a member of [collective coordination mechanisms to support peace processes](#) such as UN Contact Groups and Groups of Friends. Current initiatives such as the [EU-facilitated dialogue](#) between Belgrade and Pristina have demonstrated the EU's potential as peace mediator.

However, external and internal crises may prevent the EU from further strengthening its institutional capacities and resources for mediation. Externally, challenges to European security such as the civil war in Syria, the threat posed by the so-called Islamic State and the armed conflict in Eastern Ukraine in the context of rising tensions between NATO and Russia [could lead to a shift in the EU's foreign and security policy](#) back towards a more traditional, "hard security" approach that focuses on the development of military instruments and defence cooperation. Internally, the results of the UK referendum on 23 June 2016 and a potential exit of the UK would certainly open up a debate on the future of EU foreign and security policy without one of its most influential member states. The fact that the EU's long-awaited [Global Strategy on Foreign and Security Policy](#) will be published a week or two after the

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UK referendum suggests that the EU is well prepared to take the potential effects of a 'Leave' vote on this policy field swiftly into account. However, it is nevertheless plausible to assume that a 'Brexit' would push the EU towards a decisive crossroads as regards to the future development of its foreign and security policy, also potentially affecting its engagement in the field of peace mediation.

The EU's track record in peace mediation

Although the number of EU mediation efforts is still relatively marginal compared to UN mediation involvement, the EU has nevertheless established a considerable track record as mediator in the past ten to fifteen years. During High Representative (HR) Javier Solana's terms of office, mediation became an increasingly important element of the EU's foreign and security policy toolbox. For example, in August 2001 the EU together with the US managed to broker the [Ohrid Framework Agreement](#) settling the conflict between the Macedonian government and the Albanian minority in 2001. A few months later, the High Representative and his team became involved in a mediation process between Serbia and Montenegro, which led to the [Belgrade Agreement](#) on the formation of a state union in March 2002. While the Western Balkans certainly remained one of HR Solana's key priorities, the EU also played an important role in the [multilateral effort to mediate the political crisis in Ukraine](#) in the context of the country's 'Orange Revolution' in 2003 and was a key supporter of the [efforts by the Finnish NGO Crisis Management Initiative \(CMI\)](#) to broker a peace agreement to the conflict in Aceh, Indonesia in 2004-5.

While the EU had already been very active in the field of mediation when Javier Solana served as High Representative (1999-2009), it sustained its mediation activities during HR Catherine Ashton's term of office (2009-2014) and

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continues to be involved in mediation processes since HR Federica Mogherini has taken over. In particular, the [EU-facilitated dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina](#) stands out as the most prominent example of EU mediation. Less publicly recognized are the EU's efforts as co-mediator in the Geneva International Discussions (GID) on Georgia's Territorial Conflicts that were initiated in October 2008 following the [EU Special Representative for the South Caucasus and Crisis in Georgia](#) together with OSCE and UN Special Representatives/Envoys serving as co-chair in the talks between representatives of Georgia, South Ossetia, Abkhazia, Russia and the US. Apart from its direct involvement as mediator, EU actors have been engaged in a number of mediation support initiatives, often been less visible to a wider public. Examples include the [EEAS Mediation Support Team's efforts to assist Myanmar democratic transition](#) and the [EU Delegation's organizational and financial support to the National Dialogue Conference in Yemen](#).

The EU's institutional framework for mediation

The increase in EU mediation activities has been accompanied by the evolution of a more strategic and systematic EU approach to mediation, particularly in terms of policy development and capacity-building. A key development in this regard has been the adoption of the [Concept on Strengthening EU Mediation and Dialogue Capacities](#). In this document, the EU formulated the plan to systematically enhance its existing mediation capacities and to strengthen its overall ability to engage in non-military conflict prevention and crisis management missions. It also spells out different roles and guiding principles of EU mediation, thereby addressing the need for greater internal coherence and closer cooperation with its international partners. A major role in mediation is ascribed to the EU Special Representatives, whose mandates often include

mediation-related activities and which are often the key EU actors on the ground in the conflict region.

To implement the Concept and to promote a more systematic approach to mediation, the [Mediation Support Team \(MST\)](#) within the EEAS was established in 2011 and has become a key hub of mediation knowledge and expertise. However, the MST is not the only institutional innovation that followed-up on the 2009 Concept. The establishment of the [European Parliament Mediation Support Service](#) to assist mediation initiatives undertaken by Members of the European Parliament and the creation of the [European Institute of Peace](#) illustrate that mediation remains a vibrant field of EU foreign policy.

