The Need for a New EU Research Agenda on Peace and Conflict

Following an initiative by Austrian Federal Minister for Women, Science and Research Eva-Maria Holzleitner to strengthen peace and conflict research in Europe, a group of scientific experts came together to draft this policy paper. Building on discussions held at the informal Council meeting of research ministers on 17 July 2026 in Copenhagen, sixteen ministers from EU Member States and Associated Countries nominated experts to participate in a dedicated network – a group of whom authored this paper. Its aim is twofold: to identify current research needs that enable the EU to better respond to its peace and security challenges, and to help shape peace and conflict research as a strategic priority within the 10th EU Framework Programme for Research and Innovation.

Edited by John Doyle (Dublin City University), Maximilian Lakitsch (University of Graz), Cindy Horst (Peace Research Institute Oslo), Jonathan Goodhand (SOAS London), Thorsten Bonacker (Marburg University), and others.

Introduction

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 not only brought back large-scale interstate war to the international community, it also brought armed conflict to the European Union's (EU) immediate neighbourhood. Together with other recent conflict escalations, this reflects deeper shifts in the international system from unipolarity towards multipolarity which have fostered a significant rise in intra-state conflicts, geopolitical tensions, geoeconomic competition, resulting in a reduction in international aid assistance, a weakening of international human rights norms and an undermining of international organisations. These trends have deepened already existing challenges such as the security dimensions of the climate crisis, migration, technological innovations such as Artificial Intelligence, widening global inequality, and threats to democratic norms and institutions in many European countries. These trends ultimately have had a negative impact on human security, which has disproportionately affected the most vulnerable and precarious populations in Europe and across the globe.

The EU stands at a pivotal juncture. The EU's own historical experience as a peace project, the comprehensive and people-centred approach to peace and conflict set out in its formal EU Security Strategy, along with the union's scale and relative economic wealth, provide it with capacity across a range of instruments to better contribute to building and strengthening peace in its neighbourhood and globally. Yet the current unstable international environment has also created a great deal of uncertainty about *how* the EU should act, both in the neighbourhood and beyond. There is a need to ensure that the new Horizon and Erasmus programmes and other EU instruments assist the EU and its member states in building an evidence base, which can deepen understanding of the key contemporary drivers of peace and conflict so as to provide a sound basis for decision-making.

There will also be a greater EU focus on indispensable, traditional security and defence measures in the years ahead, including in research and innovation. However, in this regard, the EU's own conclusion appears to be of constitutive relevance: only a broad, comprehensive approach to security and peace is likely to succeed. The EU's diplomatic instruments, along with its economic and trade relations, its development programmes and its activity in international fora, provide a potentially powerful and uniquely comprehensive set of tools in their breadth. Yet, without a stronger understanding of how modern conflict should be analysed and how peace can be built and supported in the current context, there is a very significant danger that different elements of the EU and its member states will be acting in ways which are not complementary, and may even have opposing short to medium term impacts.

Interventions by European leaders (and others) during 2025 and 2026 have emphasised a growing conviction about the need to contribute to the shaping of the international order. At the Munich Security Conference in early 2026, EU leaders underlined the imperative for Europeans to assume greater responsibility for stabilizing their neighbourhoods and to exercise strategic autonomy in support of a rules-based order. They further stressed that stability must be built through engagement, dialogue, and sustained political effort alongside credible security measures. These calls resonated with arguments made shortly before at the World Economic Forum in Davos, where European leaders called for a proactive role in addressing emerging conflicts within a broader economic and political strategy. This vision aligns with a wider argument gaining traction among middle powers: that collaborative approaches across diplomacy, trade, economics, and defence can build a world of mutual respect, in which disputes are resolved through commonly agreed forums. It is this comprehensive breadth of instruments – diplomacy, trade, economic relationships, development aid, norm generation, along with military power – which provides the EU with a unique capacity not held by other international organisations.

