

## Swimming against the Tide: Transfer from Civil Society Consultations to Track 1

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**Abstract.** *This article introduces a three-phase model for evaluating transfer from civil society consultations to track 1. It applies this model to analyse how Syrian civil society has contributed to the political track in the framework of the UN-led mediation process. Drawing on in-depth interviews conducted between 2019-2021, the assessment showcases how knowledge-based outcomes generated by Syrian civil society are incorporated unevenly by track 1 actors. While these outcomes successfully set the baseline for the participation of civil society in track 1, the absence of strong mechanisms of transfer and the resistance from national delegations and countries in an already fragile negotiation preclude a substantial contribution from civil society. This article's contribution is twofold. First, it bridges two strands of literature by showing how transfer can be used to systematically examine civil society's contributions to peace processes. Second, it adds to the transfer literature by providing the first empirical model to evaluate transfer in civil society consultations.*

**Keywords:** Inclusion, Consultations, Civil society, Transfer, Multi-track, Syria

## 1. Introduction

In preparation for the holding of the third round of intra-Syrian talks in February 2016, the then Special Envoy for Syria (SE) Staffan de Mistura issued first-time invitations to civil society representatives as they “[could] provide vital ideas and insight to the talks”.<sup>1</sup> In so doing, the SE legitimized civil society’s inclusion by resorting to how it could *contribute* to the United Nations-facilitated talks. These contributions can be seen at work in the Civil Society Support Room (CSSR), the first official mechanism to include civil society (CS) in the Syrian peace process. The CSSR has not only strengthened CS participation in ongoing UN peacemaking for Syria but also contributed to shaping international action and challenging the dominant representations of the conflict (Theros and Turkmani 2022). How are civil society contributions incorporated into these political processes?

Civil society inclusion in conflict resolution is gaining traction across the realms of theory, policy, and practices. It is praised for its roles in legitimizing negotiations, making peace agreements last longer, bringing knowledge and expertise to the table, transforming relations, exerting pressure on conflict parties, or providing services to create entry points for peacebuilding (Nilsson, 2012; Orjuela, 2003; Hellmüller, 2020a; Hirblinger and Landau 2020; Paffenholz, 2009). As a result, peace processes have extended a variety of ways for such inclusion, ranging from civil society's direct representation at the negotiation table to track 2<sup>2</sup> through consultations running in

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<sup>1</sup> See <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/office-special-envoy-syria-press-statement-2-february-2016-enar> consulted 30.06.2022

<sup>2</sup> Here I refer to an increasingly accepted broader definition of Track 2 (Dayal and Christien, 2020; Palmiano Federer, 2021). This includes diplomatic or consultative processes among groups who are not principal parties to the conflict,

parallel to a negotiation process (Paffenholz, 2014). Examining how each of these inclusion modalities works to broaden CS's participation and render more effective interactions between these and negotiation processes is crucial for better defining how CS contributes to peace processes.

This article adds to this strand of literature by proposing an analytical model to evaluate how CS jointly formulates ideas in *consultations* within a peace process and *transfers* them to ongoing negotiations. This model does so by expanding the conceptualization of *transfer*<sup>3</sup>. Although initially developed for the evaluation of track 2, the concept of transfer proves useful for examining other inclusion modalities designed to contribute to a peace process. As most inclusion modalities strive to interact with political negotiations, transfer constitutes an all-encompassing notion that analytically frames how these exchanges occur (Jones, 2015; Çuhadar and Paffenholz, 2019; Palmiano Federer, 2021).<sup>4</sup> Transfer refers to a process in which outcomes are developed in one political space and are later moved to another by means of effective connections, to produce an impact in terms of conflict resolution. With regards to CS consultations, these inclusion modalities run parallel to political negotiations and generate a range of outcomes, such as policy recommendations, data, or evidence-based findings, which are later transferred to multiple target actors (third parties, the negotiating delegation, the media, etc.) (Çuhadar and Paffenholz, 2019). Transfer then allows for a fine-grained examination of how these contributions take place. However, analytical models for assessing transfer from CS consultations have not yet been put into place.

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who may either be invited to consult in the formal peace process or be holding their consultations separately from the Track 1 process, and who are intended to contribute to a war-ending political process (Dayal and Christien, 2020: 76).

<sup>3</sup> The author employs Çuhadar and Paffenholz's (2019) broader conceptualization of *transfer*. This is defined as the transfer of outcomes (e.g., recommendations, proposals, positive relationships, ideas, and insights) generated in any inclusion modality to contribute to any stage of negotiations (i.e., upward transfer) (Çuhadar and Paffenholz (2019: 11).

<sup>4</sup> This article is concerned with civil society consultations. For an examination on how transfer might unfold in other inclusion modalities, see Çuhadar and Paffenholz (2019).

This article fills in this gap. In line with the literature that examines how transfer takes place (Kelman 1995; Mitchel 1993; Fisher 1997; Çuhadar 2009; Kelman 1996, Rouhana 2000; Jones, 2015; Çuhadar and Paffenholz, 2019), the proposed model posits a process-oriented perspective to examine how civil society consultations contribute to a negotiation process. I distinguish three phases. First, a formulation phase that analyses the nature and selection of participants attending consultations, their conditions of interaction, the agenda-setting process, and the outcomes generated targeting track 1 actors. Later, I identify a transmission phase that focuses on the evaluation of existing mechanisms for connecting both political spaces and transferring generated products into ongoing negotiations. Finally, the model differentiates an incorporation phase that examines how transferred products and ideas are received by track 1 actors.

This study applies this model to the CSSR to examine how Syrian CS included in the process by means of consultations has contributed to track 1 in the UN-led mediation process. International mediation has been widely acknowledged as a tool for conflict resolution. However, recent changes in armed conflict conditions (Deep 2015) have made it less influential amidst rising tensions in international power structures and their reflectiveness in deadlocked track 1 negotiations worldwide (Da Rocha 2019; Richmond 2018). Setbacks in Yemen, Burundi, Libya, or Syria have questioned the UN's capacity to support conclusive peacemaking initiatives. This complexity has called for sophisticated responses from peacemakers by making mediation processes more inclusive of a fuller range of stakeholders under the assumption that broadening inclusion will make processes more effective (Lanz 2011; Bell and O'Rourke 2007; Çuhadar and Paffenholz 2019; Hirblinger and Landau 2020; Nilsson 2012; Wanis-St. John 2008). Understanding how transfer from inclusion modalities operates amidst this intractability proves relevant to identify the potential of non-traditional actors and non-elite-driven initiatives such as CS consultations, in broadened peace processes in generating meaningful outcomes in conflict

settings and uncovering alternative mechanisms to peace before stagnated track-1 peacemaking efforts. Besides, transfer allows an assessment of the limits and resistance encountered by these vertical inclusion mechanisms (Carl 2019; Çuhadar and Paffenholz 2019) in shaping conflict resolution, thereby contributing to the identification of strategies to mitigate these and enhance the effectiveness of international mediation (Jones 2015).

In particular, Syria is one of the most brutal and complex conflicts in contemporary wars. Encouraged by the Arab Spring, Syrians started demonstrating for democracy in March 2011 but quickly met with the repressive responses of the Assad regime. The unrest escalated into nationwide violence and further deteriorated with international and regional involvement. As a major international effort to mediate peace talks, the UN has consequently appointed four Special Envoys to Syria, namely: Kofi Annan (March 2012 – August 2012), Lakhdar Brahimi (September 2012 - May 2014), Staffan de Mistura (September 2014 -December 2018), and Geir Pedersen (since January 2019 until today). Both Annan and Brahimi led exclusive strategies as they prioritized the national political elites and the regional and international actors in the conflict (Greig 2013; Hill 2015; Lundgren 2016) whereas De Mistura initiated a continued dialogue with CS that eventually led to the establishment of the CSSR in 2016 (Hellmüller 2020a), still ongoing under Pedersen's mandate (Muto 2022).

Despite being largely characterised as a powerless process, the UN-led mediation for Syria serves as a compelling case for critically evaluating transfer processes amid growing intractability in mediation environments. First, Syria's protracted conflict and the involvement of multiple stakeholders highlight the intricate dynamics surrounding the absorption of outcomes by track-1 actors in a fragile elite-driven peacemaking environment. Indeed, the conflict involves various internal and external actors with competing interests, making it a fertile ground to explore how outcomes generated through mechanisms like the CSSR navigate complex power dynamics and

can be effectively transferred to relevant actors. Second, the CSSR sheds light on the limits of implementing inclusion mechanisms in high-risk and repressive environments that influence the mechanism design, potential interactions with the political landscape and contributions to conflict resolution. Third, the Syrian case has broader regional relevance. The CSSR stands as a unique and pioneering mechanism in the post-Arab Spring scenario that explicitly incorporates CS actors within peace processes that have been characterized by stagnation, elitism, and exclusion, including Yemen and Libya where traditional track-1 peacemaking efforts mediated by the UN have struggled to yield substantial progress. By examining the CSSR, scholars and practitioners can therefore gain valuable insights into how transfer processes in potential inclusion mechanisms in the region can be shaped and impacted by the specific dynamics and contexts in these other conflicting societies.

Thus, I explore how the depicted phases in the transfer process reflect on the CSSR's dynamics and inform how Syrian CS has transferred generated outcomes to the political process (upward transfer) between 2016 and 2022. This article makes a significant contribution to the existing literature on CS inclusion in Syria by offering a novel approach that combines a rich database inclusive of track-1 actors' perspectives, with the conceptualization of transfer, thereby providing a comprehensive model for understanding CS consultations. Previous studies on the Syrian case have explored how the civil society inclusion norm has been defined and promoted (Hellmüller 2020a) or have primarily focused on the broader context of the CSSR (Theros and Turkmani 2022; Hellmüller and Zahar 2018; Alzoubi 2017) without delving into the processes involved in generating outcomes, the impact of transfer mechanisms, and the sources of resistance rooted in track 1. These studies have predominantly adopted an outcome-oriented analysis, overlooking the intricacies of the transfer process. In contrast, this research employs the transfer concept to present a process-oriented analysis, shedding light on how the mechanisms' design

shapes the generation of outcomes within the CSSR and how the nature of the mechanisms of transfer available affects their transmission to track 1. Besides, this article adopts an actor-based perspective in analysing the incorporation of CSSR products by track-1 actors. This analytical approach reveals the complex negotiations, interactions, and power dynamics at play, offering a deeper understanding of how CS contributions are acknowledged (or not) by key actors in the Syrian peace process. By filling this gap and providing a nuanced understanding of CS inclusion, this article makes a convincing case for its unique contribution to the scholarly discourse on Syria's CS engagement.

The main data used for the analysis derives from 28 in-depth semi-structured interviews conducted between January 2019 and July 2022 with CSSR participants, organizers from the Office of the Special Envoy for Syria (OSE), including Staffan de Mistura, and implementing partners, as well as track 1 actors. The article unfolds in three parts. First, it introduces existing frameworks for the evaluation of transfer and presents a model for analysing civil society consultations. Second, it applies the depicted model to the transfer process taking place from the CSSR to track 1 in the UN-led mediation process for Syria. Third, it identifies the main findings and discusses their main implications.

## **2. Transfer in Literature**

It has been six decades since the first track 2 endeavours. Initial narrow conceptions considered these as initiatives facilitated by a scholar-practitioner in restrictive workshop settings composed of selected influential and unofficial actors with the goal of transferring ideas or people from unofficial to official conflict resolution (Palmiano Federer 2021). Following the normative turn in conflict resolution (Hellmüller, Pring, and Richmond 2020), third parties are increasingly mandated to promote inclusive interventions. This complexity has called for sophisticated

responses from peacemakers by employing track 2 as a practical mechanism through which traditionally excluded actors, such as women or CS can participate in peace processes (European External Action Service 2020; Paffenholz et al. 2016; Jones 2015; Dayal and Christien 2020; Palmiano Federer 2021). At this intersection between track 2 architectures and inclusion, a broader conception of track 2 has unfolded (Dayal and Christien 2020). This second-generation track 2 expands the definition to move beyond influential elites, including wider societal sectors with some ties to track 1 actors or decision-makers, such as CS actors, who in a parallel-process setting aim to transfer generated outcomes to influence a conflict environment in pro-resolution terms (Palmiano Federer 2021). Whereas transfer's overemphasis on track 1 has attracted criticism (Palmiano Federer et al. 2019) and concern with transfer in other directions is growing (Allen 2020), upward transfer remains a primary objective in second-generation track 2 (Palmiano Federer 2021). Aligned with the conceptual framework proposed by Lederach (1997) where track 1 occupies the apex of the pyramid, upward transfer entails the interactions and transmission of outcomes generated within these parallel spaces to the official track 1 negotiations.

