

EU PEACE CAPACITIES: AN ANALYSIS OF EU'S INTEGRATION OF THE YOUTH, PEACE, AND SECURITY AGENDA

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Abstract

This contribution examines the integration of the Youth, Peace, and Security (YPS) Agenda within the European Union (EU). This integration has evolved from initial recognition to a stronger implementation phase. Key milestones include the Young Med Voices Plus Initiative and the recent Youth Action Plan for 2022-2027. However, challenges remain. These include inconsistent support and the need for more specific strategies for youth in conflict settings. Recent developments such as the inclusion of the YPS agenda in EU Peace Mediation Guidelines signal progress towards a more systematic integration.

1 | Introduction

In recent years, the European Union (EU) has taken significant strides in committing itself to the Youth, Peace, and Security (YPS) Agenda (United Nations Security Council [UNSC], 2250), marking a shift towards recognizing the integral role of young people in shaping a peaceful, cohesive, and harmonious society (Lainz, 2019). This commitment was notably highlighted through a series of key events that underscore the EU's dedication to advancing this agenda. Among these were the EU youth consultation in 2017 aimed at contributing to The Missing Peace initiative, the adoption of the Council Conclusions in 2018 on the role of young people in peacebuilding, and the hosting of an EU conference on Youth, Peace, and Security in the same year (Lainz, 2019). These milestones affirmed the EU's position as a key actor in the YPS sphere and also signalled a broader international acknowledgment of the contributions that young people make towards securing peace and preventing conflict.

At the intersection of the EU's efforts and the YPS Agenda lies a juncture in contemporary conflict resolution, especially pertinent given the ongoing conflicts at Europe's immediate borders. The relevance of this intersection is evident, in which young people are disproportionately involved in, and affected by, conflicts. They are often seen as part of the problem, being both perpetrators and victims of violence (Altiok and Grizelj, 2019; Simpson, 2018). However, the adoption of the YPS Agenda signifies a move beyond this dichotomy as it positions young people agency as catalysts for peaceful change (UNSC, 2250). As such, this Agenda identifies key five pillars to act on: prevention, protection, participation, disengagement and reintegration, and partnership (UNSC, 2020). Participation emphasises involving young people in decision-making, while protection ensures their safety in conflict areas. Prevention addresses root causes, advocating for education and economic opportunities, and partnership underscores collaborative efforts among diverse stakeholders. Finally, disengagement and reintegration focus on supporting youth involved in conflict to transition positively.

This policy paper delves into the critical question of how the EU is integrating the YPS Agenda into its broader conflict management and resolution architecture. Section 2 examines the ways in which YPS policy commitments are mainstreamed and operationalised into the EU framework. The final section concludes by reflecting on the insights gained and proposing pathways forward for enhancing the EU's role in leveraging the potential of young people as key actors in securing a peaceful future.

2 | THE INTEGRATION OF THE YPS AGENDA WITHIN THE EUROPEAN UNION ARCHITECTURE

The EU's integration of the YPS Agenda highlights the bloc's recognition of the broad security issue represented by youth involvement in conflicts and peace efforts, and enhances the EU's global stance as a normative power (Manners, 2002). The YPS Agenda, akin to the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) Agenda, embodies a spectrum of norms that shape the practice of conflict resolution. In their pioneering work, Hellmüller et al. (2015) delve into the complex web of norms that informs mediation and conflict resolution practices, highlighting the expectations placed on mediators to incorporate it into their mediating strategies and in post-conflict settings. These professionals are tasked not only with concluding conflicts but also with weaving gender, human rights, justice, and other norms into their strategic approach. This shift is reflective of an evolving concept of peace, understood not merely as the cessation of conflict but as a multifaceted process that nurtures good international relations, propels human security, and fosters progress (Castellarin et al., 2023). The increasing recognition of these normative frameworks (Palmiano, 2020; Palmiano, 2021) marks a significant advancement in the professionalization of conflict resolution (Hellmüller et al., 2015).