This charge is particularly salient for the EU as a global economic heavyweight with both the responsibility and the means to act. It is in the EU's own interests and in conformity with its history and declared rights and values, to deepen its engagement with peacebuilding. Given the unique capacity of peace to generate legitimate institutions and relationships that underpin long-term stability, the EU's international agency provides a set of instruments which if properly directed could strengthen peace as a compass to navigate the current turbulent period of geopolitical transformation. However, even before the current international turmoil, 'liberal' peace interventions were subject to much criticism for their ineffectiveness or negative consequences, for the absence of a long-term perspective, for the lack of shared understanding between interventions in areas such as development, trade and security, and for their dis-connect from local conditions.

The uncertainty created by the current changes in the international order has added to the difficulty of agreeing effective action. The EU's diplomatic activity, including on peacebuilding, rests on the assumption that we can operate within effective international organisations and on the foundation of international norms, alongside a stable international trade regime. However, the undermining of international institutions, the recent chaos of international economic relations, and the very

significant weakening of international law and human rights has created a very different context, which requires a different approach.

We, therefore, need a new European research agenda on peace and conflict to better inform analysis, and to provide an up-to-date evidence base for policy-making and diplomatic action. To support this ambition, the paper recommends a significant increase in the priority provided to research on peace and conflict, through the various EU funding instruments and frameworks, including dedicated calls in the Horizon and Erasmus programmes.

Planning an impactful research agenda on peace and conflict

The EU needs a new research programme on conflict and peace that provides new concepts, tools, and bodies of evidence in order to understand and respond to contemporary challenges, inform contemporary policy and action on peace and security, to train new generations of experts, and to adapt education curricula to meet the above-mentioned contemporary challenges. Given its importance it cannot be left to chance that it may emerge from open, bottom-up calls. The EU needs to signal its importance by opening specific 'top down' research and Erasmus calls.

Addressing the weaknesses of current approaches to peacebuilding requires exploring new methods of data collection, including the use of new technologies such as AI, and new methodologies to untangle the complex links between issues such as climate change, poverty, migration and conflict. The EU needs approaches which can overcome the failures of externally imposed peace interventions, by creating much better ways of aligning local and international perspectives. We need sensitive, authentic and participatory methods of data collection that give community voices and knowledge greater prominence. The EU needs to be able to take into account 'local perspectives' in its peacebuilding work and also in the everyday work that happens locally to maintain peace. This alignment of local and international perspectives will provide stronger guidance for effective analysis, policy and action. It will guide the design of effective institutions, it will highlight best practices for linking peace and democratic legitimacy, and it will allow much better coordination of policy instruments from trade to international development.

Focused research will ultimately provide the analytical foundations and implementation pathways needed to translate a people-centred peace approach into concrete policies, instruments and missions.

Key Pillars of a conflict and peace research agenda

To implement this strategic shift effectively, the EU should first strengthen its research including the thematic areas outlined below. The research programme will complement programmes addressing more technical and traditional security, resilience and defence agendas. It will provide the EU with the

evidence it needs to better analyse the drivers of conflict and allow the EU to design better programmes to build and support peace as part of a comprehensive approach to international security in its widest sense. The proposed agenda will allow the EU to navigate the changed international environment as discussed above, while also taking advantage of new technologies to collect and analyse data as well as to secure or foster peace.

Peace and democratic values in the EU's own territory

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has shown how conflicts outside the EU can directly impact on democratic values in its member states. Hybrid threats, disinformation about EU actions and misinformation about international threats can undermine the EU's own democratic base and weaken social cohesion. At the same time, these dynamics highlight the importance of strengthening civil society, enhancing citizen engagement, and fostering trust in democratic institutions. Given the almost immediate interactions between international interventions of all sorts and online disinformation, how can the EU and its member states identify and combat hostile campaigns occurring at significant scale, while also supporting more resilient, informed and participatory societies? Research can clarify how misinformation spreads, how confidence in evidence can be restored, how civil society actors can be empowered and how institutional design can withstand attempts to undermine democratic processes.