Within this expanded understanding of track 2, the spectrum of inclusive modalities that could constitute track 2 has been broadened. This article builds on the premise that CS consultative forums meet the core components of a second-generation track 2 (Palmiano Federer 2021). Facilitated by a third party, these mechanisms run in parallel to track 1 in the context of a broader peace process and are inclusive of polarised societal sectors with a certain degree of access to decision-makers (Çuhadar and Paffenholz 2019). As in track 2, a defining characteristic of CS consultations is its purposeful intention to exert influence over the conflict in general and track 1 actors in particular. As such, the question of transfer is thus critical to this second-generation track 2 as well. Consequently, CS consultations have recently imported the transfer concept as a framework for understanding how these interact with track 1 (Çuhadar and Paffenholz 2019) and

how to effectively transfer the outcomes of these processes to their intended recipients. However, the application of this framework to the context revolving around CS consultations has yet to be fully examined. The subsequent subsections will delve into the traditional understanding of transfer in first-generation track 2 literature. Later, building upon this foundation and considering the particularities of CS consultations, a model will be proposed to address this gap in knowledge and provide insights into the transfer process within this context.

### ***2.1. Models of Transfer in Literature***

Several models have been laid out for the evaluation of upward transfer along with the evolution of track 2 literature by answering the key question of “what” is transferred to “whom” (Jones 2015). Drawing on discussions between participants with antagonistic perceptions in a conflict, in these models transfer initially focuses on *in situ* relationships and individuals (Burton 1969; Kelman 1996; Fisher 1997; Mitchell 1981; Rouhana 2000; Jones 2015). In these spaces, participants explore a common understanding of the conflict, develop a complex image of the other, improve their relationships and levels of trust, and acquire new abilities and learnings (D’Estrée et al. 2001; Çuhadar 2009).

In existing models of transfer for first-generation track 2, generated changes and outcomes are later expected to impact track 1. In early works, transfer was considered a natural, quasi-automatic process under the assumption that the inclusion of influential participants with close ties to governments and other relevant actors in track 1 would irrevocably expose track 1 negotiators to ideas and changes generated in track 2 and draw them into pro-resolution positions (Çuhadar 2009). However, transferring these results to the wider political realms has proven to be a complex process and, as such, literature has delved deeper into the mechanisms of transfer of inputs from track 2 into track 1. Some scholars suggested integrating track 2 spaces into negotiation processes

by emphasizing how exporting cadres of influential people from track 2 to track 1, personal contact and closeness of track 2 participants to decision-makers, or participants serving as advisors to policymakers or negotiation teams could be considered as key mechanisms for facilitating the effective transfer, even if they do not imply an immediate change in the negotiating positions (Kelman 1995; Mitchel 1993; Fisher 1997; Çuhadar 2009; Kelman 1996, Rouhana 2000). In addition, Çuhadar (2009) identified the creation and publication of ideas and policy recommendations for decision-makers' attention. Common targets of transfer in track 2 interventions are leaders, negotiators, and policy or decision-makers in track 1 (Fisher 2020; Çuhadar and Paffenholz 2019). However, since transfer is a multidirectional process that goes beyond the framework of high-level negotiations, media, broader CS, constituencies, or the populace writ large can also become targets of transfer (Çuhadar and Paffenholz 2019).

Existing models of transfer are therefore tailored to objectives in first-generation track 2 interventions. However, even if they share the purpose of impacting political negotiations, the expected functions of second-generation track 2 and, particularly, CS consultations differ from these. These participatory mechanisms aim to make negotiations more effective by sharing local knowledge or expertise, advocating for a political solution, enabling diverse actors into the process, or even gaining support and legitimacy for the process (Paffenholz 2014). These objectives affect the nature of these interventions and, as such, the process of transfer differs in civil society consultations. The following section presents a model for analysing transfer from CS consultations to peace negotiations.

## ***2.2. A Model of Transfer for Civil Society Consultative Mechanisms***

This article contributes to the literature on transfer by proposing a model applicable to transfer from CS consultations building on previous frameworks for transfer evaluation and refined through

emerging patterns in the data collected for the Syrian case (see Figure 1). I first distinguish a *formulation phase* that considers the designing process of outputs in consultations. The selection and nature of participants, the framing and identification of issues, the agenda-setting process, the conditions of interaction, and joint messages, demands, summary reports, proposals, or other sorts of knowledge-based products resulting from these interactions are surveyed in this phase. It is worth noting that this phase draws on previous works on first-generation track 2 initiatives, which examine *in-situ* interactions among participants and the outcomes they produce. A notable example is Fisher's model (2020), which considers participant identity, interaction conditions, individual changes in terms of relational and cognitive changes, and the resulting products or outcomes. However, when applying this framework to second-generation track 2 initiatives, specifically civil society consultations, certain adaptations must be made. Unlike first-generation track 2 initiatives, civil society consultations involve a specific type of participant, namely civil society actors. In these contexts, individual changes in terms of relational dynamics may not be as crucial for upward transfer, as civil society participants do not necessarily have close connections to elite power structures. Nonetheless, the focus remains on the formulation phase, where the emphasis is on the interactions among participants and the creation of knowledge-based products or outcomes. This phase aligns with what other authors might refer to as transfer inward, as it involves the internal dynamics and processes within the civil society consultations.

The selection of participants in CS consultations does not follow the same criteria as in first-generation track 2. In CS consultations, numerous groups, and organizations relevant to the public domain are included (Paffenholz 2014), and participants' connections with track 1 are not necessarily pondered. Besides, participants in consultations can rotate, as in the case of the Syrian CSSR, to reach out to a wider civil society spectrum, hindering the accumulation of knowledge, the continuity of interactions, and trust development among participants. However, participants'

interactions in consultations can still produce cognitive and relational changes along conflict divides and, even if these are not intended objectives in these settings, models of transfer in consultations must not disregard these results as they can be key for transfer in other directions (i.e., sideways, or downwards) and to foster collaborative, trustful environments that move participants to productive dialogues.

The *transmission phase* represents a critical stage in the transfer process, where the focus shifts to how the knowledge and products generated within CS consultations are effectively channelled to their intended targets. In this phase, it is important to examine both the mechanisms and targets of transfer within the framework of CS consultations. Traditional mechanisms of transfer, including personal connections to track-1 actors, the strategic exportation of participants to negotiations, and formal briefings, continue to play a significant role in facilitating knowledge exchange (Jones 2015; Çuhadar 2009; Kelman 1996; Mitchell 1981; Fisher 2020; (Çuhadar and Paffenholz 2019) from CS consultations. These mechanisms have served as established pathways for sharing insights, recommendations, and proposals and remain available in CS consultations. However, the nature of CS consultations, with their focus on advocacy and influencing high-level politics (Paffenholz 2014), introduces an additional dimension to the transfer process. Participants in these consultations often adopt advocacy tactics that go beyond traditional mechanisms of transfer. They leverage alternative fora, examples in the CSSR context are the annual EU-sponsored Brussels Conference for Syria, where CS has the opportunity to directly engage with influential international actors. In these alternative fora, CS participants exercise various advocacy tactics to convey their inputs, influence policies, and promote their agendas. This dynamic interaction enables CS to actively shape the discourse and decision-making processes, ensuring that their perspectives and concerns are heard by the intended targets. By merging advocacy tactics with traditional mechanisms of transfer, CS can bridge the gap between their generated knowledge

and the target recipients. This integration of advocacy tactics within mechanisms of transfer highlights the unique characteristics of the transfer process from CS consultations.

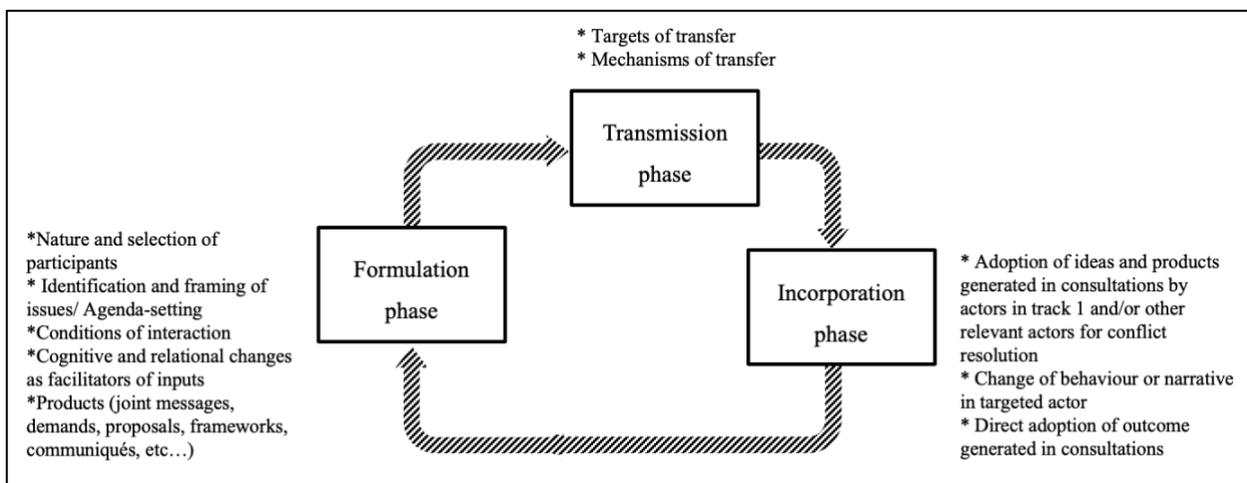
The targets of transfer in CS consultations can evolve and expand over time, presenting new opportunities for engagement and influence. As consultations occur at multiple stages of a conflict, their focus and intended targets may undergo notable transformations. The CSSR exemplifies this dynamic, initially primarily targeting national actors but later broadening its scope to include regional and international actors, non-state entities (ex., the EU), and specialized UN bodies but also pointing to other transfer directions by targeting other civil society organisations. Expanding the intended targets of transfer allows CS to effectively engage with a wider range of influential actors who possess authority and capacity to shape policies and drive the resolution process forward, while adapting to evolving track-1 dynamics.

The *incorporation phase* delves into the intricate process of how products generated in CS consultations are received by track-1 actors. Commonly expected effects of transfer are the adoption of ideas, the direct incorporation of formulated products by track-1 actors, or a change in these actors' political narratives or behaviours. The significance of the effects of transfer and the challenges associated have been subjects of inquiry in previous scholarly work. Scholars such as Kelman (1996), Fisher (1997, 2020), Mitchell (1981) and Jones (2015) have previously explored the effects of transfer in various contexts. More recently, Çuhadar and Paffenholz (2019) shed light on the difficulties encountered in transfer processes within consultative mechanisms. Their research emphasizes that decision-makers within these contexts may possess distinct reasons for resisting the transfer of ideas and products. Building upon these prior investigations, the present study further examines the concrete complexities of the incorporation phase in CS consultations. An actor-based analysis is employed to capture the diverse approaches and responses exhibited by different targets during the incorporation process. While a supportive political will towards

incorporating consultation products facilitates transfer (Çuhadar and Paffenholz 2019), it is crucial to recognize that each track-1 actor holds unique conceptions of civil society, which greatly influence their interactions with consultative mechanisms and ultimately shape their levels of resistance towards the generated products. This nuanced understanding of actor-specific dynamics contributes to a more comprehensive and explanatory examination of the incorporation phase within the broader transfer process.

This model thus proposes three phases for analysing upward transfer from CS consultations. However, mediation processes in protracted conflicts rely on consultations multiple times. Consequently, transfer can feed itself back in every consultation according to changes in conflict dynamics, evolving agendas in peace processes, or reactions of track 1 actors to previous inputs, thereby resulting in the creation of a process within a process. The following sections examine upwards transfer from the Syrian CSSR to track-1 actors using this model of transfer.

Figure 1. Model of Transfer for Civil Society Consultations



Source: Prepared by the author

The primary purpose of this model is to provide a tool for analysing and assessing the effectiveness of transfer from CS consultative mechanisms to track 1. However, the model proves flexible for practitioners involved in similar interventions to guide the design and implementation of CS consultation if adjustments are made. To adapt the model for practical use, a conflict-sensitive analysis must be conducted to ensure its relevance and applicability to the specific context while answering in parallel the definitory question in the transfer process of *what* is transferred to *whom* (Jones 2015). This analysis would involve adjusting several variables throughout the suggested phases before and during the intervention and, as such, customising these phases' design and implementation according to the intended objectives. It should be noted that while this structured model serves the purpose of uncovering variables' interconnections, it is important to acknowledge that reality is inherently complex and messy (De Coning 2018), and connections can be non-linear and highly dynamic despite these attempts to structure them.

