

EU peace capacities: An analysis of the EU's integration of the youth, peace and security agenda

Jusaima Moaid-azm Peregrina 

Departamento de Derecho Internacional Público y Relaciones Internacionales, Universidad de Granada, Granada, Spain

Correspondence

Jusaima Moaid-azm Peregrina, Departamento de Derecho Internacional Público y Relaciones Internacionales, Universidad de Granada, Plaza de la Universidad, s/n, Centro, 18001 Granada, Spain.
Email: jusaimamap@ugr.es

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 | THE EU AND YOUTH: SHAPING A NEW APPROACH TO PEACE AND SECURITY

In recent years, the European Union (EU) has made significant strides in committing itself to the youth, peace and security (YPS) agenda (UNSC, 2015), marking a shift towards recognising the integral role of young people in shaping peaceful societies (Lainz, 2019). This commitment was notably highlighted through a series of key milestones that underscore the EU's dedication to advancing this agenda. Among these was 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 peace building 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 acknowledgement 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, which is 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 & Grizelj, 2019;

Simpson, 2018). However, adopting the YPS agenda signifies a move beyond this dichotomy as it positions young people's agency as catalysts for peaceful change (UNSC, 2015). This agenda identifies five key pillars to act on prevention, protection, participation, disengagement and re-integration and partnership (UNSC, 2020).

This short policy paper delves into the critical question of how the EU integrates the YPS agenda into its broader conflict management and resolution architecture. Section 2 examines how 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) examine the complex web of norms that informs mediation and conflict resolution practices. In their work, norms are dichotomised into content-related and process-related categories. Inclusivity, particularly the involvement of all relevant stakeholders in the mediation process, stands as a prime example of a process-related norm. The significance of inclusivity is widely acknowledged, although consensus on the identity of these key stakeholders to be included may vary (Hirblinger & 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.

As a normative power, the EU's incorporation of the YPS agenda is a natural extension of its broader commitment to peace and conflict norms, even if ultimately structural constraints and resistance continue to impede a smooth implementation (Deiana & McDonagh, 2017). To assess the integration of the YPS agenda into the EU framework, I develop a comprehensive mapping of four elements (Table 1). 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 scrutinised. These include conferences, workshops, consultations and other events that have been organised 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 the United Nations (UN). Finally, I delineate the EU institutional **architecture** involved so far in developing the YPS agenda.

Following this mapping of the four essential elements of the EU's engagement with the YPS agenda, we can now delineate the progression of the EU's efforts in two stages. The first stage, spanning from 2018 to 2020, laid the foundation, marking the initial adoption of key policy acknowledgements and the establishment of a limited framework for the YPS agenda. The subsequent stage, from 2020 to 2024, builds upon this groundwork, demonstrating some instances 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 the role of youth in peace and security domains to be recognised and amplified. This recognition began in 2017 with the launch of the Young Med Voices Plus Initiative, an EU-funded programme designed to foster intercultural dialogue and empower young people as global agents of change,¹ not only within Europe but also across the Southern Mediterranean region. Although isolated, this initiative established a precedent of youth-dedicated platforms aimed at influencing 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 peace-building 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 peace builders. The conference identified four main areas for action, including the creation of spaces for youth engagement, expansion of peace-building communities to include youth from diverse regions, the translation of youth proposals into tangible projects and enhanced funding for youth-focused initiatives.² Shortly after the conference, the EU Council's conclusions on the role of young people in building a secure, cohesive and harmonious society in Europe³ highlighted the importance of incorporating the YPS agenda into the EU's external action service, calling for its systematic implementation. These developments⁴ collectively signalled a growing acknowledgement of the role of youth in peace building and set the stage for further integrating the YPS agenda into the EU's architecture, policies and actions, especially through its external services.

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 programmes (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 engagement by the EU bodies, the EU has forged partnerships to advance its initiatives related to the YPS agenda primarily with other international organisations, notably the 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

TABLE 1 Integration of the YPS agenda into the EU framework.

Timing	Event	Policy development	Partnerships		Architecture ^a
			Coordinated events (with UN and/or AU)	Coordinated policy developments (with UN and/or AU)	
March, 2017	Young Med Voices Plus Initiative				EU Commission (through the Directorate General for Education, 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 Peace: Independent Progress Study on Youth, Peace & Security' ^a		European External Action Service
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	European Parliament
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 Peace building	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' ^a	
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			

^aData for the identification of the EU architecture involved in the implementation of the YPS agenda has been extracted from Lainz (2019).