In Hellmüller et al. (2015)'s work, norms are dichotomized into content-related and process-related categories. Content-related norms dictate the negotiable aspects of a mediation process and the ultimate contents of a peace agreement. Conversely, process-related norms delineate the procedural aspects of how mediation is orchestrated and executed. Moreover, the scientific literature distinguishes between settled and unsettled norms (Frost, 1996). Settled norms¹ are deeply ingrained within international relations and are fundamental to the very definition of mediation, to the extent that any deviation necessitates explicit justification (Hellmüller et al., 2015). Unsettled norms, however, can be disregarded.

Inclusivity, particularly the involvement of all relevant stakeholders in the mediation process, stands as a prime example of a process-related, settled norm. The significance of inclusivity is widely acknowledged, although consensus on the identity of these key stakeholders to be included may vary (Palmiano, 2021; Hirblinger and Landau, 2020; Hellmüller et al., 2015). Within this framework, the YPS Agenda's emphasis on youth participation in conflict resolution emerges as a process-related yet contested norm. While the principle of inclusivity is settled, the specific inclusion of youth remains a point of contention, still in the process of gaining widespread acceptance and integration among international actors.

The EU recognized for its normative power and commitment to sustainable peace, naturally aligns with the evolving peace concept and the expanding normative framework that accompanies it (Manners, 2008). The EU's history of integration is intertwined in the pursuit of sustainable peace, making its support for the YPS Agenda's norms, including the critical aspect of youth participation, an expected progression. The EU's incorporation of the YPS Agenda is a natural extension of its broader commitment to peace and conflict norms which has been previously demonstrated through its normative adoption of the WPS Agenda, even if ultimately structural constraints and resistance continue to impede a smooth implementation in those conflict settings the EU is actively engaged as a peace promoter (Deiana and McDonagh, 2017). As the peace concept evolves, so too does the EU's role in promoting a comprehensive normative framework that encompasses these changes. This, in turn, highlights the importance of assessing the integration of these norms packed in the YPS Agenda, particularly youth inclusion, among key stakeholders in the peace and security domain.

¹ Hellmüller et al. (2015) employ the example of jus cogens norms. These include prohibitions against genocide, slavery, and apartheid, which no mediator can contravene, thereby underscoring their settled status in the mediation landscape.

To examine the integration of the YPS Agenda into the EU framework, I develop a comprehensive mapping of four elements (Table 1). These elements provide a holistic understanding of how the YPS Agenda is being operationalized within the EU, highlighting the mechanisms of engagement, the breadth of activities undertaken, and the collaborative efforts that underpin the EU’s level of integration. Firstly, I analyse the **policy development** aspect, focusing on the formulation of policies directly related to the YPS Agenda within the EU framework. This involves an in-depth look at the strategic and policy documents that have been issued to support the integration of the Agenda's principles into the EU’s broader peace and security framework. Secondly, the **events** undertaken to push the agenda forward are scrutinized. This includes conferences, workshops, consultations, and other events that have been organized or sponsored by the EU to promote the YPS Agenda. Thirdly, I explore the **partnerships** established through policy developments and events with other relevant stakeholders, such as including the UN. Finally, I delineate the EU institutional **architecture** involved so far in developing the YPS Agenda within the EU. This encompasses an overview of the various EU bodies and institutional structures that have played a role in shaping and advancing the Agenda’s incorporation. By mapping this institutional landscape, I aim to highlight the interplay between different EU institutions and YPS Agenda integration, illustrating how they contribute to the formulation of YPS-related activities and policies.

Table 1. integration of the YPS Agenda into the EU framework

TIMING	EVENT	POLICY DEVELOPMENT	PARTNERSHIPS	ARCHITECTURE*
			Coordinated events (with UN and/or AU)	Coordinated policy developments (with UN and/or AU) EU Commission (through the The Directorate-General for Education,
March, 2017	Young Med Voices Plus Initiative			Youth, Sport and Culture and the Directorate-General for International Cooperation and Development)
September, 2017			Youth consultation as a contribution to the Progress Study “The Missing	European External Action Service

