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# NAVIGATING THE INTERSECTION BETWEEN MEDIATION AND DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY: OPPORTUNITIES TO STRENGTHEN EU PEACE CAPACITIES

Jusaima Moaid-Azm Peregrina

PhD candidate / Predoctoral researcher  
University of Granada (UGR)

## Introduction

While international mediation in armed conflicts remains an essentially human-led endeavour, a growing number of conflict resolution efforts integrate digital technologies (DT) in peace processes. In December 2020, the recently renewed Concept on EU Peace Mediation, a key political document that promotes the use of mediation and dialogue as a tool of first response to emerging and ongoing crises, acknowledged for the first time that the use of digital technologies<sup>1</sup> and social media has the potential to change the ways and the speed with which conflicts evolve. The use of technologies can be both disruptive and constructive in conflict settings. Disputing parties rely on online means to finance activities, spread political narratives, hinder opponents' digital activities, shut down the Internet, or for misinformation, surveillance and monitoring. However, digital technologies can also be used for producing better conflict sensitive analysis, for engaging and facilitating sustained communications with conflict parties, or for broadening inclusion and participation in peace processes. Consequently, mediators need to better understand the rapidly evolving implications of connectivity and reliance on information technologies in conflict scenarios.

<sup>1</sup> In this policy brief, digital technologies are understood in a broad sense as electronic devices, systems and tools that generate, store or process information and data.

Under the European Union (EU) framework, peace mediation is part of the Integrated Approach to External Conflicts and Crises (Council of the EU, 2018c) and, as such, it relies on EU leverage and potentialities to strategically assist in the prevention and resolution of conflicts. During the 2000s, the EU has progressively increased its engagement in peace mediation interventions, particularly in the eastern and southern neighbourhoods. Moreover, the EU has enhanced its peace mediation capacities by strengthening its institutional structure through the establishment of a pool of EU mediators and a hub of mediation advisors under the political guidance of the High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and Vice-President of the European Commission (EC) (Karjalainen, 2020), and by underpinning a policy framework through the subsequent adoption of the first 2009 Concept on Strengthening EU Mediation and Dialogue Capacities (Council of the EU, 2009) and, later, the 2020 Concept on Peace Mediation (European External Action Service, 2020b). In so doing, the EU details for the first time its principles and potential roles in peace mediation, reinvigorates its tools, values and norms for conflict resolution, and acts as a steadfast promoter of peace-making in a neighbourhood disfigured by internationalised conflicts and growing political unrest.

However, the integration of DT in the EU's peace mediation practices is still underdeveloped. Policy developments for incorporating digital technologies as tools for EU mediators are not entirely tailored to the EU's particular approach, and professional guidelines derived from these reflect the United Nations (UN)'s practice. How are DT incorporated into ongoing EU mediation interventions so far? How can the EU better integrate DT to enhance its peace mediation approach? By examining the role of DT in the successive Brussels Conferences on Supporting the future of Syria and the region (2017-2021), co-chaired by the EU and UN as a lead mediator for the Syrian conflict, this policy brief highlights how DT can be used for enhancing EU peace mediation practices and goals.

In the following, the author reviews the current state of the incorporation of DT in the EU peace mediation policy framework by examining EU documents and previous cases in which DT played a prominent role in strengthening EU efforts. Findings in this part are also based on an interview conducted by the author with an EU policy officer in the EU Conflict Prevention and Mediation Support Division of the European External Action Service (EEAS), who is currently working on the integration of DT. Then, the brief turns to analyse the use of DT in an ongoing EU peace mediation intervention and finally provides a set of policy recommendations on how DT can be used for boosting EU peace mediation capacities.

## **A trial-and-error incorporation: digital technology integration into the EU peace policy framework**

The current EU standpoint on the intersection between peace and technologies is based on a trial-and-error approach (Policy officer, Conflict Prevention and Media Support Division, EEAS, personal communication, January 27, 2022). As this intersection is multifaceted, highly context-oriented, and yet to be explored, the EU has not designed an overall strategy on DT in peace-making and, as such, it relies more on lessons learned from previous efforts in which the potential of DT was leveraged successfully in EU interventions. However, even if the EU has not prepared a strategic document, the EU Peace Mediation Guidelines accompanying the 2020 Concept on EU Peace Mediation contribute to defining some of the priorities where DT can play a major role. While acknowledging for the first time in EU policy developments that DT disrupt the contexts in which peace mediation takes place by, for instance, spreading disinformation through social media to hinder the parties' trust in the mediator, the EU also recognises that DT might be used as analytical tools to better understand and monitor conflicts, as platforms for dialogue and mediation with the disputing parties, or as a means for increasing inclusivity in a process (EEAS, 2020a). Even if these references to DT represent a step forward from the preceding 2009 Concept, they are still limited, fail to specify how DT have been previously used

in the EU's experience and, as such, overlook their potential for strengthening the EU's particular approach to peace mediation.

