

Fragility and Peacebuilding: Will the EU Succeed or Fail?

Policy Commentary by Bernardo Mariani, 19 January 2026

Protracted conflicts, climate shocks, political instability and inequality are no longer exceptions in today's world – they are the norm. In its [States of Fragility 2025 report](#), the OECD counts 61 contexts experiencing high or extreme fragility, including 24 affected by armed conflict and eight in a state of war. For EU external action, fragility can no longer sit at the margins of policy: it must be treated as a central political challenge.

This comes at a critical moment. The EU is reshaping major parts of its external toolbox: the rollout of the [Global Gateway](#) strategy with its much-discussed “360-degree approach”, the [Global Europe Instrument](#) as a unified funding framework, a forthcoming [Communication on Humanitarian Aid](#) led by DG ECHO, and – above all – [the 2028-2034 EU budget](#). Together, these processes will determine whether fragility becomes the rationale for renewed investment in peacebuilding – or the justification for sidelining it further.

These questions were also at the heart of discussions held in Brussels on 19 January 2026, convened by the [Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Egmont Institute](#), as policymakers, practitioners and analysts reflected on how the EU engages in fragile and conflict-affected settings.

Why fragility matters

According to the [OECD](#), fragility is exposure to high risks combined with low capacity to cope. It emerges where states lack the capacity or legitimacy to manage risks, prevent violence or deliver for their citizens. It is political, social, economic and environmental all at once – and violent conflict is often both a cause and a consequence.

For Europe, addressing the causes of fragility must be seen as far more than an act of solidarity. Fragility is directly linked to Europe's own security and prosperity. Instability, conflict, displacement, and transnational risks do not remain contained. They shape Europe's strategic environment in profound ways.

Fragility also defies linear development models. In fragile and conflict-affected contexts, standard approaches based on long planning cycles, strong state partners and predictable reform trajectories often fall short. What is required instead is long-term engagement, flexibility, tolerance for political risk, and a clear-eyed understanding of power, exclusion and grievance.

The EU wants its private sector to engage more actively in the Global South. Yet businesses are understandably reluctant to operate in risky fragile contexts. Creating conditions for mutually beneficial private sector cooperation requires sustained, principled engagement. That means helping partner countries address the underlying drivers of fragility – not just its symptoms.

The EU frequently says it wants to “stay engaged” in difficult contexts and pursue an ["integrated approach to fragility"](#). These commitments matter. But staying engaged without adapting how the EU works risks doing more harm than good.

Where the EU stands today

Over the years, the EU has built an impressive policy architecture around fragility: the [Integrated Approach to External Conflicts and Crises](#), the 2016 [Global Strategy for the EU's Foreign and Security Policy](#), [Council Conclusions on operationalising the humanitarian-development-peace \(HDP\) nexus](#), and more recently [Team Europe](#) initiatives. On paper, these all recognise that humanitarian aid, development, peace and security must work together.

In practice, things are messier. Peacebuilding and conflict prevention are routinely acknowledged, but rarely prioritised in practice. Funding tends to favour short-term crisis response, migration management or geopolitical objectives. Conflict dynamics are often treated as background noise rather than as central political problems requiring sustained engagement.

The new Global Gateway Strategy risks reinforcing this tendency, particularly if EU external action shifts further towards near-term strategic interests (energy, critical minerals, and migration) without embedding conflict sensitivity and peace objectives. Yet Global Gateway could also, in principle, support peace-positive investments – but only if conflict sensitivity and peacebuilding objectives are treated as core programme design requirements from the outset.

The proposed [Global Europe instrument](#) does signal progress by explicitly mentioning fragility, crisis situations and differentiated engagement. Yet it also carries risks. Conditioning cooperation on, among other factors, partner governments’ “commitment” to addressing fragility or irregular migration can, in contested contexts, shift costs onto populations rather than political decision-makers. Any such conditionalities therefore need careful conflict- and do-no-harm screening.

The forthcoming Communication on Humanitarian Aid, which will set out the EU’s integrated approach to fragility, is therefore more than a technical exercise. It will be a test of whether the EU is prepared to treat conflict and fragility as political risks requiring prevention and transformation – or merely as drivers of humanitarian need.

Plenty of tools – uneven impact

The EU has no shortage of instruments: humanitarian aid, development cooperation, peacebuilding tools and crisis response funding. Flexibility has improved in recent years, yet day-to-day practice still gets in the way.

Short funding cycles, heavy bureaucracy and institutional risk-aversion make it hard to stay the course in protracted crises. Despite years of rhetoric around the HDP nexus, silos and competing priorities persist, limiting genuinely joined-up action.