				Peace: Independent Progress Study on Youth, Peace & Security” *	
November, 2017					African Union - European Union Summit: Investing in Youth for a Sustainable Future – AU- EU Youth Plug-In Initiative Follow-up initiative: AU- EU Youth Cooperation Hub
April, 2018					UN SC Open Debate on YPS Council of the European Union
May, 2018	EU Conference on Youth, Peace and Security: Promoting Youth in Peacebuilding	EU Council Conclusions on the role of young people in building a secure, cohesive and harmonious society in Europe			
					The release of “The Missing Peace:

			Independent Progress Study on Youth, Peace & Security” *
April, 2019			AU-EU Youth Cooperation Hub
June, 2020		Conclusions on ‘Youth in external action’	
June, 2021		Conclusions on ‘Strengthening the multilevel governance when promoting the participation of young people in decision-making processes’	
December, 2021			Launch of the AU-EU Youth Lab (Lab 3.0) (2022-2025)
January, 2022	The EU’s Implementation of the Youth, Peace and Security Agenda: Gathering Young Experts’ Recommendations		
October, 2022		Youth Action Plan in EU external action for 2022- 2027	

August, 2023	Establishment of the Youth Sounding Board to implement and disseminate the Youth Action Plan.	
October, 2023		EU Peace Mediation Guidelines

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*Data for the identification of the EU architecture involved in the implementation of the YPS Agenda has been extracted from Lainz (2019).

Following this mapping of the four essential elements within the EU's engagement with the YPS Agenda, we can delineate the progression of the EU's efforts in two stages. The first stage, spanning from 2018 to 2020, lays the foundation, marking the initial adoption of key policy acknowledgments and the establishment of a thin framework for the YPS Agenda. The subsequent stage, from 2020 to 2024, builds upon this groundwork, demonstrating some instances in the direction of a more robust will to mainstream the YPS agenda within the EU's broader strategic objectives.

During the first stage, progress was nuanced but marked a shift in the EU narrative towards the youth: from a limited, passive role greatly associated with the provision of education, economic, and labour opportunities, to the recognition of the youth as active agents for peace. The EU undertook several key initiatives and events that allowed for recognizing and amplifying the role of youth in peace and security domains. This recognition began in 2017 with the launch of the Young Med Voices Plus Initiative, an EU-funded program designed to foster intercultural dialogue and empower young people as global agents of change², not only within Europe but also across the Southern Mediterranean region. Although isolated, this initiative settles a precedent of youth-dedicated platforms aimed to influence policy-making.

The momentum continued into 2018, a pivotal year that saw the EU's commitment to the YPS agenda grow stronger. In May 2018, the EU hosted a landmark Conference on Youth, Peace, and Security, focusing on the critical role of young people in peacebuilding efforts. This conference, in partnership with the United Nations and other global entities, represented a forum for dialogue and the exchange of ideas among these stakeholders and young peacebuilders. The conference identified four main areas for action, including the creation of spaces for youth engagement, expansion of peacebuilding communities to include youth from diverse regions, the translation of youth proposals into tangible projects, and enhanced funding for youth-focused initiatives³. Shortly after the conference, the EU Council Conclusions on the role of young people in building a secure, cohesive, and harmonious society in Europe⁴ highlighted the importance of incorporating the YPS agenda into the EU's external action

² See Young Med Voices, available at: <https://www.youngmedvoices.org>.

³ See EU Conference on Youth, Peace, and Security: Promoting Youth in Peacebuilding, available at <https://shorturl.at/uMX01>.

⁴ See Council conclusions on the role of young people in building a secure, cohesive and harmonious society in Europe, available at urlshortener.at/DPRV9.

service, calling for its systematic implementation. These developments⁵ collectively signalled a growing acknowledgment of the role of youth in peacebuilding and set the stage for further integrating the YPS Agenda into EU architecture, policies, and actions, especially through its external service.

Indeed, the initial efforts to integrate the Agenda showcased distinct roles played by various EU institutions, each contributing to the agenda's advancement in different capacities. For example, the EEAS was the key coordinator behind the first EU conference, while the European Commission played a managerial role, particularly through funding instruments designed to support youth programs (Lainz, 2019). On the other hand, the involvement of the European Parliament and the Council of the European Union, focused on pushing forward the limited policy framework available, was observed to be on a lesser scale compared to the EEAS and the Commission. In addition to this level of EU bodies' engagement, the EU has forged partnerships to advance its initiatives related to the YPS Agenda primarily with other international organizations, notably the United Nations (UN) and the African Union (AU).