The formulation phase requires careful evaluation of several factors as it has significant implications for the configuration of the mechanism. A comprehensive analysis of the pre-existing CS landscape in the conflict-affected society is essential. This analysis encompasses an exploration of the conceptualization of CS within that particular context, its diverse manifestations, the available space for CS emergence and operation, the degree of acceptance by other social and political actors, how CS adapts in the aftermath of conflict and escalating violence, and how societal divisions and conflicting dynamics manifest within CS. These factors play a crucial role in determining the composition of participants in the mechanism, their potential positions on agenda-setting processes, the level of polarization in future discussions, and the framework governing interactions. Furthermore, practitioners should consider building on pre-existing coalitions or alliances within CS to foster constructive dialogues among participants and non-participants in the mechanism while carefully navigating potential security concerns, especially in

high-risked contexts or amid political actors' animosity and striking a balance between confidentiality and the mechanism's need for public buy-in and transparency.

By thoroughly understanding these elements, a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics at play within the CS mechanism can be attained. To address potential polarization, a parallel trust-building process could prove beneficial to foster relational changes, such as mutual recognition among CS actors. This process may not necessarily guarantee complete consensus or alignment on all outcomes, such as recommendations or proposals. However, it can contribute to creating a more constructive and secure environment for CS bargaining processes and establishing connections that facilitate transfer in other directions.

In the transmission phase, practitioners should map the available mechanisms of transfer and their potential effectiveness in conveying the desired outcomes to targeted recipients. Ideally, officially endorsed mechanisms provide easier pathways for transfer, but in the absence of such mechanisms, alternative official and unofficial channels should be considered. Advocacy strategies may also be necessary to facilitate the transmission of outcomes when traditional entry points are unavailable or do not meet security requirements.

The incorporation phase heavily depends on the quality of the mechanisms of transfer and the official endorsement by the parties involved. Practitioners must anticipate potential resistance to transfer and map the underlying rationales for such resistance. Understanding the resistance and its evolution can help identify entry points and develop strategies to overcome it. Additionally, practitioners need to consider the (pre)existing relationship between CS and targeted actors, especially in challenging contexts with fragmented political parties. Building or rebuilding these relationships and persuading stakeholders to consider CS outcomes become critical aspects of the incorporation phase. Indeed, failing to recognize and address resistance from track-1 actors and neglecting to effectively collaborate with CS to develop strategies for overcoming this resistance,

can have long-term consequences. If practitioners do not acknowledge the challenges and barriers faced by CS actors in gaining entry into track-1 processes, it can result in frustration and disillusionment among them. This frustration may intensify over time and eventually backfire the mechanism, particularly when potential entry points into track-1 emerge.

While this model does not address transfer happening in other directions, there is room for future adaptation and expansion to evaluate other directions of transfer and examine how knowledge generated in one context can be utilized in other similar track 2 or inclusion modalities (transfer sideways) or to transfer to the general public (transfer downwards). By considering these possibilities, researchers and practitioners can continue to refine and evolve the model, ensuring its relevance and applicability to a wider array of transfer processes. The central question of “transfer of what to whom” remains pertinent in these directions, and the model’s disaggregation of this question provides a foundation. Future adaptations require a comprehensive understanding of the specific targets and actors involved in these directions. Furthermore, it is important to account for the specific goals and generate potential relevant outcomes in the intended direction, which might involve adapting the formulation phase. In parallel, it is important to identify the appropriate targets in these directions, explore the mechanisms of transfer that better reflect them and examine how generated outcomes can be effectively incorporated by these targets, addressing potential resistance in advance. Understanding how transfer operates in these directions by reflecting on this model also accounts for the transmission of informal or intangible products. For example, cognitive transformations, such as the development of new negotiation skills or the acquisition of technical knowledge in specific domains, as well as attitudinal changes fostered through trust-building processes, can be transferred to other contexts where these same participants are involved.

#### **4. Methodology**

Data for the following analysis was collected through 28 in-depth semi-structured interviews conducted between 2019 and 2022 with CSSR participants based in Europe, the US, Syria, Lebanon, and Turkey, CSSR organizers in the OSE, including the SE Staffan de Mistura and implementing partners (swisspeace and NOREF), and Syrian facilitators appointed for the discussions. Insights from track 1 actors on the CSSR interaction with the political process have also been included as they allowed for a better understanding of the incorporation phase in the transfer process (Table 1). For the sampling of interviewees, I used snowball sampling methods. This number of interviews has produced significant and diverse data that offers a holistic approach to the actors involved in the process of transfer in the CSSR. To identify these interviews, the selection process followed a multi-faceted approach that aimed to capture insights from diverse perspectives within the CS context.

The initial interviews were identified through a combination of strategies. First, I reached out to organizers, including facilitators and implementing partners, who were recommended by the mediator. These key stakeholders played a crucial role in connecting with individuals who were actively involved in the CSSR and provided a valuable foundation for further data collection. Later, organizers facilitated introductions to participants located in the region, specifically in Turkey and other European countries. By leveraging their network and connections, these participants, who had first-hand experience and knowledge of CS dynamics, became instrumental in the data collection process. Through their involvement, I gained access to a more diverse range of insights in the CSSR.

To ensure a larger sample, a non-discriminative snowball sampling approach was employed. This approach allowed for the broadening of participant recruitment through referrals. However, it was also crucial to ensure that participants from various geographical locations, specifically regime-held areas, were included and, as such, a screening process was implemented. This involved carefully assessing each referral to ensure that a balanced representation of perspectives was achieved. This screening process was conducted in a fair and unbiased manner, with the primary goal of achieving a diverse and representative sample. By carefully selecting participants from both opposition-held and regime-held areas, the study sought to provide a holistic understanding of the complexities within the CS landscape and their interactions with the broader conflict dynamics. Finally, interviews with track-1 actors contributed to a comprehensive and robust understanding of the transfer process by ensuring that the analysis considered the perspectives, experiences, and interactions of both CS and track-1 actors in the context of the CSSR.

Given the sample's nature, there is a potential for biases to influence data collection. The CSSR was organized by a specific group of actors with interests, which could have influenced both their own perceptions of the mechanism and those of the participants. For example, the organizers may have been more inclined to overstate the potential of the mechanism in order to promote its legitimacy and support. Similarly, participants who were invited to participate in the mechanism may have had pre-existing biases or interests that could have affected their views on the mechanism. To mitigate these potential biases, I made efforts to recruit a diverse range of participants who had different perspectives and experiences with the mechanism, rather than relying solely on the organizers' networks. Additionally, I used an open-ended interview approach to allow participants to express their views freely and to uncover any unexpected themes or perspectives. Besides, a neutral and non-judgmental stance was maintained to encourage

participants to share their views and experiences without feeling pressured to conform to certain expectations. The researcher employed probing and follow-up questions to gain deeper insights and ensure a comprehensive understanding of the topics discussed. Finally, in the analysis and interpretation of the data, multiple perspectives were considered, and findings were presented in a balanced and objective manner. While it is not possible to completely eliminate all potential biases, these measures helped to ensure that the findings are rooted in the perspectives of a diverse range of participants and are not solely reflective of the interests or biases of the organizers or other specific groups.

Two separate interview protocols were used. The first one, aimed at the participants, included questions on CSSR-generated results and outcomes, cognitive and relational changes experienced by participants in the meetings, and intended directions and implementation of transfer. The organizers' protocol strived to analyse the process design, participant selection, and the effects of transfer on intended targets.

This research has the free and informed consent and collaboration of the interviewees. However, their willingness to freely discuss the CSSR varied among them. While some interviewees were open and forthcoming in sharing their experiences and perspectives, others exhibited varying levels of hesitation or reluctance. This can be attributed to factors such as the sensitivity of the topic, concerns about personal safety or security, potential repercussions for themselves or their organizations, or simply a preference for maintaining a certain level of discretion. During the interviews, efforts were made to create a safe and non-judgmental environment that encouraged participants to express their thoughts and experiences openly. The establishment of rapport and trust between the researcher and the interviewees played a crucial role in fostering open dialogue. Confidentiality and anonymity were also guaranteed to ensure that participants felt comfortable sharing their views without fear of any negative consequences. To

facilitate identification, each interview has been assigned a code indicative of the interview number and date, and the interviewee’s profile. In the analysis and findings, care was taken to respect the privacy and confidentiality of the participants, ensuring that their responses were presented in an aggregated and anonymized manner to maintain their anonymity and protect their identities.

Table 1. Sample selection

<b>Units</b>					
Participants*		Organizers**		Track 1***	
<i>Operational context</i>		<i>Role</i>		<i>Role</i>	
Syria	4	Implementing partners	2	Opposition delegation	2
Europe	9	OSE	2	Constitutional Committee-Opposition	1
US	2	Facilitators	2	Constitutional Committee-Middle Third	1
Region	3				
<i>Total</i>	18		6		4

\*As per their operational contexts/ \*\*As per their role in the CSSR/ \*\*\*As per their role in track 1

Source: Prepared by the author

Most interviews were recorded and had an average duration of 60 mins. Given the geographically dispersed nature of interviewees, interviews were conducted online, employing virtual platforms as a means of data collection. This contributed to overcoming the logistical challenges associated with physical proximity and travel constraints, thereby ensuring the inclusion of a diverse range of participants across various locations. Conducting interviews online offered

flexibility and convenience, allowing for efficient engagement with individuals who may be situated in different regions or have limited accessibility.

Interviews were conducted in English and Arabic. To mitigate the challenge of ensuring that the main research concept, namely transfer, was accurately conveyed across different languages, I took several steps in the data collection. First, I disaggregated the transfer concept into its constituent components, and targeted questions pertaining to each of these elements were posed. This ensured a consistent understanding of the concept among participants, irrespective of the language employed. This approach enabled the identification of any potential variations or misunderstandings in participants' interpretation of the concept and to clarify any issues as they arose. Second, the interview guide was piloted with a small sample of participants to test its clarity and effectiveness in eliciting relevant information related to the key concepts of the study. This facilitated the refinement of the questions and adjustments to the guide as deemed necessary. Third, whenever feasible, interviews were conducted in Arabic with the assistance of an interpreter, ensuring full comprehension of the questions by the interviewees. Lastly, diligent efforts were made to clarify any ambiguities in the questions to ensure participants' complete understanding during the interviews. Although it is challenging to eliminate language and cultural barriers in qualitative research, the adopted approach of concept disaggregation and rigorous data analysis endeavours ensure findings are grounded in a comprehensive understanding of the concept across different languages and cultural perspectives.

Generated data were transcribed verbatim and analysed using thematic coding in search of repetitive patterns using the software program NVIVO (see a thematic table in Appendix A). Themes were selected according to the research focus and theoretical framework, and a set of six steps were followed for producing the analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006). First, I read the data previously transcribed thoroughly. Second, I identified features of the data relevant to the analysis,

generating initial codes. Third, I sorted the different codes into themes according to predominant ideas. Fourth, themes were reviewed to form coherent patterns that helped refine the depicted transfer model. Fifth, I named the themes and finally, produced this analysis. Data collected from interviews were triangulated with 33 documents such as summaries of 2016, 2017, 2019, 2020, 2021, and 2022 meetings and outcomes provided by the CSSR organizational team publicly available on the mechanism's website<sup>5</sup> as well as joint statements, annexes, and internal reports provided by participants. Additionally, a total of 42 documents with references to the CSSR issued by the OSE were reviewed and included in the analysis (see Appendix B).

## **5. The Hybrid Functions of the Civil Society Support Room**

The CSSR embodies a second-generation track 2 that emerges from the fusion of essential elements of track 2 processes and the norm promotion of CS inclusion. After the adoption of Security Council Resolution 2254 (2015), Staffan de Mistura broadly interpreted the participation in the Syrian political process to include CS through the establishment of the CSSR. Since then, this Room has adopted various roles that reflect on its functions, its formats, and the nature and number of its participants. Between 2016-2017, the CSSR developed as a first-generation track 2 (Alzoubi 2017). Even when the CSSR was not formally linked to track 1 via official mechanisms of transfer, meetings would take place exclusively during official intra-Syrian talks under the expectation that it would feed directly into the negotiation process and the parties' delegations.<sup>6</sup> The CSSR started with approximately twenty participants close to the opposition delegation that turned the CSSR into a space where various political issues were negotiated. The outcomes of the CSSR discussions in 2017, as highlighted by Alzoubi (2017), directly informed the ongoing peace negotiations during

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<sup>5</sup> See <https://cssrweb.org> Consulted on 12.06.2022.

<sup>6</sup> Interview organizer #2, 21.08.2020; interview participant #6, 20.04.2021.

the Geneva IV conversations. These outcomes played a significant role in bolstering the political opposition's stance on critical matters, including the principles governing the Constitution.