EU humanitarian aid remains a global benchmark for quality. But humanitarian assistance alone cannot reduce fragility if deeper issues of conflict, inequality and exclusion remain unaddressed.

Civil society: always mentioned, rarely empowered

In fragile contexts, civil society often holds things together when states falter. Local NGOs, women's organisations, faith-based actors and community groups deliver services, mediate disputes, rebuild trust and keep dialogue alive.

The EU recognises this in principle, but support in practice is patchy. Civic space is shrinking in many fragile settings, while EU funding rules remain complex and centralised. Local and national civil society organisations – often the actors best placed to work on conflict prevention and social cohesion – struggle to access funding at all.

If the EU is serious about resilience and conflict prevention in fragile and contested contexts, backing civil society is not optional; it is strategic.

The big risk: peacebuilding pushed aside

Current debates increasingly frame fragility through a narrow lens of security, migration and geopolitical competition. Global Gateway risks crowding out attention to conflict dynamics unless clear safeguards are built in. And with DG ECHO leading the Humanitarian Communication, there is a real risk that conflict is framed primarily as a source of humanitarian need, rather than as a political problem requiring prevention and peacebuilding.

Funding patterns already reflect this [imbalance](#). Mediation, dialogue, reconciliation and social cohesion initiatives remain underfunded, short-term and marginal compared to [EU spending](#) on defence, migration or stabilisation.

If fragility is reduced to a technocratic risk-management exercise, the underlying causes of today's global "public bads" – growing violence, resource conflicts, violent extremism, and spiralling inequality – will remain unaddressed, with far-reaching long-term consequences, including for European societies themselves.

Or an opportunity to put peacebuilding back at the centre

But it does not have to be this way. Taken seriously, fragility strengthens the case for peacebuilding.

If fragility is rooted in broken social contracts, exclusion and unresolved conflict, then humanitarian aid and development investment alone will never be enough. Peacebuilding is the connective tissue linking relief, governance, development and resilience. Unlike stabilisation, which prioritises short-term security and state presence, peacebuilding focuses on transforming conflict relationships, grievances and social contracts over time.

A smarter EU approach to fragility could justify long-term engagement in politically difficult contexts, support locally driven peace initiatives, move away from quick exit strategies, and elevate dialogue and reconciliation as core responses, rather than optional add-ons.

What would stop peacebuilding being sidelined?

Four factors matter most:

- **Clear political recognition** that violent conflict is both a driver and a consequence of fragility, and that peacebuilding is a distinct, long-term political and social strategy – not merely a subset of stabilisation or crisis management. In practice, this means treating peace outcomes as binding design constraints in investments and programmes, rather than as optional safeguards added later.
- **Dedicated, predictable funding for peacebuilding** in the next EU budget. Without [earmarked, multi-year resources](#) under the next Multiannual Financial Framework, peacebuilding will continue to lose out to short-term stabilisation and migration-related priorities. Concretely, this could take the form of a ring-fenced, multi-year funding window supporting mediation, social cohesion, and locally led peace initiatives, with sufficient flexibility to adapt to evolving conflict dynamics.
- **Stronger institutional ownership across EU institutions.** Clear leadership, defined mandates and accountability are needed to ensure that conflict prevention and peacebuilding do not fall between the EEAS, INTPA, ECHO and FPI. At a minimum, this would require a named senior owner and joint accountability across these services, supported by shared indicators and decision gates for major programming and investment choices.
- **A central role for civil society peacebuilders.** Women's and youth organisations, in particular, must be recognised as core peacebuilding actors and supported accordingly, especially in contested or hard-to-reach contexts. This implies easier access to funding, proportionate compliance requirements, and the protection of civic space as an integral part of the EU's overall external action.

So, where does this leave us?

A renewed EU approach to fragility can go in two directions. It can absorb peacebuilding into broader agendas until it quietly disappears. Or it can recognise fragility for what it is – a threat to the EU's core foreign policy objectives – and use it as an analytical lens to prioritise and strategise external action more effectively.

This choice will not be made in speeches, but in budgets, programming decisions and Global Gateway investments – for example, in whether the next MFF includes a predictable, multi-year peacebuilding window; whether Global Gateway projects undergo mandatory conflict-sensitivity screening; and whether civil society can access funding through simplified, locally anchored channels. Fragility should be the strongest argument for investing more in peacebuilding, not less. But that will only happen if the EU actively chooses to put peacebuilding back at the centre of its international cooperation.



The views expressed in this commentary are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of CMC.

About the author

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