As noted in the EU Guidelines, EU peace mediation practitioners have identified various uses of DT embedded mainly in two lines of action in conflict scenarios and peace processes, namely *conflict analysis* and *inclusion*. On the one hand, the wide area of conflict analysis in the EU follows a complex process in which data collection takes a prominent role (EEAS, 2020c). Analyses provided by the EEAS and the EC are evidence-based, involve multiple actors, such as EU Delegations, EU Special Representatives, member states, civil society, and so on, and use DT to significantly improve their reporting and, as such, better inform the decisions and the interventions to be undertaken (EEAS, 2020c). For example, data collection and crisis mapping platforms, such as the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), have been used by the EEAS to understand how the interactions between the actors in a conflict evolve as well as where and under what circumstances there is an increase or decrease in violence. These analyses are generated by using artificial intelligence (AI) through language processing of local and global media reports that extract events of political instability, violence, and protests across the world (ACLED, 2022). In so doing, the EEAS manages to shape conflict resolution efforts, ensure a common understanding of a conflict, and better advise Delegations, EEAS Departments, and so on, through straightforward, non-controversial analyses. Besides, the EU has also promoted a Conflict Early Warning System, coordinated by the EEAS, which supports evidence-based decision-making on conflict situations by similarly using DT to compile and integrate data (EEAS, 2014). This digitally enhanced system contributes to preventing the (re)emergence of violence by identifying structural risk factors and potential conflicts in a 4-year time horizon and later informing EU Missions and the member states, among other EU actors.

Another example of digitally enhanced conflict analyses in the EU can be found in the use of AI-driven tools for ceasefire monitoring in Yemen, warning systems, such as the Hala System, in Syria, or the use of EU satellite imagery for tracking the movements of troops in South Sudan. For example, by employing machine-learning algorithms and using EU satellites in Syria to gather data and to instantaneously validate the information from multiple sources, these systems manage to identify trends and detect threats, such as potential airstrikes (Policy officer, Conflict Prevention and Media Support Division, EEAS, personal communication, January 27, 2022). Consequently, response systems and sirens can be activated remotely from anywhere on the planet to guarantee civilian protection and the saving of lives. Additionally, DT have also invigorated the evaluation of damages and social conditions in cities destroyed by conflict. Through urban profiling, the EU Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations (DG NEAR) has invested in developing digital tools, such as UrbAN-S,<sup>2</sup> that collect information on displacements and urban functionality (humanitarian needs, damage assessments, land use analysis, etc.) to inform decisions and plan all sorts of EU interventions.

DT have also been employed for ensuring accountability and the prosecution of crimes in contexts such as Syria. Information on social media and forensic analysis of videos provided by the member states, the EC, the Council of the EU and civil society, among others, were key in providing evidence for convicting Syrians involved in mass killings and based in Europe (Eurojust, 2020).

On the other hand, inclusivity has also become a digitally enhanced line of action within the EU peace framework. By using digital tools, e.g., social media platforms, video-conferencing tools or instant messaging applications, the EU has managed to leverage the voices of different segments of a society into a peace process. For example, the EEAS has funded the implementation of mechanisms such as the Civil Society Support Room (CSSR) for Syria for the inclusion of civil society in the ongoing UN-led peace process. Through this mechanism, an

<sup>2</sup> <https://urban-syria.org/#home>

online, collaborative platform was launched to allow for the formation of an alternative track in the process that comprises civil society organizations (CSOs) operating in hard-to-reach areas in Syria and abroad and conducts regular consultations with the mediator and the representatives of different states. However, there are various factors that should be considered when fostering digital inclusion. Elements such as the availability of the Internet or electricity, the design of the platform, digital literacy, socio-cultural factors, political surveillance, and state repression of cyber resilience, among others, have the potential to disrupt digital inclusion and produce new patterns of exclusion (Hirblinger, 2020).