However, despite this momentum, the YPS agenda encountered significant challenges during this first stage. Variations in the commitment levels of subsequent EU presidencies, including those of Austria and Romania, led to inconsistent advancement of the agenda, with the Finnish presidency being key for its revitalization (Lainz, 2019). As such, a notable aspect of this period was the influence of a small group of Member States within the Council of the European Union, which contributed to an increase in youth-related peace and security programs, yet programs by and for youth remained limited and scattered and lacked systematic support by all EU member states (Lainz, 2019). As a consequence, EU architecture has reflected individual member states' priorities rather than systemic change or inclusion within the EU's Peace and Security field which has been characterized by ad hoc references and commitments to the YPS Agenda. After all, the EU's status as a leading global donor, offering extensive funding opportunities, did not effectively translate into mainstreamed support for youth in conflict and post-conflict settings, nor did it facilitate their participation in formal peace processes.

The current stage, from 2020 onwards can be characterized by an operationalization of the YPS commitment. During this stage, the EU has recognized the importance of the YPS agenda through policy developments and strategic dialogues and taken steps towards implementing these policies into actionable frameworks. First, this phase has seen the introduction of policy developments such as the conclusions on 'Youth in external action'⁶ and the emphasis on strengthening multilevel governance to foster youth participation in decision-making processes⁷. These policy advances aimed at enhancing the role of youth within the EU and in its external actions, even though there was a need to be more specific about how these strategic frameworks could be displayed for youth in conflict settings.

The launch of the Youth Action Plan in EU external action for 2022-2027 marked a significant operational shift. It provided a political framework and operational roadmap for engaging with young people, emphasizing the need for youth ownership of EU external action. This plan has been instrumental in translating the EU's commitments into structured, concrete actions, including the

⁵ Another relevant policy development has been the EU Youth Strategy 2019-2027. Although this strategy sought to redefine youth policy beyond traditional domains, advocating for a comprehensive inclusion of youth across various policy areas, it notably lacked a direct focus on peace and security. Thus, it has been excluded from the analysis.

⁶ See Council conclusions on the Youth Action Plan in EU external action, 28 November 2022, available at <https://shorturl.at/iltC7>

⁷ See Conclusions of the Council and of the Representatives of the Governments of the Member States meeting within the Council on strengthening the multilevel governance when promoting the participation of young people in decision-making processes, available at : <https://shorturl.at/qDKQ2>.

establishment of platforms for dialogue, the integration of youth perspectives in programming, and capacity building among EU staff. For example, the creation of an EU platform for regular dialogue with youth organizations and the Youth Sounding Board for International Partnerships showcases additional structures for further involvement of youth in decision-making processes. Another concrete step towards operationalizing the Youth Action Plan has been the development of country roadmaps that integrate a youth perspective and ensure meaningful participation of youth organizations in the programming process of the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI-Global Europe). This approach would allow the EU to take into consideration the needs and circumstances of young people across different regions, not exclusively Europe, from the EU's enlargement and neighbourhood countries to Africa, the Middle East, and beyond. Moreover, the Plan's focus has also been on enhancing institutional capacity and expertise on youth engagement within the EU itself by having youth focal points in 80% of EU Delegations by 2024.

Later, the EU Peace Mediation Guidelines⁸ included for the first time specific references to the YPS agenda in the EU architecture for peace mediation, acknowledging the role of youth in peacebuilding and conflict resolution. In parallel, the establishment of the Youth Sounding Board and the development of guidelines and structures for youth participation in EU delegations and external actions have allowed a move towards institutionalizing youth engagement in the EU's external actions.

Consequently, this stage represents a period where the EU has begun to embed the YPS agenda within its structures and external actions, moving beyond recognition and policy development to practical implementation and engagement with youth in external efforts. However, a more specific strategic framework for this engagement in conflict settings and peace endeavors promoted or assisted by the EU continues to be necessary.