In this context, the Horizon and Erasmus programmes should deal with the question of peace in EU citizenship education. Capacity building and curricular reform can be designed and supported to anchor EU citizenship education in everyday contexts, as well as participatory learning formats in schools, youth centres and adult education settings that provide spaces for dialogue, reflection and collective problem-solving. Such spaces can provide safe spaces for interactions between communities and diasporas who may have a conflictual relationship elsewhere. Designed in this way, and based on sound research on contrasting perspectives, citizenship education becomes a peace policy in practice, strengthening trust in institutions, reducing alienation, and fostering a peace-oriented European identity rooted in daily life. Research can also analyse the impact of socioeconomic factors, and regional imbalance on political polarization; the importance of community interventions in reducing polarization through locally tailored programmes; and the effectiveness of cooperation models between the state, platforms, researchers, and civil society for detecting and responding to threats to democratic processes. Such evidence can inform the EU's approach to competitiveness and social cohesion, helping to design intervention programmes that combine social protection, skills development, and inclusive public spaces with democratic participation.

Peace through Enlargement

The adoption of shared principles, rights, and values has been central to European integration. It provides the common foundation for interaction among the Union's member states and citizens and,

in doing so, underpins the EU's internal peace. Following a period of 'enlargement fatigue' the Russian invasion of Ukraine has moved enlargement back to the centre stage of integration. Europeanisation through EU enlargement and the credible prospect of membership can be a powerful driver of peacebuilding in the Union's near neighbourhood. To realise this potential, research needs to clarify the mechanisms by which integration dynamics can translate into conflict transformation, distil lessons from past processes, and embed peacebuilding perspectives into accession pathways. More research is needed on how existing socio-political realities interact with the EU's legal requirements. Research priorities include learning from the broader process design, assessing how enlargement incentives and conditionality can advance or impede peacebuilding in the Western Balkans, and developing a peace-informed approach to Ukraine's transition to EU membership that aligns reconstruction, justice, and institutional reform with reconciliation goals. By generating actionable evidence across these cases, the EU can shape enlargement as a coherent peace strategy, one that strengthens democratic legitimacy, reduces conflict risks, and fosters inclusive regional convergence.

Peace and Europeanization in the EU's Neighbourhood

The Barcelona Process, and subsequently the European Neighbourhood Policy, sought to extend the EU's sphere of mutual understanding and peace to its eastern and southern neighbourhoods, with the aim of fostering a Europeanised realm. However, the Arab Spring and the Syrian civil war, the ongoing conflict in Ukraine and Russia's invasion, as well as continued tensions in the Balkans and the South Caucasus, have cast a harsh light on the EU's Europeanisation strategy and its model of norm diffusion. Numerous reviews have underscored the urgency of aligning ENP policies with the perspectives and priorities of populations in partner countries. Research should investigate how a revitalised European Neighbourhood Policy can make a real contribution to peace, particularly in those states that are not on a path to membership, or where membership remains a distant prospect. Furthermore, analysis should examine the incentives beyond membership that EU actions and programmes deploy in order to build a peaceful and secure neighbourhood within the current international environment.

Peace in an era of heightened geopolitical tensions

The heightened degree of armed conflict on the EU's borders and near neighbourhood, since the Russian invasion of Ukraine and subsequent armed actions across the Middle East, have generated a necessary re-focusing on defence and traditional security measures in the EU institutions and EU member states. It is important however that such activity does not displace a focus on longer-term requirements for action on peacebuilding. We need better analysis of how institutions and policies at EU and member state level can be designed so that responding to the immediately urgent aspects of defence, does not inadvertently lead to actions which undermine longer-term policy initiatives in peacebuilding, and which generate future problems. Research can explore how policies and technologies aimed at preventing conflict and building peace have interacted with traditional security

measures, their short- and long-term impacts, and the extent to which they remain relevant in the current context.

Peace and international institutions

The European Union's peace project has historically been embedded in a broader architecture of international and multilateral institutions that emerged after the end of the Second World War. Organizations such as the United Nations helped stabilize international relations by embedding cooperation, legal norms, and collective security in formal structures. International Financial Institutions, such as the World Bank, the IMF, and regional development banks, have provided the financial means to assist post-conflict countries in their institutional and societal recovery, with the goal of preventing a relapse into armed violence. Today, however, these multilateral arrangements face a growing crisis, as major powers increasingly challenge, bypass, or undermine the rules and institutions that once underpinned the post-war order. If the relative peace and stability achieved in Europe after World War II were made possible through robust international institutions, renewing and strengthening these frameworks is essential for sustaining peace in the present geopolitical context.