Other peace mediation practitioners have identified other uses of DT in conflict scenarios. For example, the UN Digital Mediation Toolkit draws on the UN's experiences to encapsulate four thematic areas in which DT play a constructive part in peace. As identified in the EU, the UN also emphasises the potential of DT in *conflict analysis* and *inclusivity* but adds to that *engagement with the conflicting parties* and *strategic communication* (StratCom) (UN DPPA & HD Centre, 2019). Within the EU, even if conflict analysis and inclusivity take a more prominent role, these additional functions of DT are distinctly present too. First, the UN has a long record as a lead mediator and, as such, it has used DT in multiple ways to communicate with the parties. However, the EU is still exploring the potentialities of DT in this line of action as the EU can hardly be considered an impartial actor and rarely acts as a lead mediator (Bergmann, 2021). In contexts where the EU is perceived more neutrally, it can contribute to building trust among the conflicting parties, for example, by providing them with information, such as EU satellite imagery, as guarantees to ensure that no side is moving troops in certain locations or even allow the formation of a humanitarian corridor (Policy officer, Conflict Prevention and Media Support Division, EEAS, personal communication, January 27, 2022).

Second, while UN mediators are expected to handle StratCom in a sensitive, non-partisan way to inform about peace processes and convey messages to wider audiences, EU StratCom in the field of peace mediation is also embedded in the wider EEAS public communication strategies and the interest-based agenda of the EU CFSP. As such, the EEAS houses two communication divisions on public diplomacy and StratCom that engage with public statements, traditional media and social platforms to boost EU narratives. However, the significance of the StratCom division is increasing lately in the context of disinformation practices, and DT are being used to counteract invasive narratives, false information (e.g., in the Ukraine conflict) and propaganda campaigns (e.g., Islamic State[IS]/Daesh radicalisation campaigns in Europe) designed for instilling fear and mistrust in the EU (Bentzen, 2016). For example, the Delegation of the EU in Syria mobilised in 2021 via its website and social media to debunk myths about the EU's behaviour in Syria as the Syrian regime and its allies were spreading false information (EUDEL Syria, 2021).

Thus, the EU's approach to the intersection between DT and mediation is context-oriented and shows key lines of action (*conflict analysis* and *inclusivity*) in which the potential of DT has been previously leveraged. However, by reflecting on how DT have been employed in the subsequent Brussels Conferences on Supporting the future of Syria and the region, the following section highlights some potentialities yet to be explored in the EU mediation approach.

## **Digital technologies in ongoing EU peace mediation interventions: the Brussels Conferences on Supporting the future of Syria and the region**

The EU has hosted five conferences since 2017 on supporting the future of Syria and the region with both humanitarian and political ambitions. Throughout these five Conferences, the EU has progressively increased the use of DT. In Brussels I (2017), the main digitally enhanced line of action was strategic communication. Through institutional websites, traditional media and social

platforms, the Council of the EU ensured the transparency of the unfolding of the Conferences. However, StratCom acquires a broader sense here since these digital tools were used to openly promote the legitimacy of the UN mediation, to advocate a sustainable peace for Syria, to publicly pressure the Syrian regime and its supporters to abide by a political solution, and to state the EU's political position towards Syria. Consequently, this digital "strategic promotion" was employed for amplifying the EU common narrative around the Syrian conflict, but it only built a one-way communication through which the EU circulated its position and left insufficient margin for an interactive engagement with relevant segments of Syrian society, such as CSOs (Council of the EU, 2017).

Social media and various pieces of video footage on EU websites were used for web-streaming Brussels II and for strategically promoting the EU's narrative in line with Brussels I. However, in 2018 the EU also projected its own approach to CSOs in peace mediation. The EU considers civil society as a partner that represents another dimension in the family of EU mediation actors. Civil society is not just an "outside actor" to be included but a mediator that can transform relationships and generate incentives for negotiating (EEAS, 2020b). Consequently, EU institutional websites were used to make Syrian CSOs' work more visible and spread its initiatives, speeches, and operational recommendations during the so-called "Days of Dialogue" (Council of the EU, 2018a).

Additionally, for the first time the EU ran online consultations with Syrian CSOs in preparation for Brussels II. Through digital platforms such as Slido or Upinion, the EU gathered some views of organisations working inside Syria and the region on potential themes for the Conference, promoting inclusivity and knowledge-generation in the process. Consultations with CSOs are an instrument that allows for the incorporation of views and insights of actors not present in high-level negotiations. Digitally-driven consultations permitted the generation and sharing of day-to-day knowledge on the challenges and lessons of Syrian CSOs while lowering the costs of the process of consulting, and facilitating contact with actors in hard-to-reach areas (Council of the EU, 2018b). However, these online consultations were mainly unidirectional as the emphasis was placed on the EU and not on the Syrian CSOs. Even if inclusion and knowledge-generation were promoted, online consultations aimed to strengthen the Conference by bringing in CSOs' insights, but they did not open a space for the EU to reciprocate in a bidirectional process or for Syrian organisations from different operational contexts to engage with each other.