3 | A LONG ROAD AHEAD FOR THE YPS AGENDA : GAPS IN THE EU'S IMPLEMENTATION

Despite the global initiative of UN Security Council Resolution 2250 and this aforementioned level of integration within the EU architecture, the implementation of the YPS agenda still faces significant gaps, reflecting both global and regional complexities.

As highlighted earlier, the YPS agenda aims to empower young people in peacebuilding and conflict resolution efforts. However, within the EU framework, this agenda struggles to achieve comprehensive integration into existing youth policies and peace and security documents (Rohrhirsch, 2022). As such, a primary gap identified is the compartmentalization of youth-related issues from broader security policies, preventing the YPS Agenda from becoming a fully cross-cutting element in policymaking. The existing EU youth policy documents, apart from the Youth Action Plan, have largely overlooked the explicit linkage between youth and the policy area of peace and security (Rohrhirsch, 2022). This disconnect extends to significant foreign policy and security frameworks, where the YPS agenda is notably absent. For instance, the Strategic Compass published in March 2022, as a critical EU security document, does not mention young people or the YPS agenda, highlighting a significant gap in mainstreaming youth involvement (Council of the EU, 2022).

While the Youth Action Plan marks progress by formalizing youth engagement in external action, it lacks a more holistic approach necessary for full YPS Agenda implementation that integrates youth perspectives into all phases of policy formulation and implementation. This includes dedicating

⁸ See EU Community of Practice on Peace Mediation 2023, available at <https://www.eupeacemediation.info>.

adequate funding and human resources tailored to support already existing youth-led initiatives across diverse conflict settings (Council of the EU, 2022). Furthermore, the EU's approach to the YPS agenda often fails to capitalize on existing EU instruments like the Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace. While this instrument funds numerous programs supporting youth in peacebuilding and crisis management, its impact remains limited by bureaucratic hurdles and fragmented implementation across member states (Council of the EU, 2022).

Additionally, a structural issue is that the securitization of youth remains prevalent, perpetuating persistent stereotypes that frame young people as potential threats rather than active contributors to peace (Murphy, 2018; Sukarieh and Tannock, 2017). This securitized lens, driven by fears of youth radicalization and terrorism, and association to violence (Sukarieh and Tannock, 2017), often overshadows the YPS Agenda's transformative potential (Altiok et al., 2020). Addressing this requires not only shifting these narratives but also tackling the root causes of youth vulnerabilities, such as economic exclusion, lack of educational opportunities, and political disenfranchisement (Murphy, 2018). Policies can shift from merely managing perceived threats to empowering youth as agents of positive change and resilience by holistically focusing on these structural determinants of social and political conflict.

Indeed, integrating the YPS agenda into the EU architecture necessitates a nuanced approach that critiques and adapts policies dominated by these securitized narratives of youth. This securitization not only overshadows youth vulnerabilities in conflict settings, as pointed out previously, but also incorporates a gendered perspective of violence that portrays (young) men as those who exert violence and (young) women as victims, thereby assuming young men to be inherently dangerous (Pruitt et al., 2018). As such, these narratives, rooted in the youth bulge theory (Fuller, 1995; Goldstone, 2016), classify young men as predisposed to violence: these are constructed as persons to be feared (Sukarieh and Tannock, 2017), and treated as threats to the peace of the (European) social order (Pruitt et al., 2018). Such fears are then incorporated into EU policies and public discourse, distorting the implementation of the YPS Agenda principles. One example can be found in the EU border control and migration policies, which illustrate the gaps in fully applying the YPS Agenda principles. During the so-called European migration crisis, young men have repeatedly been constructed as actors "to be feared, controlled, expelled, or legislated against" (Pruitt et al., 2018: p.699). This framing not only undermines the principles of the YPS agenda but also perpetuates a cycle of marginalization and exclusion, further exacerbating the vulnerabilities of young migrants and refugees in the Mediterranean region.