Research should elaborate on how the EU can respond to the current weakening of international institutions and regimes. It should identify which elements of the multilateral system can be adjusted to function effectively in the current environment. Further analysis should examine which new alliances of like-minded states could play a positive role in resolving conflict and supporting peace. At the same time, it could clarify which types of activities and interventions ought to be given priority in the diplomatic efforts of the EU and its Member States. Another area of research could focus on financial institutions. In this regard, relevant research questions could include how their lending practices and conditionalities affect conflict dynamics; how risk appetite, performance metrics, and due diligence processes could better support stability and resilience; and what reforms to the international financial architecture may be needed to finance peace outcomes more effectively.

Strengthening peace – beyond armed conflict measures

A programme of conflict and peace research needs to explore the impacts of alternative, non-heroic, and everyday forms of peacemaking and coping that remain marginal in dominant political and institutional frameworks. Practices such as community-based mediation, mutual aid networks, care infrastructures and quiet acts of resistance often help to maintain peace in the face of structural and symbolic violence, even when formal institutions fail. Research can provide the EU with new analytical frameworks and operational tools that recognise non-visible forms of violence, capture intersectional vulnerabilities, and support the agency of those historically excluded from decision-making. By systematically documenting and evaluating such approaches, research can reveal practical entry points for EU external action, from local partnership models and safe-space provision to inclusive governance reforms that embed care and dignity in the delivery of essential services.

Climate, Peace, and Security

The current threats to the multilateral order have among other impacts significantly weakened international cooperation towards climate action. This has many dimensions, most crucially the existential threat to the planet's flora and fauna, but short-term impacts include climate-related tensions and conflicts, particularly in contexts marked by power asymmetries, historical responsibilities, and global inequalities. As soils degrade, clean drinking water and irrigation supplies diminish, and food security for humans and livestock falters, everyday precarities grow, eroding social cohesion and increasing the likelihood of conflict. In turn, armed violence further degrades ecological conditions, perpetuating a vicious cycle in which environmental harm and insecurity reinforce each other. The EU needs more focused research on how climate-related pressures interact with political, socio-economic, and institutional factors to create conflict. Research can map these feedback loops, identify points of intervention to build resilience and peaceful approaches to adaptation. Research can help the EU design conflict-sensitive green transitions, equitable adaptation pathways, and preventive diplomacy that reduce grievances rather than deepen them, and which avoid over-securitisation of climate impacts.

Gender, Peace, and Security

Among the many areas of recent attacks on international norms and institutions, organisations and measures working on gender equality, including work on gender peace and security have been subject to particular hostility. EU research needs to provide a deeper and broader analysis of both the progress, limitations and failures of the Women, Peace and Security agenda of recent decades. It needs to analyse how a new agenda can be supported in a world of diminishing consensus on international norms, where international institutions working on gender equality have been actively undermined, and where development aid, which was often used to fund gender equality programmes in peacebuilding, has been cut in scale. The EU needs to support research and capacity building programmes that illuminate how gendered power relations of various kinds structure the everyday conditions of peace and violence. To analyse where and how peace is experienced, negotiated or denied in daily life, research needs to explore how gender interacts with class, ethnicity, race, disability, and migration status to shape exposure to violence, access to recognition, and capacity for political agency. In doing so, it can clarify how inclusive approaches to peacebuilding can transform complex intertwined dynamics.

More in detail, research could explore how and why the rights of women and girls are being rolled back, including the motivations of hostile actors and the strategies and narratives used to undermine gender equality. Further areas of inquiry include the gender and national security nexus, particularly how the rollback of rights can be exploited to weaken societal resilience, democratic institutions, and security; how a changing conflict and humanitarian context is affecting the ability of the humanitarian system to engage with and meet the needs of women in conflict; and which longstanding and emerging issues are likely to be most significant for the Women, Peace and Security agenda over the next five to ten years and why.