Is the EU an effective mediator?

To what extent the EU is effective in its mediation efforts is an issue which still has to be comprehensively addressed in peace and conflict studies research. The answer to the question of EU effectiveness also depends on how one conceptualizes [effectiveness and success in international mediation](#). A brief comparison of the EU-facilitated dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia with the EU's role as co-chair in the Geneva International Discussions on the conflicts over South Ossetia and Abkhazia may illustrate this. In terms of conflict settlement, the EU-facilitated dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia has been relatively effective, given that it has led to several agreements between the parties, including compromises on previously heavily contested issues such as Kosovo's participation in regional fora, freedom of movement and trade, and the governance of Northern Kosovo. Most importantly, the EU brokered the [First Agreement of Principles Governing the Normalization of Relations](#) in April 2013 that has been widely applauded as [ground-breaking and historic](#). Although the parties are lagging behind when it comes to the implementation of

some agreements, the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue still is a success story which can, at least partly, be attributed to the EU's leverage vis-à-vis with the conflict parties due to their aspirations for EU accession and its mediation strategy that draws on this leverage to move parties toward agreement through the use of positive incentives.

In case of the Geneva International Discussions, the EUSR and his team have been considerably less effective in brokering agreements between the parties compared to the Kosovo-Serbia case. Apart from the establishment of Incident Prevention and Response Mechanisms to facilitate exchange of information on security incidents at the administrative boundary line (ABL) between South Ossetia/Abkhazia and Georgia proper, the discussions have not resulted in any tangible results yet. However, a focus on conflict settlement alone would not be sufficient to make a comprehensive judgement on the EU's effectiveness as a co-mediator in this case. The fact that the EU has managed to keep the parties at the negotiation table and stay committed to the mediation process is in itself an achievement, given the fact that the space for compromise between the parties seems to be very limited. In addition to the EU's effort to stabilize the security situation on the ground through the EU Monitoring Mission (EUMM), the EU's leading role in the GID has contributed to a stabilization of a conflict which was prone to escalation not that many years ago.

What can we learn from this comparison about EU effectiveness in mediation? There are at least two lessons that could be drawn here. First, the Kosovo-Serbia case illustrates the great potential of the EU as a mediator in contexts where EU memberships serves as a huge incentive for compromise solutions. Second, the EU's involvement in the Geneva International Discussions demonstrates that in less favourable contexts – due to a lack of EU leverage or

a limited willingness to compromise from the conflict parties – the EU may not be able to achieve more than preserving the status quo and committing the parties to confront one another peacefully in negotiations rather than through violent means. Thus, there may be certain limits to what the EU is able to achieve, but this does not mean automatically that the EU is ineffective. Rather, the main task for the EU will be to fully exploit the potential it has, given the specific circumstances and context of the conflict in which it decides to engage.

If the EU is able to further strengthen its profile as an international mediator, it will depend on the political will of the Member States. Although EU mediators such as EU Special Representatives enjoy a certain degree of leeway, it is the EU member states who decide on their mandates and the EU's approach towards a particular conflict more generally. Moreover, individual Member States may provide EU mediation efforts with additional weight. In the Kosovo-Serbia case, for example, the UK and Germany have played a key role in moving Belgrade to compromise in the dialogue with Pristina by making it a condition for further progress on its path towards EU accession. While Germany has been the key driver behind the efforts of putting more pressure on Serbia to move forward in the implementation of agreements reached in the context of the EU-facilitated dialogue at different levels, the UK has played a key role in backing this policy publicly and through diplomatic channels. Given that the UK has been a firm supporter of the EU's further enlargement, one potential effect of a 'Brexit' could be that in cases where enlargement is the key 'carrot' the EU can offer to conflict parties, there might be more reluctance to draw on this leverage due to a change to the EU's internal balance between enlargement supporters and skeptics among the Member States. Thus, although a potential 'Brexit' may not inevitably affect and change the EU's approach to mediation, it may have a long-term negative impact on the EU's

ability to use both pressure and political/economic incentives to spur agreement between conflict parties.

Image by Rock Cohen via [Flickr](#).

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