In addition to these challenges, the concept of youth peacebuilding remains vaguely defined within the EU YPS Agenda frameworks. While the rhetoric broadly accepts youth as agents of peace, a lack of contextual understanding can undermine this goal. The EU's approach to the YPS agenda needs to acknowledge the diverse capacities and needs of young people across different regions and conflict contexts in which there is an intervention, and a tailored approach is thereby essential to ensure that youth engagement efforts are contextually relevant and effectively contribute to sustainable peacebuilding outcomes. Without such consideration, EU interventions risk ignoring already existing youth networks for peace or marginalizing alternative, homegrown, bottom-up approaches to peace.

Within the current level of policy development and events in the EU framework, youth are often portrayed as beneficiaries in need of training within conflict contexts or invited to formal structures or engagements that can sometimes limit youth voices to those that reinforce existing narratives (Turner, 2015). This ignores that youth often use everyday practices and informal networks to organize for peace (Berents and McEvoy-Levy, 2015; Turner, 2015), and, as such, their agency is overlooked or deemed ineffective. For example, movements such as hip-hop and youth activism highlight how young

people resist and reinterpret peace through creative expressions and political actions (Berents and McEvoy-Levy, 2015; Pruitt, 2015). This calls for a deeper examination of how youth is already actively engaged in cultural, political, and ideological interventions, challenging dominant peacebuilding discourses (Berents and McEvoy-Levy, 2015).

Moving forward, addressing these challenges requires a concerted effort to bridge the gap between rhetoric and action, ensuring structural reforms within EU institutions and policy development. This entails tackling the root causes of youth vulnerabilities, mainstreaming youth perspectives across all levels of decision-making processes related to peace and security, and making sure that youth are not only empowered but meaningfully included and their actions taken into consideration, as essential partners in building peaceful and resilient societies within and beyond Europe. Without such integration, youth engagement efforts risk remaining superficial rather than transformative.

4 | CONCLUSION

The integration of the YPS Agenda within the EY has evolved from initial recognition and policy development to a stronger implementation and operational engagement. This progression highlights the first steps in a transformative shift in the EU's approach towards engaging youth as active agents in peacebuilding and security domains. Beginning with foundational initiatives such as the Young Med Voices Plus Initiative in 2017 and culminating in an operationalization phase marked by the Youth Action Plan in EU external action for 2022-2027, the EU has shown a commitment to not only recognizing but also institutionalizing youth participation in peace and security efforts. This includes the establishment of platforms for dialogue, the integration of youth perspectives in programming, and the enhancement of institutional capacities to engage with youth effectively. Despite challenges such as inconsistent support from EU member states and the need for more specific strategies for youth in conflict settings, the recent inclusion of the YPS agenda in the EU Peace Mediation Guidelines and the establishment of youth-focused structures signify the EU is pointing in the direction towards a more systematic integration of the YPS agenda within the EU's architecture and external actions.

Despite this progress, there remains room for improvement. The EU needs to ensure a more systematic and uniform implementation across member states and EU external delegations, increase dedicated funding and resources for youth-led initiatives, enhance inclusivity to involve diverse youth perspectives, and strengthen capacity building for young peacebuilders. Additionally, formalizing participation mechanisms for youth in decision-making processes, improving monitoring and evaluation frameworks, raising awareness about the YPS agenda's importance, and expanding partnerships with civil society and youth-led organizations are also key steps for further integrating and implementing the YPS Agenda in the EU architecture.

Furthermore, the EU's implementation of the YPS agenda faces structural gaps, such as the compartmentalization of youth-related issues from broader security policies and the persistent securitization of youth. These gaps prevent the YPS agenda from becoming a fully cross-cutting element in policymaking and often marginalize existing youth peace networks and bottom-up approaches. Addressing these issues requires a nuanced and contextually aware approach that acknowledges the diverse capacities and needs of young people across different regions and conflict contexts. Moreover, the EU must move beyond viewing youth solely as actors or agents, and instead engage them in creating new, inclusive perspectives and knowledge about peace. This involves rethinking policy frameworks to be more responsive to youth initiatives and ensuring that youth voices are not limited to those reinforcing existing narratives. By tackling the root causes of youth vulnerabilities and mainstreaming youth perspectives across all levels of decision-making processes,

the EU can ensure that youth are not only empowered but meaningfully included as essential partners in building peaceful and resilient societies within and beyond Europe.

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