Participation grew consistently from 2017 onwards as per the OSE's ambition of making the CSSR a diverse, inclusive mechanism. By the end of 2017, approximately three hundred civil society actors had attended the CSSR in Geneva according to a rotational system that allowed some participants to attend several meetings to enable continuity of work while rotating others to make the mechanism more diverse (Hellmüller and Zahar 2018). The CSSR then strengthened itself as a CS consultations mechanism where the SE would meet with a wide number of civil society actors in a range of formats and not exclusively during official intra-Syrian talks. As such, the functions adopted by the CSSR also expanded. First, the mechanism played a key advisory role for the OSE by sharing local knowledge with the mediator as 'these actors possess a wealth of information, understanding, insights, and networks, that are useful for all sorts of things (...) and for track 1, this is the UN understanding better the conflict and the narratives via CS.'<sup>7</sup> Second, the CSSR was also expected to build support for a future political solution and to promote a stronger, long-term CS role in the process. As one organizer stated, 'the political objective of the CSSR is one in which they influence the political process and change the mindsets of member states with influence on the parties to the conflict whereby they can operate in the middle, long term (...) and be ready to play a longer-term role.'<sup>8</sup> Third, the CSSR also acted as a space for advocacy through sessions and meetings with member states, as well as through side events in the subsequent annual Brussels conferences for Syria since 2017.<sup>9</sup> Fourth, the CSSR assumed an unintended role in bridge-building (Hellmüller 2020b). Although initially relationship-building among civil society actors was not an

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<sup>7</sup> Interview organizer #2, 21.08.2020.

<sup>8</sup> Interview organizer #4, 22.07.2021.

<sup>9</sup> Interview organizer #3, 20.05.2021; interview organizer #4, 22.07.2021.

official function of the CSSR, participants grew new relationships along political divides and developed some trust and empathy (Turkmani and Theros 2019). Unlike the CSSR in 2016 and 2017 where a small group of influential people, close to track-1 actors, gathered to explore the background of the conflict and produce proposals, this bridge-building function situates the CSSR closer to a second-generation track-2 composed of representatives that familiarize themselves with different contexts and create an emerging intra-civil society dialogue not strictly dependent on track 1.<sup>10</sup>

Over the past few years, the CSSR has reached a pivotal stage where its objective is to broaden and reinforce its functions. The CSSR launched an online, collaborative platform to enhance intra-Syrian civil society dialogues and develop its bridge-building capacity. Besides, it expects to better capture CS technical capacity through the launching of Thematic Working Groups that allow experts and participants with specific backgrounds to transfer more focused, detailed assessments on certain thematic areas. As explained below, all these functions are relevant to understanding transfer processes in the CSSR. As a mechanism for civil society consultations, the CSSR has produced different knowledge-based artefacts and outputs aligning with its functions of knowledge transfer and advocacy, while as a second-generation track 2, it has led to relational and cognitive changes in participants in a polarized CS that help explain transfer in other directions and the improvement in the conditions of interaction among participants during discussions.

## **6. Results**

### ***6.1. Upward Transfer in the CSSR: Formulation Phase***

#### *6.1.1. Nature and Selection of Participants*

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<sup>10</sup> By the end of 2017, intra-Syrian talks in track 1 stopped and did not resume until 2019. However, the CSSR continued meeting through a variety of formats.

The selection of participants in the CSSR is a critical aspect of the transfer process, as it directly influences the nature of products engendered by CS to contribute to track 1. While OSE holds ultimate responsibility for participant selection, guidance from CSSR implementing partners, swisspeace and NOREF, is considered. The aim is to ensure a diverse range of participants, encompassing various political affiliations, geographic locations, gender representation, and age groups.<sup>1112</sup> This strategic approach recognizes the importance of diversity in generating multiple insights and fostering inclusivity. However, the rotational system employed in participant selection presents a tension between change and sustainability. While it promotes fresh perspectives and prevents stagnation, it also poses challenges in terms of continuity and accumulative value. Each new round of the CSSR generally involves the inclusion of participants with no prior knowledge, necessitating a restart of the process and potentially disrupting ongoing trust-building interactions, and relational changes among participants.<sup>13</sup> These dynamics warrant careful consideration in the pursuit of effective transfer as they impede the smooth flow of ideas, knowledge accumulation, and sustained engagement among CS actors and between these and track-1 actors.

The selection of participants in the CSSR brings forward four salient features that shed light on the dynamics within the formulation phase in the transfer process. Notably, there is a notable emphasis on diversity, yet it is observed that most participants correspond to profiles associated with NGOs.<sup>14</sup> This tendency towards an ‘NGOnization’ of the CSSR participant pool raises

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<sup>11</sup> Interview organizer #3, 20.05.2021; interview organizer #2, 21.08.2020; interview organizer #4, 22.07.2021; interview participant #7, 17.02.2021, interview participant #17, 25.02.2021.

<sup>12</sup> The author recognizes the complexities in defining civil society in conflict settings. However, I use it as an analytical category to include participants who either self-identify as CS or were considered as such by the UN.

<sup>13</sup> Interview participant #9, 09.02.2021; interview participant #10, 16.02.2021; interview participant #11, 14.06.2021; interview organizer #2, 21.08.2020; interview organizer #3, 20.05.2021; interview organizer #5, 03.11.21.

<sup>14</sup> Interview organizer #3, 20.05.2021; interview organizer #2, 21.08.2020.

important questions about the representativeness of the broader spectrum of Syrian CS.<sup>15</sup> The historical context of a repressive political environment has resulted in inherent weaknesses and limited experience within Syrian CS. Moreover, the diverse political geographies in which CS operates have led to varied adaptations and organizational structures. For instance, while CS in Turkey follows a well-defined registration process, the situation is less clear in other areas of influence, such as the Syrian Northwest.<sup>16</sup> Consequently, the absence of a distinct and identifiable structure within CS makes other forms of engagement, such as local leaders, grassroots initiatives, and community-level activists, less visible in the CSSR. This has distinct implications for inclusivity as this curbed representation restricts the translation of ideas, experiences, and perspectives from these less visible actors into generated products and eventually their transmission to track-1 actors.

Second, track-1 actors filtrate into the selection of participants and introduce additional constraints on the diversity and inclusivity in the CSSR based on high-level political dynamics at play. The OSE navigates the process in conformity with the consent of the conflicting parties (Hellmüller 2020b) which translates into a CSSR selection process that meets the exigencies of the parties and their stakeholders concerning CS.<sup>17</sup> This feature of the selection process is easily recognized in the control strategies laid out by the Syrian regime to include participants that could always report back the dynamics of conversations. As a participant pointed out ‘the number of participants [from Damascus] increased as the Syrian government wanted to know what was happening.’<sup>18</sup> The inclusion of CS from the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria

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<sup>15</sup> Interview participant #12, 21.01.2021; interview participant #9, 09.02.2021; interview organizer #5, 03.11.21; interview organizer #3, 20.05.2021; interview organizer #2, 21.08.2020.

<sup>16</sup> Interview organizer #5, 03.11.21.

<sup>17</sup> Interview participant #7, 17.02.2021; interview organizer #3, 20.05.2021; interview organizer #2, 21.08.2020; interview organizer #4, 22.07.2021; interview participant #13, 22.03.2021, interview organizer #5, 03.11.21.

<sup>18</sup> Interview participant #7, 17.02.2021.

(AANES) followed a similar pattern as only recently did organizers meet with CS from the AANES in regional consultations in Iraq. Kurdish lack of direct political representation in track 1 due to Turkish pressures thereby filtered into the CSSR<sup>19</sup> (author XXXX). Consequently, operational restrictions imposed by the political level result in the exclusion of certain participants from the CSSR, limiting the full spectrum of CS representation and, ultimately, restricting product generation.

Third, the selection of participants has recently evolved to better integrate expert profiles and their contributions to the CSSR.<sup>20</sup> Gathering diverse, unrelated CS profiles has created a sentiment among participants that discussions are often too wide, and their expertise and technical were not adequately utilized. As one participant mentioned, ‘the group of invitees was a mix of people who are working on [different issues] and I told them [the OSE team] ‘if you want to discuss education, I have no role to play here because we work on human rights and political issues.’<sup>21</sup> Participants perceive the CSSR as a mechanism for *technical* knowledge transfer, while the OSE perceives it as a politically balanced consultation mechanism to receive and disseminate *general* knowledge (Hellmüller 2020b). To address these divergent interpretations, the CSSR has increased the number of experts present in the Room and has expanded its technical advisory functions through the establishment of thematic working groups (TWG).<sup>22</sup> These TWGs better capture participants’ expertise in specific topics, allowing for a more targeted and in-depth exchange with the OSE. While the selection process remains broad and open to participation, the emphasis now lies on individuals with specific thematic expertise or a particular interest relevant to the Syrian

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<sup>19</sup> Interview organizer #3, 20.05.2021; interview organizer #6, 15.09.2021; interview participant #6, 20.04.2021; interview participant #12, 21.01.2021; interview participant #7, 17.02.2021.

<sup>20</sup> Interview organizer #4, 22.07.2021; interview organizer #2, 21.08.2020.

<sup>21</sup> Interview participant #8, 27.01.2021

<sup>22</sup> Interview organizer #4, 22.07.2021; interview organizer #2, 21.08.2020.

political process (CSSR Consultations 2021). This evolution in the selection of participants reflects a deliberate effort to enhance the transfer of technical knowledge from the CSSR. By involving technical experts, the resulting theme-specific products in the formulation phase carry a higher degree of authority and transfer more specialized knowledge while allowing a more substantive and constructive engagement with the OSE.

Fourth, CSSR formats affect the selection of participants. Geneva consultations adhere to stricter representation patterns, with a smaller number of participants compared to regional consultations. In Geneva, the selection is designed to reflect the main political divides. As one organizer indicated, ‘in Geneva, it is always political, you have to have half based in Syria, half based outside, half men, half women, etc... There are always people who have to be there for political reasons.’<sup>23</sup> Whereas in regional consultations undertaken in Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, Iraq, or inside Syria, organizers gather a larger number of participants from the same operational context and with similar political stances in a less sensitive, fixed context.<sup>24</sup> These distinct selection approaches bring attention to the strategic considerations that emerge when balancing political dynamics with participant representation, ultimately influencing the formulation phase. The level of diversity and polarization among participants becomes pivotal in shaping interactions, negotiations, and the subsequent content and scope reflected upon transferable products generated through this consultation process.

### *6.1.2. Conditions of Interactions*

Features in the selection of participants affect the conditions of interaction within the CSSR. Track 1 filtering into the CSSR affects participants’ ability to express themselves freely and formulate

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<sup>23</sup> Interview organizer #2, 21.08.2020.

<sup>24</sup> Interview organizer #4, 22.07.2021; interview organizer #3, 20.05.2021; interview organizer #2, 21.08.2020.

diverse ideas during meetings. CS delegations coming from Damascus face strict control measures that hinder their contributions to debates.<sup>25</sup> As a participant emphasized ‘I cannot speak freely in the meetings because I would have been detained when I came back. I spoke less of what I wanted, and I did not participate in certain issues to avoid detention. Despite that, Security visited me days upon my arrival.’<sup>26</sup> Participants expressed themselves more freely in interactions undertaken in private, outside the official, in-room dialogues but, as such, these are not captured in the final products.<sup>27</sup> As one participant stated, ‘I had very good meetings with some people from Damascus in private, in corridors, while in the Room we might not even say good morning.’<sup>28</sup>

Concurrently, the diverse operational geographies of participants present in the CSSR formats determine the social cleavages prevailing in discussions. In Geneva, discussions primarily go through the opposition/regime divide. Therefore, these political narratives become prominent in discussions, often contributing to the polarization of ongoing debates.<sup>29</sup> In contrast, regional consultations and focused discussions in small delegations in Geneva provide a platform for delving deeper into a range of social cleavages. Participants operating in different regional hubs, such as Jordan, Turkey, or Lebanon, often share similar political stances, allowing for more nuanced discussions on topics such as religion, ethnic divides, federalism, women empowerment, transitional justice, and public administration, among others.<sup>30</sup> Similarly, focused discussions within small delegations in Geneva follow this pattern. As the discussions become more technically oriented or focus on specific issues, emerging narratives break free from the confines of the

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<sup>25</sup> Interview participant #14, 04.03.2021; interview participant #13, 03.22.2021; interview participant #10, 16.02.2021; interview participant #7, 17.02.2021; interview participant #8, 27.01.2021; interview participant #9, 09.02.2021.

<sup>26</sup> Interview participant #14, 04.03.2021.

<sup>27</sup> Interview participant #10, 16.02.2021; interview participant #8, 27.01.2021; interview participant #9, 09.02.2021.