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and Romania, led to inconsistent advancement of the agenda, with the Finnish presidency being key to its revitalisation (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 programmes: yet programmes 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 characterised 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 characterised by an operationalisation of the commitment to YPS. During this stage, the EU has recognised 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'⁵ and the emphasis on strengthening multilevel governance to foster youth participation in decision-making processes.⁶ 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, emphasising 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 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 organisations and the Youth Sounding Board for International Partnerships showcases additional structures for further involvement of youth in decision-making processes. Another concrete step towards operationalising the Youth Action Plan has been the development of country roadmaps that integrate a youth perspective and ensure meaningful participation of youth organisations in the programming process of the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI-Global Europe). This

approach allows 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 Guidelines⁷ included for the first time specific references to the YPS agenda in the EU architecture for peace mediation, acknowledging the role of youth in peace building 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 created a move towards institutionalising 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 endeavours promoted or assisted by the EU continues to be necessary.

3 | THE 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.

A primary gap identified is the compartmentalisation 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 formalising youth engagement in external action, it lacks a more holistic approach necessary for fully integrating

youth perspectives into all phases of policy formulation and implementation. This includes dedicating 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 capitalise on existing EU instruments like the instrument contributing to stability and peace. This instrument funds numerous programmes supporting youth in peace building and crisis management, but its impact remains limited by bureaucratic hurdles and fragmented implementation across member states (Council of the EU, 2022).

A structural issue is that the 'securitization' of youth (meaning here the presentation of youth as a security issue) remains prevalent, perpetuating persistent stereotypes that frame young people as potential threats rather than active contributors to peace (Murphy, 2018; Sukarieh & Tannock, 2017). This securitised lens, driven by fears of youth radicalisation and terrorism, and association with violence (Sukarieh & 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).

Integrating the YPS agenda into the EU architecture necessitates a nuanced approach that critiques and adapts policies dominated by these securitised narratives of youth. This securitisation not only overshadows youth vulnerabilities in conflict settings 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: they are constructed as persons to be feared (Sukarieh & 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 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).

Moreover, the concept of youth peace building 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 peace-building outcomes. Without such consideration, EU interventions risk ignoring already existing youth networks for peace or marginalising 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 organise for peace (Berents & 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 & McEvoy-Levy, 2015). This calls for a deeper examination of how youth is already actively engaged in cultural, political and ideological interventions, challenging dominant peace-building discourses (Berents & 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 EU 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 peace-building and security domains. Beginning with foundational initiatives such as the Young Med Voices Plus Initiative in 2017 and culminating in an operationalisation phase marked by the Youth Action Plan in EU's external action for 2022–2027, the EU has shown a commitment not only to recognising but also institutionalising 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 peace builders. Additionally, formalising 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 organisations 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 compartmentalisation of youth-related issues from broader security policies and the persistent securitisation of youth. These gaps prevent the YPS agenda from becoming a fully cross-cutting element in policymaking and often marginalise 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, where their role is limited to participation in predefined processes, and instead engage them as co-creators in the policy-making process. Co-creation involves youth in shaping the policies themselves, allowing them to contribute new, inclusive perspectives as generators of knowledge about peace, rather than merely acting within the boundaries of existing frameworks. This shift signifies a move from rhetoric to real, impactful engagement, where youth perspectives are not simply heard but actively shape and drive the future of peace building.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

There are no conflicts of interest to my knowledge.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

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ORCID

Jusaima Moaid-azm Peregrina  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6327-6248>

ENDNOTES

- ¹ See Young Med Voices, available at: <https://www.youngmedvoices.org>.
- ² See EU Conference on Youth, Peace, and Security: Promoting Youth in Peacebuilding, available at <https://shorturl.at/uMX01>.
- ³ See Council conclusions on the role of young people in building a secure, cohesive and harmonious society in Europe, available at urlshortener.at/DPRV9.
- ⁴ 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.
- ⁵ See Council conclusions on the Youth Action Plan in EU external action, 28 November 2022, available at <https://shorturl.at/iltC7>.
- ⁶ 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>.
- ⁷ See EU Community of Practice on Peace Mediation 2023, available at <https://www.eupeacemediation.info>.

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Jusaima Moaid-azm Peregrina is a PhD in Social Sciences and a Magister in International and European Studies, University of Granada. She is a teacher of International Relations at the Department of Public International Law and International Relations of the University of Granada. Her research focuses on peace and conflicts, processes of political change, international mediation and women, peace and security. She has gained regional expertise in the Middle East, notably Syria, as well as Yemen.

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