Peace and Migration

While the impact of armed conflict and insecurity in driving migration is well understood, the heightened domestic political focus on migration as an issue of political contestation in many EU Member States has generated a requirement for research on wider and more complex interactions of migration, insecurity and peace. Migration policies do more than simply react to (in)security, they can shape the conditions of trust and distrust that determine the prospects for sustainable peace, and influence how people perceive the fairness, credibility and stability of political orders. Research needs to identify these interactions and provide a better analysis of the complex causal processes towards conflict. It needs to shed light on how cooperation frameworks shifting containment and return responsibilities to partner countries unintentionally fuel local grievances by empowering coercive actors, distorting local economies and imposing security logics on border regions that do not align with community needs. Analyses should scrutinize how migration control measures fuel longer-term instability in transit areas, thereby undermining the EU's broader peace objectives in its neighbourhood. Addressing these dynamics requires not only an assessment of the effectiveness of deterrence, but also of its impact on local legitimacy and social cohesion.

Peace and stability of resources and critical infrastructures

It should be borne in mind that peace today depends on the stability and accessibility of resources as well as of infrastructures as material conditions for peace. Whether it be water, minerals, oil, or other resources, they can be a source of stability or instability in the world and in Europe. The same goes for infrastructures such as 'vital systems' that emerged out of the experience of global conflict. We currently see that those infrastructures are targets in conflict. Additionally, stability and access to resources overlap with the environmental component of security and other activities that can promote peace or the absence of conflict. In this context, research must contribute to making infrastructures resilient and instrumental for peace, thus creating infrastructures for peace. Within the policy framework of the European Union, infrastructures for peace may include governance mechanisms, participatory institutions, and cooperative systems that ensure fair access to resources and mediate potential conflicts related to their distribution.

Stability and access to resources substantially correlate with the economics of peace and security. During the post-Cold War period an international consensus emerged around the pursuit of international development goals, based on the recognition that equitable sustainable development was a crucial component of human security. This consensus has broken down in the contemporary era linked to a range of factors including heightened geo-economic competition, the securitization of vital infrastructures, increasingly extractive models of development, and the roles of globalisation and technological shifts in concentrating wealth and exacerbating inequalities – accentuated further by the weaponization of connectivity through sanctions regimes, and also by the precipitous decline of development aid. Increasingly the world's poor are concentrated in fragile and conflict-affected states that are often deeply affected by climate change and where illicit transnational economies, whilst sometimes providing an economic safety net for local populations, have wider diffusion and spillover

effects, destabilizing their immediate neighbourhoods as well as countries within the EU. There is an urgent need for research that generates new evidence about the distributive consequences of contemporary development processes as well as their impacts on global and regional security, with a view to developing policies that build strategic stability, address state fragility and target economic insecurities and inequalities. This is also key to tackling the structural drivers of migration.

Peace Tech

Digital technologies such as AI-driven tools offer significant opportunities to strengthen peacebuilding, from enhancing early warning systems to supporting mediation efforts and monitoring ceasefires with greater precision. However, this potential is constrained by a fundamental disconnect. Over 90% of AI training data originates from Europe and North America, while the majority of conflicts take place in the Global South. In practice, this means that many of the tools being developed are shaped by realities far removed from the environments in which they are ultimately deployed. This is further compounded by the limited involvement of local peacebuilders in the design of digital tools, alongside gaps in digital capacity and infrastructure in conflict-affected settings. These challenges are not only technical, but structural. They raise important questions about who designs PeaceTech, whose knowledge is embedded within it, and who ultimately benefits from its deployment.

A robust PeaceTech research agenda must therefore move beyond a narrow focus on technological innovation and instead examine the conditions under which these tools are developed, governed, and applied. This includes addressing bias in training data, the risks of extractive data practices often described as “data colonialism”, and the growing influence of commercially driven and dual-use technologies in peacebuilding contexts. Research should place the perspectives and agency of communities most affected by conflict at its centre, ensuring that local peacebuilders are not treated as end-users of externally developed solutions, but are actively involved in shaping technologies that reflect their needs, knowledge, and values. This requires sustained investment in participatory design approaches, alongside ethical data governance frameworks such as decentralised, Gaia-X-aligned data spaces that preserve local control, and targeted capacity-building to bridge the digital divide. In essence, anchoring PeaceTech in human-centric principles, and in particular the baseline of Do No Harm, is essential.