<sup>28</sup> Interview participant #10, 16.02.2021

<sup>29</sup> Interview participant #8, 27.01.2021; interview organizer #2, 21.08.2020.

<sup>30</sup> Interview organizer #2, 21.08.2020; interview organizer #6, 15.09.2021.

political dichotomy. This had led to a dynamic where participants with initially opposing political stances find themselves sharing viewpoints while differing from those with whom they initially aligned politically.<sup>31</sup> These range of viewpoints and sociopolitical divides brought to the table directly influence emerging frameworks of interactions among participants and ultimately shape the formulation phase.

### *6.1.3. Agenda-setting Process and Outcomes*

Political divisions significantly influence the agenda-setting process, particularly in Geneva consultations. The OSE proposes agenda items primarily aligned with track 1 topics, although CS is given some space to introduce specific issues at the start of meetings (Turkmani and Theros 2019: 21). However, an agenda heavily influenced by high-level political considerations polarizes discussions among participants, limiting their ability to address grassroots concerns and widening the gap between track 1 and local levels.<sup>32</sup> Throughout the process, agenda items have generated two layers of tension among participants.<sup>33</sup> Firstly, a strategic/tactical tension arises, with some CS sectors emphasizing long-term conflict resolution, such as national dialogues or constitution-building, while those from government-controlled areas prioritize short-term conflict management issues like water provisions, aerial routes, or ceasefires. Secondly, a political/apolitical tension emerges, where certain participants prefer less controversial issues such as the role of culture and youth in peacebuilding, framing them in a less politically sensitive manner, while others align their issues with the dominant political narratives. This top-down agenda-setting process reinforces

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<sup>31</sup> Interview participant #6, 20.04.2021; interview organizer #6, 15.09.2021; interview organizer #4, 22.07.2021.

<sup>32</sup> Interview organizer #2, 21.08.2020; interview organizer #5, 03.11.21; interview participant #8, 27.01.2021; interview organizer #3, 20.05.2021

<sup>33</sup> Interview organizer #2, 21.08.2020; interview organizer #3, 20.05.2021.

divisive lines from track 1 in participants' discussions, perpetuating zero-sum dynamics in their conversations.

The products that emerge from the CSSR consultations do not always capture the full range of perspectives expressed during the discussions. These consultations have yielded various outputs, including recommendations, proposals, draft laws, non-papers, and reports.<sup>34</sup> The OSE expects consensus-based results, as they can be more easily incorporated later on (Hellmüller 2020b). However, the diversity among participants intended from previous phases does not always align with this consensus-driven formula, which becomes a bottleneck for incorporating the insights and experiences present in the Room and ultimately erodes the mechanism's advisory role<sup>35</sup>. As noted by one organizer, 'this plays out negatively, especially because participants do not necessarily always structure the discussions in a way that can accommodate these tensions'.<sup>36</sup>

The CSSR aimed to facilitate bridge-building among participants to foster consensus in their messages (Hellmüller 2020b). While interactions did contribute to relational changes and a reduction in mistrust between participants (Theros and Turkmani 2022), their impact on upward transfer of products was limited. Instead, these interactions served as a foundation for transfer in other directions. Through their engagement in CSSR meetings, participants developed empathy for each other, gained a deeper understanding of the *other* and their operational contexts.<sup>37</sup> This rapport facilitated the establishment of networks among participants, leading to collaborative grassroots projects across controlled areas in Syria.<sup>38</sup> For example, an organization from a Kurdish-controlled

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<sup>34</sup> Results were not made available to the public until 2020 when the CSSR website was launched.

<sup>35</sup> Interview participant #8, 27.01.2021; interview participant #14, 04.03.2021; interview organizer #2, 21.08.2020.

<sup>36</sup> Interview organizer #2, 21.08.2020.

<sup>37</sup> Interview participant #17, 25.02.2021; interview participant #7, 17.02.2021; interview participant #6, 20.04.2021; interview participant #12, 21.01.2021; interview participant #18, 02.02.2021; interview organizer #2, 21.08.2020; interview organizer #3, 20.05.2021; interview organizer #6, 15.09.2021.

<sup>38</sup> Interview participant #10, 16.02.2021; interview participant #14, 04.03.2021; interview participant #11, 14.06.2021; interview organizer #3, 20.05.2021.

area in Syria cooperated with another from a regime-held area on a school support initiative in their towns. These relational changes were also observed in other track 2 spaces outside the UN framework, where participants who had engaged in the CSSR were more receptive to dialogue and inclusion, ‘we brought people from different geographies to talk to each other, those who participated in the CSSR were much easier to talk to and to include in such dialogues.’<sup>39</sup> While participants highly valued these unintended effects and consider them one of the main contributions of the CSSR, organizers focused more on the transferable outcomes generated in discussions aimed at track 1 actors, ‘we look more forward to what *we* can get out of writing common messages together [*emphasis added*]’.<sup>40</sup> This raises tension in products embedded in the hybrid functionality of the CSSR, as relational and cognitive changes in participants, are beyond typical CS consultation roles but closer to track 2 spaces’ intended objectives. However, participants are cautious not to conflate the process of building relational bridges and fostering understanding with the expectation of reaching unanimous agreements or consensus-driven outcomes. While the interactions and relational changes within the CSSR contribute to creating an atmosphere of empathy and mutual understanding, participants are aware that these bridge-building functions do not automatically translate into tangible, transferable outcomes.

Simultaneously, participants are also careful not to formulate messages that could trigger a reaction in their constituencies, as one participant stated ‘they [Damascus-based participants] wanted to say things we disagree with, positions that we cannot take and will pose problems with our constituency, so we could not reach an agreement.’<sup>41</sup> Their awareness of potential disagreements and the implications these may have with their constituents leads to a delicate

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<sup>39</sup> Interview organizer #6, 15.09.2021.

<sup>40</sup> Interview organizer #3, 20.05.2021.

<sup>41</sup> Interview participant #8, 27.01.2021.

balancing act during the formulation process. Achieving consensus on the formulation of messages requires the removal of potentially divisive content and the toning down of strong demands.<sup>42</sup> This process is particularly pronounced in the Geneva formats, where participants grapple with the core conflicting issues. An illustrative example can be observed in how the issue of missing and forcibly disappeared persons is portrayed in the final products of the 2016 and 2020 meetings. In 2016, with a majority of opposition-leaning participants, the mentions of this issue included forceful condemnations of the involved parties, particularly the Syrian regime, and references to other interconnected crimes. However, in 2020, the framings shifted to exclude explicit condemnations, and the mentions became less substantial in their content.<sup>43</sup>

This careful navigation of product formulation reflects participants' strategic considerations, taking into account the sensitivities and potential repercussions within their respective constituencies. It underscores the intricate dynamics at play within the formulation phase, where the transfer of outcomes to track 1 necessitates finding common ground while managing the diverse perspectives and concerns of the participating actors.

#### ***6.1.4. A Typology of Knowledge in the CSSR***

While all these factors influence product formulation, the question of what knowledge is being transferred persists. Products capitalize on CS knowledge and, as such, result in various types of CSSR knowledge (Table 3). This knowledge can be categorized based on two dimensions, *knowledge direction*, which considers to whom the knowledge is being directed and the desired

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<sup>42</sup> Interview participant #7, 17.02.2021; interview participant #11, 14.06.2021; interview participant #14, 04.03.2021; interview organizer #3, 20.05.2021.

<sup>43</sup> CSSR Consultation in Geneva. Summary of meeting outcomes, January 20-24, 2020. Available at: <https://cssrweb.org/en/round/geneva-consultations/> Consulted 04.10.2021.

impact it is expected to have, and *knowledge content*, which pertains to the specific subject matter or topic that is being explored or claimed by CSSR participants.

Based on its direction, the knowledge in the CSSR can be categorized as either internally or externally oriented. On one hand, participants have generated multiple products in the form of recommendations, messages, structured proposals, or reports with the main objective of improving the CSSR and, as such, they have directed this knowledge to the CSSR system, in particular its organizers, funders, and the OSE as the primary management agent behind it.

Internally oriented knowledge has covered a range of topics related to the performance of the CSSR that have provided valuable feedback to the mechanism and enabled it to adapt over the years. For instance, this knowledge has informed the adoption of various formats, the expansion of participant networks, and the adaptation of the CSSR functions to better align them with the changing conflict environment. First, products have addressed how the CSSR could better position itself to enhance *knowledge creation*. For example, in the 2020 regional consultations in Amman, participants highlighted the CSSR's capacity to "conduct research studies"<sup>44</sup> on Syrian refugees in Jordan. Second, participants have also produced recommendations on reinforcing *knowledge coordination*. These refer to how to strengthen knowledge flow and interactions among the regional hubs and the other formats the CSSR has adopted, establishing procedures for sharing and exchanging knowledge from previous meetings to subsequent ones and facilitating communication and collaboration among hubs. Third, the CSSR has also produced recommendations on how to boost *knowledge storage* by creating databases, archives, or other repositories, as well as developing systems for cataloguing and retrieving generated products and making them available to all participants. Fourthly, the products have offered advice on various *organizational and*

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<sup>44</sup> CSSR Consultation in Amman. Participants summary report, May 6-11, 2020. Available at: [https://cssrweb.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/CSSR\\_Amman-2020-EN.pdf](https://cssrweb.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/CSSR_Amman-2020-EN.pdf) Consulted 15.04.2023.

*operational aspects*, including the functions that the CSSR should adopt or reinforce, agenda-setting, governing principles, or participant selection criteria.

Alternatively, this article focuses on what CSSR-generated knowledge migrates outside its system with the intended purpose of enhancing the performance of track 1, influencing the conflict environment, and shaping external actors' perceptions by providing insights on the political, legal, humanitarian, economic, and social situations in Syria. Externally oriented knowledge has primarily targeted track-1 activity with a particular focus on key elements such as the Constitutional Committee (CC)<sup>45</sup> or relevant actors (e.g., national parties or state actors). Moreover, it has also been directed towards parallel mechanisms to track 1 in the broader peace process, such as the Women Advisory Board (WAB).<sup>46</sup>

When examining externally oriented knowledge, it is useful to consider two main perspectives whether it relates to the substantive content of negotiations, or the methods and processes used to conduct said negotiations. Content-related knowledge pertains to the underlying conflicting issues, on-the-ground realities, and the specific needs of the affected population that require attention in a political negotiation, including but not limited to, humanitarian, economic, and legal concerns. Such knowledge is characterized by its direct relevance to the substantive aspects of negotiations and the broader conflict environment, as it encompasses the issues that are at the centre of the conflict and that require resolution to achieve sustainable peace. Examples include recommendations related to humanitarian issues such as detainees, forcibly disappeared,

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<sup>45</sup> The CC was launched in 2019 and is the sole political channel available in track 1 today. It consists of a 150-member body comprising 50 representatives each from the Syrian Government and opposition, along with 50 members from civil society, known as the "Middle Third."

<sup>46</sup> The WAB is a 17-member inclusion mechanism established by the OSE in January 2016, to ensure that diverse women's perspectives and a gender equality agenda are considered throughout the political process in line with the WPS Agenda.

and missing people, as well as issues related to ensuring humanitarian access and maintaining a cessation of hostilities.

Process-related knowledge, on the other hand, refers to the procedural framework that underpins negotiations and the principles that guide their conduct, including strategies that a mediator could use to enhance negotiations. This type of knowledge focuses on advocating for certain principles to inspire a negotiation process, such as local ownership, inclusion, transparency, or legitimacy. It also suggests protocols for exchanging information between the CSSR and track-1 negotiators, improving the mechanism of the CC, or providing scenarios for the mediator to better respond to track-1 impasses. By providing insights into the framework that governs negotiations, process-related knowledge aims to enhance the planning and execution of the mediation process.

The typology of knowledge presented in this section provides a framework for broadly understanding the different forms of knowledge generated within the CSSR and their intended impact on the Syrian peace process. Externally oriented knowledge directly resonates with transfer and CS contributions. This knowledge is expected to interact with track-1 actors and, as such, broadly influence conflict resolution in Syria. However, equally important is the effective transmission of this knowledge to key actors involved in the peace process. The following section examines the transmission phase of externally oriented knowledge and explores the mechanisms of transfer available shedding light on the limitations that arise when attempting to transfer such knowledge to inform track 1.

## ***6.2. Upward Transfer in the CSSR: Transmission Phase***

In theory, externally oriented products in the CSSR target four main audiences in track 1 (see Figure 2): (1) the OSE and other UN Agencies, (2) the Syrian opposition-regime delegations, (3) the CC, and (4) countries, international organizations. In its initial design, the CSSR was expected

to particularly impact the delegations, ‘the idea was that CS can talk to the parties as Syrians, from Syrians to Syrians.’<sup>47</sup> Consequently, CSSR meetings took place in parallel to intra-Syrian talks between 2016 and 2018, and outcomes directed the conflicting parties too. However, intra-Syrian talks have proven extremely fragile (author, XXXX), and both the opposition and the regime have resisted civil society participation in the process (Turkmani and Theros 2019), prompting the CSSR to strategically target actors at the regional and international levels with leverage on national and local actors inside Syria. Thus, reports in 2020 and 2021 addressed specifically the OSE, ISSG member states,<sup>48</sup> and the EU through its High Representative.

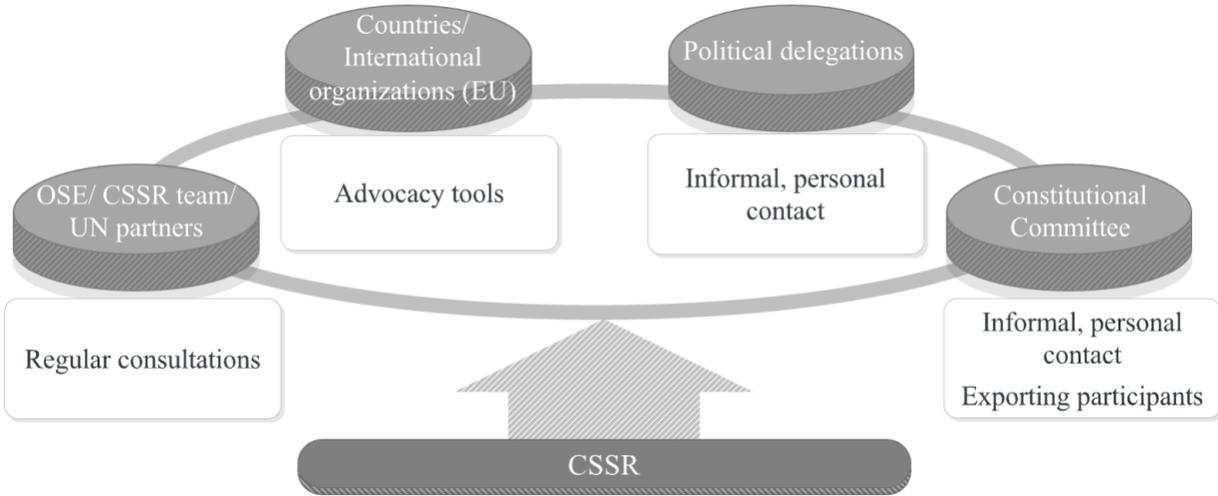
Connections between track 1 and the CSSR have not been carefully outlined and mechanisms of transfer are highly dependent on the quality of contact, communication, and relationship among participants, mediator, and track-1 actors. Through regular consultations, the OSE remains the main audience of the CSSR. Sessions start with an introductory briefing by the SE on the status of the political process. After that, participants host internal discussions, formulate their products, and present them in a final session to the SE and other stakeholders, such as the donors of the CSSR. Under the OSE, outcomes particularly target the CSSR team to feed the constant redefinition process of the CSSR, the role that CS should have in the process and its connections with the CC or the WAB. In-between formal meetings with the SE or high-level meetings with other actors, this team also serves as a link between CS and the OSE, reporting on civil society trends, and conveying messages from CS to the UN.

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<sup>47</sup> Interview organizer #2, 21.08.2020.

<sup>48</sup>The International Syria Support Group encompasses a group of twenty states and international organizations relevant for the international and regional dimensions to the conflict, including Russia, the US, Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Turkey.

Figure 2. Transmission phase. Mechanisms of transfer and targets from the CSSR toward track 1 actors



Source: Prepared by the author

The OSE does not only behave as a target itself but also as a mechanism of transfer. Transfer is a multi-directional process (Çuhadar and Paffenholz 2019, Fisher 2020), and strict boundaries between targets and mechanisms of transfer may blur in these settings. When incorporating CSSR outcomes, the SE indirectly becomes a mechanism for transferring them into the UN internal apparatus through his briefings before the Security Council (SC) or connections with UN agencies.<sup>49</sup> As a mechanism of transfer, the SE focuses on common content in CSSR outcomes, and simplifies civil society messages in order to generally advocate for a political solution in his briefings.<sup>50</sup> As one organizer stated, ‘they have different messages but, overall, they advocate for a political solution to the conflict versus a military one.’<sup>51</sup> In so doing, the SE acts as a filter of

<sup>49</sup> Interview organizer #2, 21.08.2020; interview organizer #3, 20.05.2021.

<sup>50</sup> See <https://undocs.org/S/PV.8036> and <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/united-nations-special-envoy-syria-geir-o-pedersen-briefing-security-1>, consulted 21.10.21.

<sup>51</sup> Interview organizer #3, 20.05.2021.

CSSR products, and his references in briefings are interpreted by participants as scarce and ‘cherry-picked,’<sup>52</sup> as one interviewee said “when the SE reports, he mainly says ‘we brought CS,’ chooses what suits their agenda, and very few demands are actually reflected.”<sup>53</sup>

The SE organizes unmediated, direct meetings between participants, international organizations, and countries’ representatives. In the Brussels Conferences, CS annually addresses their messages to EU High Representative and EU member states, while in recent Geneva consultations, ISSG countries are invited to directly interact with Syrian CS. In these high-level meetings, the CSSR becomes an advocacy space not only for previously formulated, collective products but also for participants’ individual causes. As a result, mechanisms of transfer in these CSSR formats merge with advocacy tactics (Keck and Sikkink 2005). Examples include,<sup>54</sup> first, information politics when Syrian CS shares its context-based knowledge. As an organizer indicated ‘here you have for example individuals and activists from Deir Ezzor talking to the American diplomats on specific issues in Deir Ezzor.’<sup>55</sup> Second, accountability politics through CSSR products when participants collectively push countries for changing their positions and re-commit to a political solution in line with UNSC Resolution 2254.<sup>56</sup> Third, leverage politics as participants, both individually and collectively, pressurize the international community or specific states to influence the humanitarian, political, economic, or social dimensions of the Syrian conflict.<sup>57</sup> Fourth, the Brussels Conferences recurrently spotlight concrete stories, testimonies, and actions

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<sup>52</sup> Interview participant #7, 17.02.2021; interview participant #8, 27.01.2021; interview participant #12, 21.01.2021.

<sup>53</sup> Interview participant #7, 17.02.2021.

<sup>54</sup> To identify advocacy tactics in these settings, I follow the typology developed by Keck and Sikkink (2005).

<sup>55</sup> Interview organizer #2, 21.08.2020

<sup>56</sup> CSSR side event on the margins of the Brussels Conference On supporting the Future of Syria and the Region – Brussels, June 25-30, 2020. Available at <https://cssrweb.org/en/round/virtual-regional-consultations/> Consulted 06.10.2021.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.* Interview organizer #2, 21.08.2020; interview participant #10, 16.02.2021; interview participant #11, 14.06.2021.

carried out by Syrian activists or organizations as powerful symbols to raise awareness and frame issues for an international audience.<sup>58</sup>

As CS, participants have their own connections with countries and donors outside the CSSR framework. Through these individual channels, participants discuss the functionality of the CSSR with countries<sup>59</sup> that both fund the CSSR and particular Syrian organizations, initiatives, or platforms participating in the Room.<sup>60</sup> As one participant mentioned, ‘as donors, the interest of the European countries is natural. I personally had some discussions with Sweden on the feasibility of the Room.’<sup>61</sup> However, the transfer of products in the CSSR is not guaranteed through these channels as these interactions cover the concrete relationship between Syrian organizations and their donors. Other than donors, participants point out that countries’ engagement in the Room has decreased along the process. As one participant stated ‘[countries] started lowering the staff members they sent (...) with time they’ve become used to the room. We started with the Ambassador, then, the Secretary, and later, the intern.’<sup>62</sup>

Transmission from the CSSR to national negotiating delegations relies mainly on participants’ personal and informal connections<sup>63</sup> whereas, with the CC, mechanisms of transfer also include the exportation of participants from the CSSR to the Middle Third.<sup>64</sup> These connections do not necessarily take place during the CSSR meetings and may present themselves

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<sup>58</sup> Brussels V Conference – Supporting the future of Syria and the region. European External Action Service. Available at [https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/93313/node/93313\\_en](https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/93313/node/93313_en) Consulted 07.10.2021

<sup>59</sup> The CSSR is funded jointly through contributions from Switzerland, Norway, Sweden, and Germany through the EU.

<sup>60</sup> Interview participant #10, 16.02.2021; interview participant #8, 27.01.2021.

<sup>61</sup> Interview participant #8, 27.01.2021.

<sup>62</sup> Interview participant #10, 16.02.2021.

<sup>63</sup> Interview opposition #2, 08.07.2022; interview opposition #1, 04.07.2022.

<sup>64</sup> Interview participant #10, 16.02.2021; interview participant #8, 27.01.2021; interview participant #7, 17.02.2021; interview participant #11, 14.06.2021; interview participant #12, 21.01.2021; interview participant #13, 03.22.2021; interview participant #20, 19.01.2021.

later on, as a participant noticed ‘the ones [CS] in the opposition were in close contact with the oppositions in Turkey. It is a close circle, everyone knows everyone.’<sup>65</sup> These unofficial interactions as mechanisms of transfer are particularly dependent on participants themselves since their perceptions and willingness will determine the extent to which generated products are finally transferred from the CSSR to track 1 actors. As a participant pointed out, ‘if this person has goodwill, it will impact positively, but if that person is communicating to get an advantage, it will not.’<sup>66</sup> This also makes transfer highly dependent on participants’ security restraints and particular contexts. For CS attending from Damascus, the government’s internal apparatus pursues a control strategy over them in a way that they lack a free space of communication to transfer generated products and affect their political environment in pro-resolution terms.

Factors explaining the absence of stronger mechanisms of transfer lie both in the fragility of track 1 and in the parties’ resistance. The SE faces constant constraints when building mechanisms of transfer with track 1 as these easily trigger suspicion and prompt hard reactions in the negotiating delegations.<sup>67</sup> An organizer puts it in these terms, ‘when it comes to the delegations’ sensitivities with the CSSR, they are not comfortable, and that is why the OSE does not want to enforce a formal relationship, so as to not shake things up.’<sup>68</sup> The political parties’ resistance is rooted in how they perceive the mechanism.<sup>69</sup> The Syrian opposition perceives the mechanisms as alien to negotiations and distrusts the CSSR because of its participant selection. While the inclusion of participants from regime-controlled areas is part of the OSE’s quest for diversity and navigation

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<sup>65</sup> Interview participant #7, 17.02.2021

<sup>66</sup> Interview participant #9, 09.02.2021.

<sup>67</sup> Interview organizer #3, 20.05.2021; interview organizer #2, 21.08.2020; interview participant #10, 16.02.2021; interview organizer #4, 22.07.2021.

<sup>68</sup> Interview organizer #3, 20.05.2021.

<sup>69</sup> Interview Constitutional Committee/Opposition #1, 06.07.2022; interview opposition #1, 04.07.2022; interview opposition #2, 08.07.2022.

of track 1 actors' exigencies, it has also prevented a closer interaction with the opposition delegation which perceives the mechanism as exclusively useful for the mediator. As a member stated 'there is no official connection because of the nature of the CSSR. It includes civil society from all political leanings, and this is something the SE started for himself.'<sup>70</sup> As such, the Syrian opposition does not perceive the benefits of a stronger, official mechanism of transfer with the CSSR.

In addition, some participants also refrain from advocating for a stronger connection between the CSSR and track 1 as these could easily expose them or affect their legitimacy.<sup>71</sup> As one participant stated, 'I do not want to be associated with any political party or political talks because that could affect my reputation.'<sup>72</sup> In essence, participants interpret differently the potential connections that the CSSR should have with other mechanisms within the process and, as such, they move from supporting clearly defined connections with track 1 to limiting these interactions and letting the SE act as the main conveyer belt.

### **6.2.1. A Typology of Mechanisms of Transfer in the CSSR**

Effective mechanisms of transfer are essential for ensuring that externally oriented knowledge is delivered to their intended targets and maximizing their impact (Jones 2015). The CSSR has developed various mechanisms of transfer, which can be categorised based on the *method* employed and the *timeframe* for delivery. First, exporting participants from the CSSR to track 1 and relying on informal connections between the CSSR and the political parties, particularly the Syrian political opposition, can be classified as *person-based strategies for transfer*. These come

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<sup>70</sup> Interview Constitutional Committee/Opposition #1, 06.07.2022.

<sup>71</sup> Interview organizer #4, 22.07.2021; interview participant #8, 27.01.2021; interview participant #21, 10.07.2022; interview Constitutional Committee/Opposition #1, 06.07.2022.

<sup>72</sup> Interview participant #21, 10.07.2022.

into play after knowledge has been generated within the CSSR and refer to mechanisms through which knowledge is transferred from one person to another without relying on a designated space or formal platform for this transfer to occur. These individuals act as carriers of knowledge and serve as conduits for transferring the CSSR products and to track-1 actors.

The unofficial nature of these mechanisms implies a lower degree of traceability, making the extent to which knowledge is effectively conveyed dependent on the participant's interpretation of the content, level of alignment with the message, willingness to transfer, and personal networks with the political parties. For example, a track-1 opposition member pointed out, "There is not an official, direct connection [between the CSSR and track 1], (...) but we will be talking in an informal way. There are lots of informal talks that are very beneficial like let's say we meet the night before [official talks] to talk, for example, about transitional justice, it is informal, (...) they give an added value to the conversations."<sup>73</sup>

Indeed, informal connections as person-based mechanisms of transfer rely on a trust element that has been noted to contribute to transfer effectiveness (Jones 2015). Nonetheless, this element operates differently in the two national delegations in the Syrian peace process. Informal connections between participants and the opposition side are characterized by the dilution of power dynamics and a certain level of bias. The opposition does not hold a strong grip on CS, which means that security concerns are less pressing, and interactions take place in a more open and dialogical environment, "at least it is a more independent relationship, no affiliation of any kind."<sup>74</sup> However, it is important to note that the indirect and trust-based nature of this mechanism of transfer carries a bias that affects what externally oriented knowledge is prioritized. Given that the political opposition predominantly engages with participants who align with their own

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<sup>73</sup> Interview opposition #2, 08.07.2022.

<sup>74</sup> Interview participant #8, 27.01.2021.

perspectives, the flow of knowledge becomes skewed and fails to encompass the full spectrum of views and interests present in the CSSR-generated knowledge.<sup>75</sup> Besides, the extent to which knowledge is exchanged and effectively conveyed through person-based mechanisms is contingent upon the nature of participants' connections and the quality of relationships that preexist or unfold between opposition-leaning participants and the political opposition. A participant pointed out, "The opposition, I know them all personally, I know some people that are good in some sense, some others are just hypocrites, and it is just publicity, my views towards them have not changed, I know people who are actually nice and are trying to do something, and I meet them if we come to Geneva."<sup>76</sup>

The fragmented nature of the Syrian opposition (Lund 2012) further complicates this mechanism of transfer, "they have stronger relationships with civil society organizations than the regime does, but still, they have a structural problem as a negotiating delegation. This inability to develop this relationship and take it to a higher level is partly due to the inefficiency within the fragmented opposition structure."<sup>77</sup> The level of engagement and interaction differs between different opposition factions and individuals, and this fragmentation has limited the availability and effectiveness of personal connections as person-based mechanisms of transfer, resulting in uneven and inconsistent knowledge transfer. In some cases, certain CS actors have stronger relationships with specific factions or individuals, while others face difficulties or avoid establishing such connections. A participant stated, "I think we need to consider that we are not speaking about one united political party or coalition representing all opposition. We are speaking about an umbrella that includes groups, individuals from different backgrounds who have common

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<sup>75</sup> Interview participant #13, 22.03.2021; interview participant #8, 27.01.2021; interview participant, #7, 17.02.2021.

<sup>76</sup> Interview participant, #7, 17.02.2021.

<sup>77</sup> Interview participant #8, 27.01.2021.

objectives and a shared opposition to the regime (...) Of course, some civil society activists like some people in the opposition, hate others, or advise others.”<sup>78</sup>

In parallel, person-based mechanisms with the regime are hampered by a restrictive security environment in which trust is lacking. The regime’s structure and control over the knowledge flow impact the effectiveness of these mechanisms for potentially influencing decision-making processes and negotiation outcomes. Government-imposed censorship, pervasive surveillance, and stringent communication restrictions not only impede the generation of knowledge, as discussed earlier but also severely limit the scope for the free dissemination of externally oriented knowledge originating from the CSSR. As the Syrian regime deploys this tight control strategy upon participants, direct interactions and knowledge exchange are limited, tightly controlled, and are primarily directed towards acquiring information that is pertinent to the regime’s own survival and repressive maintenance of power.

Second, another category present in the CSSR has been *space-based mechanisms of transfer*. These involve the exchange of externally oriented knowledge by relying on the officially established intermediary spaces that unfold between CSSR participants and the intended targets of the transfer. Formal consultations and briefings conducted between participants and the intended recipient, for example, the OSE or international stakeholders, such as the ISSG, have acted as space-based mechanisms. These are simultaneous when knowledge is being generated and transferred at the same time, through direct interactions between these actors, allowing for rapid dissemination. An example of a simultaneous mechanism is when the OSE engages in direct, multidirectional group discussions with the CSSR participants and, as such, becomes part of it. On the other hand, sequential mechanisms of transfer are employed when participants engage in

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<sup>78</sup> Interview participant #8, 27.01.2021.

separate discussions and deliberations to develop a final product, which is then presented to the OSE. In this context, the transfer occurs in a specific order or sequence, building upon the knowledge and input gathered from the individual consultations. Participants first engage in their respective discussions, exploring ideas, perspectives, and potential solutions. They then consolidate their findings and develop a comprehensive final product that represents their collective input. This final product is subsequently presented to the OSE, allowing for a more structured transfer of knowledge. The sequential nature of this mechanism ensures a cohesive outcome that can be effectively communicated to the OSE for further consideration.

In addition to consultations and briefings, advocacy spaces can also serve as space-based mechanisms for knowledge transfer. When CSSR participants employ the official annual Brussels Conference for Syria, they employ various advocacy tactics to effectively communicate CSSR products to international stakeholders as these advocacy spaces create opportunities for sharing knowledge, generating awareness, and influencing decision-making processes. Simultaneous and sequential transfer modes are observed in these advocacy spaces too. When CS participants individually interact with international stakeholders, externally oriented knowledge is transferred in a simultaneous manner, allowing for immediate dissemination, while when it involves collectively generated CSSR outcomes, the transfer tends to be sequential, building upon previous discussions and developing a more structured transfer process.

Finally, deliverable-based transfer mechanisms involve creating and disseminating tangible products or outputs that contain CSSR-generated knowledge. This category relies on developing and disseminating specific deliverables that can take various forms, such as written reports, providing detailed information and analysis on a particular topic, proposals, recommendations, or any other form of documentation. For instance, in the context of the CSSR, papers were distributed containing the outcomes of previous meetings, including joint messages and preliminary draft

ideas. These sequential mechanisms involve a structured transfer process, where the information builds upon previous discussions and analysis, and have shown their efficacy in facilitating transfer in other directions while playing a significant role in facilitating transparency. Indeed, these tangible products have the potential to be shared and utilized by various actors, enabling the transfer of knowledge beyond the immediate participants. If provided access, they can be utilized by non-participants as well as future organizations and individuals involved in the CSSR.

### **6.3. Upward Transfer in the CSSR: Incorporation Phase**

The absence of official, well-defined mechanisms of transfer determines the non-systematic reception of CSSR outcomes in negotiations and, as such, each track 1 actor incorporates differently these products. First, the *national delegations* interact asymmetrically with the CSSR and, by extension, with the Syrian CS. On the one hand, the dyadic opposition-CS is characterized by a bidirectional interaction in which some sectors of the opposition in Geneva are more open to CS and strategically benefit from the knowledge produced to enhance their arguments.<sup>79</sup> Syrian CS has developed the capacity to produce relevant technical knowledge on a wide array of subjects which is later incorporated by the opposition through previously identified mechanisms of transfer. As a participant stated ‘the opposition needed the civil society, at least, to give them some information and expertise that they do not have. For example, when there is a meeting on houses, land, and properties, politicians from the High Negotiation Committee, Etilaf, etc. go back to civil society, asking “what should we do?”’<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Interview organizer #6, 15.09.2021; interview participant #7, 17.02.2021; interview participant #8, 27.01.2021; interview participant #20, 19.01.2021; interview Constitutional Committee/Opposition #1, 06.07.2022; interview Constitutional Committee/ Middle Third #2, 22.06.2022; interview opposition #1, 04.07.2022.

<sup>80</sup> Interview participant #7, 17.02.2021.

This incorporation is strategic as it has been used by politicians in the opposition to find new arguments and reinforce their positions in negotiations. As a participant mentioned, ‘the opposition came to us asking “how many detainees do we have in prison now? We need a complete list of names for our discussions,” but we are not working for them, they get us wrong.’<sup>81</sup> Consequently, civil society organizations are cautious not to equate this strategic incorporation with influence on the opposition. The reason is that even if participants share CSSR outcomes and offer recommendations based on the knowledge they produce, this does not necessarily mean that the opposition is willing to follow them nor change their behaviours or positions in negotiations accordingly.<sup>82</sup> Admittedly, some members of the Syrian opposition in track 1 recognize how this engagement with CS provides them with specific knowledge that they later decide how to strategically incorporate into their positions, ‘we ask for papers and surveys relating to the political process, we ask them as well to survey people on what they think should be in the constitution, or what they think governance should look like in Syria in the future. This might not set how we direct our work, but at least we have in the back what people might want to see in the political process.’<sup>83</sup>

However, the dyadic opposition-CS has also been characterised by a sense of competition. When De Mistura initially invited CS, the opposition reacted against this inclusion as they considered it as a replacement in case the delegation failed to be a credible interlocutor. Even if some opposition members were initially activists and the Syrian CS has partly shared common objectives with the opposition, the resulting climate of mistrust and rivalry flawed this interaction and prevented the development of a robust, sustained relationship.<sup>84</sup> Consequently, some sectors

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<sup>81</sup> Interview participant #20, 19.01.2021.

<sup>82</sup> Interview participant #8, 27.01.2021; interview participant #7, 17.02.2021; interview participant #20, 19.01.2021; interview participant #13, 03.22.2021.

<sup>83</sup> Interview Constitutional Committee/Opposition #1, 06.07.2022.

<sup>84</sup> Interview organizer #2, 21.08.2020; interview organizer #4, 22.07.2021; interview participant #6, 20.04.2021; interview participant #8, 27.01.2021; interview participant #11, 14.06.2021.

of the opposition have deemed civil society inclusion as an undermining factor and disregard CSSR outcomes in the political process.

On the other hand, the dyadic regime-CS is defined by unidirectional interactions that intend to control participants in the CSSR,<sup>85</sup> as an organizer explained, ‘when they go back to Syria, they need to report, so they try to instil fear (...) the Government is just trying to make sure that participants are not saying anything against them in the meetings.’<sup>86</sup> The regime holds a narrow conception of CS in which CSSR participants are utilized to disseminate the regime’s narrative. An organizer recounted, ‘the central government used them as a bio-box to send messages through them.’<sup>87</sup> As a result of this unidirectional, narrow conception, the Syrian regime exploits the CSSR to legitimize itself in the international arena and rejects the incorporation of CSSR outcomes as they tend to contravene its power position and narrative.

Second, the CSSR laid the foundations for the participation of CS in track 1 through the so-called *Civil Society Middle Third* in the CC. As the first concrete political agreement between the regime and the opposition, the Terms of Reference and Core Rules of Procedure, issued in September 2019 to guide the work of the CC, include for the first time 50 civil society representatives in the structure of the CC (United Nations, 2019). In so doing, this agreement endows CS with a position in the drafting of a constitution for Syria. As one participant explained, ‘this is the first time that there is this type of engagement of CS, it is almost legally fixed that we are part of the solution.’<sup>88</sup> The Middle Third represents a by-product incorporated into track 1 that occurred because the CSSR advocated for it. Not only does the Middle Third include former CSSR

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<sup>85</sup> Interview organizer #2, 21.08.2020; interview organizer #3, 20.05.2021; interview organizer #4 22.07.2021; interview organizer #6, 15.09.2021; interview participant #18, 02.02.2021; interview participant #6, 20.04.2021.

<sup>86</sup> Interview organizer #3, 20.05.2021.

<sup>87</sup> Interview organizer #5, 03.11.21.

<sup>88</sup> Interview participant #10, 16.02.2021.

participants but the whole idea of forming a third bloc inclusive of CS in the CC originated in the CSSR.<sup>89</sup> As a participant indicated, ‘if we had not had the CSSR, it would have been very difficult to convince the SE or the other members to have a delegation of CS in the CC.’<sup>90</sup> As such, the CSSR has smoothed the path towards CS being accepted by the political parties, particularly the opposition, in today’s track 1 within the CC. This is exemplified in the internal negotiations taking place between the Syrian opposition bloc in the CC and the Middle Third, where the interactions and coordination between these two groups demonstrate a partial sense of equality and partnership, rather than hierarchical subordination. A member of the Syrian opposition bloc mentioned, ‘we do not tell them what to say, or how to say it. We feel we are at the same level within the CC (...) and we coordinate a lot of times. For example, if we are going to talk about the [constitutional] principles, we will have discussions between us (...) and have a complementary approach (...) it is about coordination, not subordination.’<sup>91</sup>

However, the absence of official, systematic mechanisms of transfer between the CSSR and the Middle Third and the polarization of the CC preclude the stronger incorporation of CSSR outcomes into track 1. Even if the Middle Third comprises CS, the selection of most members followed a political balance between the opposition and the regime that hinders the internal cohesion and the self-organization of the Middle Third as a bloc.<sup>92</sup> Besides, any progress by the CC ultimately depends on the agreement between the opposition and the regime blocs and, as such, the SE cautiously navigates the work of the Middle Third not to upset the other two. As an organizer stated, ‘the co-chairs [both the regime and opposition’s] have to agree on everything, so if one of

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<sup>89</sup> Interview organizer #2, 21.08.2020; interview organizer #6, 15.09.2021; interview organizer #4 22.07.2021; interview participant #10, 16.02.2021; interview participant #11, 14.06.2021.

<sup>90</sup> Interview participant #11, 14.06.2021.

<sup>91</sup> Interview Constitutional Committee/Opposition #1, 06.07.2022.

<sup>92</sup> Interview participant #10, 16.02.2021; interview participant #6, 20.04.2021; interview participant #17, 25.02.2021; interview organizer #4 22.07.2021; interview organizer #5, 03.11.21.

them says “no, we cannot work with the Middle Third like this,” then it just does not happen.”<sup>93</sup>

This power structure hampers upward transfer as it reduces the capacity of the Middle Third to establish stronger linkages with the CSSR that could contribute to incorporating systematically its products and broadens the political parties’ margin to finally determine to what extent CSSR outcomes are accommodated in the work of the CC.

Third, CSSR products are prominently incorporated by the *SE* and his team. At the political level, participants highlight the capacity of the CSSR to shape the mediator’s narrative as the *SE* uses these products to better inform his speeches and briefings before the Security Council or the General Assembly.<sup>94</sup> Organizers also emphasize how the CSSR provides elements that contribute to defining the mediation strategy. For example, the *SE* indicated in his briefing before the SC in June 2021 how the common messages brought forth by the CSSR shape ‘his own thinking’ (United Nations, 2021). At the humanitarian level, CSSR outcomes have frequently been used in emergencies and early warnings, as participants have provided critical information that facilitated the work of humanitarian agencies in issues such as cross-border operations, delivery of humanitarian assistance, or protection before imminent dangers and threats of the use of military force.<sup>95</sup>

Yet, participants have adopted a realistic approach to the incorporation of CSSR outcomes by the *SE*. After their participation, interviewees mentioned that even if the *SE* incorporates these outcomes, this has not yielded the expected results as the mediator does not want to jeopardize negotiations and his margins for incorporating CSSR products are ultimately subjected to the

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<sup>93</sup> Interview organizer #3, 20.05.2021.

<sup>94</sup> Interview organizer #2, 21.08.2020; interview organizer #3, 20.05.2021; interview organizer #4 22.07.2021; interview participant #18, 02.02.2021; interview participant #6, 20.04.2021; interview participant #7, 17.02.2021; interview participant #12, 21.01.2021; interview participant #8, 27.01.2021; interview participant #13, 03.22.2021.

<sup>95</sup> Interview organizer #2, 21.08.2020; interview organizer #3, 20.05.2021; interview participant #18, 02.02.2021.

parties and the states involved in the conflict. As a participant stated, ‘the SE moves within the boundaries established by international actors (...) this is not about convincing Pedersen about certain points, but about enabling him to push for an agenda.’<sup>96</sup>

Participants call for their outcomes to be implemented in the short term, but after attending the meetings they revise their expectations about the potentialities of the CSSR. A participant recounted, ‘it has changed narratives, words, but not the whole picture. Our recommendations should not be touchable by the political parties.’<sup>97</sup> Meanwhile, the OSE expects the CSSR to play a long-term role in the process and considers small-scale milestones, such as direct engagements between the CS and the states, as successes in the CSSR process.<sup>98</sup> Consequently, both organizers and participants have different tempos for evaluating the capacities of the CSSR within the whole political process which generates frustration in civil society and hinders their confidence in the negotiations in the long term.

Finally, the incorporation of CSSR products by *countries* is asymmetrical. Generally, participants highlight relevant issues to states’ representatives which do not translate into major shifts in their views to the conflict. However, the EU, countries in the European sphere, and the US have a broader, cooperative notion of CS that is reflected in their relationships with the CSSR. As a participant mentioned, ‘governments like Germany, France, etc.... some of them are donors, believe in CS and take recommendations more seriously.’<sup>99</sup> These countries establish donor-recipient relationships within and outside the CSSR by which Syrian CS affects public designs, decisions, or narratives.<sup>100</sup> Yet, these countries/donors consider Syrian CS as tools on the ground

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<sup>96</sup> Interview participant #8, 27.01.2021.

<sup>97</sup> Interview participant #12, 21.01.2021.

<sup>98</sup> Interview organizer #2, 21.08.2020; interview organizer #3, 20.05.2021; interview organizer #1, 08.02.2020.

<sup>99</sup> Interview participant #12, 21.01.2021.

<sup>100</sup> Interview participant #11, 14.06.2021; interview participant #14, 04.03.2021.

and, as such, they influence organizations by imposing certain requirements and changes to their strategic plans or targets.<sup>101</sup> A organizer puts it in these terms, ‘the EU has no forces in Syria and, as such, does not have any influence, the only ones who have influence are civil society. So, there is a value-based approach but there is also this practical approach.’<sup>102</sup>

On the other hand, states outside this sphere, such as Russia or Iran, reflect their own limited approaches to CS when dealing with the CSSR. Interactions are limited to the CSSR framework and, even if these countries are exposed to the Syrian civil society’s narrative, there is no incorporation of CSSR products. As an organizer explained, ‘you could be Russia, Turkey, Iran, etc... and you could listen to civil society, and I am not sure if their perceptions changed, but it does highlight some important needs of Syrian civil society in areas where they might not know.’<sup>103</sup>

## **7. Conclusions**

This article introduces a three-phase model for evaluating contributions from civil society consultations to track 1 negotiations by drawing on the example of the CSSR in the UN-led mediation process for Syria. Under this model, a process-oriented approach of the concept of transfer is adopted to analyse how the Syrian civil society track has contributed to the political process. I first distinguish a formulation phase that considers the nature and selection of participants, the conditions of interaction, the process of agenda-setting, and the products generated targeting track 1 actors. The CSSR is characterised by a quest for diversity in the selection of participants and knowledge-based products are expected to feed the political process. However, four features undermine this diversity: an identification problem that prioritizes NGOs and ignores

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<sup>101</sup> Interview participant #17, 25.02.2021; interview participant #10, 16.02.2021; interview #9, 09.02.2021.

<sup>102</sup> Interview organizer #6, 15.09.2021.

<sup>103</sup> Interview organizer #3, 20.05.2021.

other loosely structured initiatives and other traditional actors, a track 1 filtration into the selection of participants, a lack of ability to accommodate expert profiles in the CSSR process, and the various formats in which the CSSR takes place.

Findings show how conditions of interaction and the agenda-setting process prevent an accurate, unrestrained generation of CSSR outcomes. Firstly, participants, particularly those based within Syria, face strict control measures that constrain their ability to express themselves freely in discussions. Secondly, donors' demands lead participants to bend their narratives accordingly. Thirdly, the agenda-setting process in certain CSSR formats translates political divides from track 1 into the Syrian civil society, polarising civil society discussions along conflicting lines and preventing an agenda based on participants' aspirations. Fourthly, the OSE expects final products to be consensus-based which forces participants to lose potentially divisive content to reach an agreement.

The transmission phase scrutinises existing mechanisms for transferring CSSR outcomes to track 1. The article presents how the absence of systematic, official mechanisms of transfer determines that upward transfer is highly dependent on participants' willingness and room for manoeuvre. Regular consultations with the OSE and direct advocacy engagements with countries are the most sophisticated mechanisms of transfer available in the CSSR, however, transfer to national delegations or the CC rests on participants' personal connections. Therefore, generated outcomes have limited means of filtering into the political process.

The incorporation phase follows an actor-based analysis to highlight how products are received by track 1. Findings suggest that pre-existing conceptions of civil society held by actors and their pre-established relationships with Syrian civil society determine the extent to which CSSR outcomes are incorporated. While the OSE and certain countries have a broader, open conception of civil society that makes them amenable to CSSR outcomes in principle, national

delegations resist stronger incorporation as civil society is considered a threat to power positions. Regarding the Constitutional Committee, even if the current polarisation of the mechanism and the absence of systematic mechanisms of transfer precluded stronger incorporation, the CSSR has laid the foundations for the establishment of a civil society bloc in the Constitutional Committee and for political parties to recognize civil society as a party within the current track 1. Results reported in this study suggest that effective incorporation requires a transfer design that considers the targets' (pre)conceptions of civil society and how these could be altered by virtue of these interactions.

The article shows how contributions from civil society consultations are framed within a process affected by how these mechanisms are designed and participants' conditions of interaction, whereas the incorporation of outcomes will not only be dependent on the quality of the connections and interactions between these modalities and track 1 but also political actors' preconceived ideas of the role of civil society in conflict resolution and pre-existing relationships with these actors. This article thus represents a step forward in showing that it is possible to systematically evaluate civil society contributions to negotiations by using the concept of transfer. It thereby bridges two strands of literature and, as such, presents the first study that uses transfer to examine civil society consultations. Given that civil society inclusion aims at increasing the legitimacy of a peace process, it is essential to understand how civil society generates knowledge-based products to feed a political process and the conditions that render more effective interactions between these inclusion modalities and track 1.

Finally, it is worth noting that the connection between transfer and civil society inclusion is complex and multifaceted, as exemplified by the CSSR. On one side, transfer can be seen as a mechanism to enhance civil society's inclusion within traditional, elite-level peacemaking by effectively incorporating their generated products into negotiations. However, it is essential to

acknowledge that, while transfer provides opportunities for civil society to contribute their ideas, concerns, and recommendations, the extent to which that knowledge is genuinely absorbed and influences decision-making within elite-level peacemaking is not guaranteed. Therefore, promises of transfer should not overshadow the persistent exclusion of civil society from peace processes. Besides, attempts at transfer can inadvertently discourage civil society actors. If civil society ideas and inputs are consistently disregarded or if there is a lack of meaningful engagement with the transferred knowledge, civil society actors may become disheartened and perceive their efforts as tokenistic gestures rather than substantive inclusion. The CSSR serves as a compelling illustration of participants' growing disillusionment with the Syrian peace process and the CSSR's limited ability to effectuate transfer, largely due to persistent resistance from track-1 actors.

Moreover, an increasing focus on transfer upward, i.e. towards track-1 actors, can potentially create a hierarchy within the peacemaking process, undermining the value and contributions of civil society peacebuilding. If transfer is solely oriented towards elevating civil society ideas into elite-level discussions without adequately recognizing and valuing the unique contributions and expertise of civil society actors in their own right, it can perpetuate an imbalanced power dynamic and undervalue civil society-led peacebuilding efforts. In fact, the CSSR is inherently linked to a stalled track-1 peace process whose challenges are manifold. This focus on track 1 limits the CSSR's potential. This mechanism has demonstrated adaptability by focusing on its own process, harnessing downward transfer through a network of civil society actors inside Syria, the region, and beyond. As such, to facilitate a more powerful inclusion mechanism amid an intractable context, it might be advisable to reinforce products that facilitate sideways or downward transfer, especially when track-1 actors fail to engage with civil society products. This approach does not disregard upward transfer but aims to dilute the hierarchy between tracks, downplaying the overemphasis on track 1.

By adapting the mechanism to unfavourable track-1 conditions, the CSSR can promote transfer to other avenues, strengthen civil society connections laterally, and enhance legitimacy among grassroots actors. This strategic approach acknowledges that a blocked track 1 should not impede the functioning of the mechanism. Coordinated efforts at these other levels and promoting the CSSR's internal process, along with fostering connections within civil society, garner a greater appreciation for these other products and, as such, might help alleviate participants' frustration with the mechanism, ensuring a more constructive and inclusive environment.

Generally, while transfer can offer opportunities for civil society inclusion and knowledge dissemination, it is crucial to ensure that it is not a substitute for genuine and meaningful engagement of civil society in decision-making processes. Effective inclusion requires not only the transfer of ideas but also the recognition and presence of civil society within the broader peacemaking landscape.

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