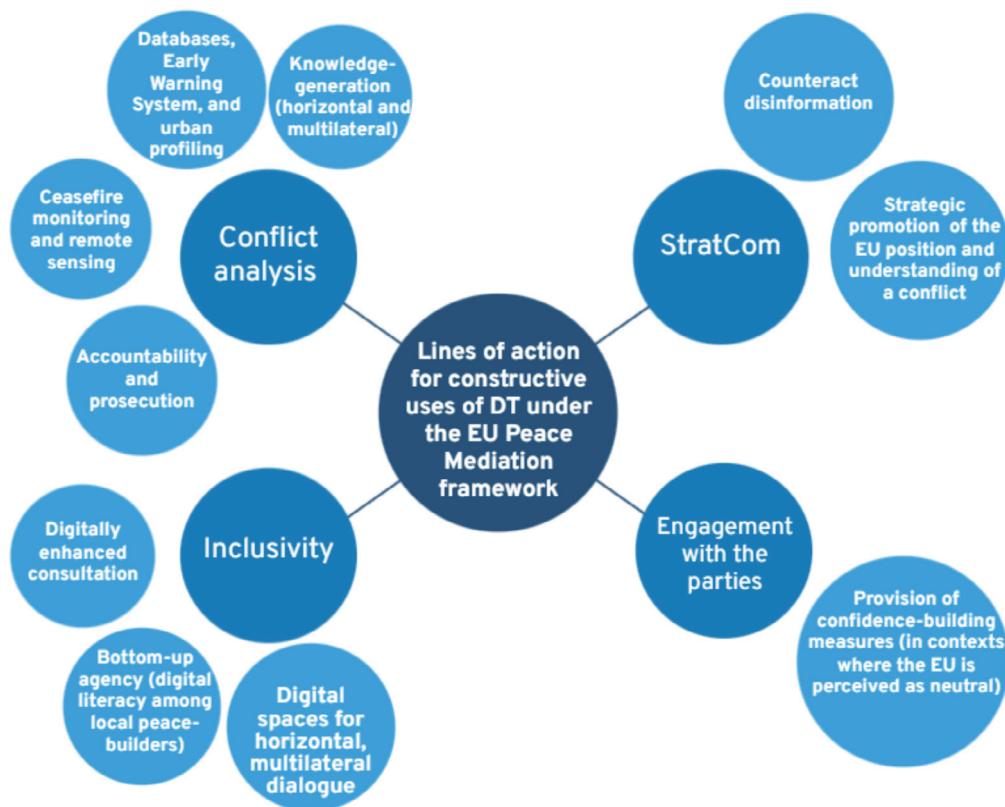
Strategic promotion and this unidirectional use of DT for consultations were also present in Brussels III (2019). However, Brussels III hosted for the first time the Syrian Digital Lab (SDL), which aimed at exploring how DT could contribute to fostering peace in Syria. The event's underlying logic was that many (Syrian) actors are already active in the tech domain, for example, by combating disinformation, and yet donors and practitioners remain sceptical about the potential of digital solutions for mediation purposes. As such, SDL aimed to bring these actors together to exchange experiences and build a network to produce digitally-based practical solutions for Syria that, for example, could coordinate the technological sector and a digitally literate civil society to work towards the provision of spaces for social cohesion or address issues, such as housing and land properties, documentation, the right to return, and so on, by accessing reliable data and surpassing in-person limitations (Council of the EU, 2019). Consequently, the EU timidly introduced another area for using DT in peace mediation. By strengthening digital literacy and skills among "peace-builders" at the local level and creating partnerships between public sectors and private institutions, the EU adopts a bottom-up approach to the uses of DT in peace mediation in which it is the affected population that has the agency to decide how to incorporate DT and digitally enhance their peace-building initiatives.

Brussels IV (2020) and V (2021) took place entirely online due to COVID-19 restrictions. Here, the EU promoted inclusivity and knowledge-generation again in both Conferences by running online consultations through Upinion with participants recruited partially via social media and

building an online repository for CSOs to store documentation. However, even if the emphasis continued to be mainly placed on what Conference could leverage by consulting civil society, CSOs received feedback messages and follow-up events about the results of the consultations and, as such, a small step towards the opening of bidirectional channels between the EU and Syrian civil society was taken. Besides, results were carefully analysed and made public online, therefore allowing for multi-directional knowledge-sharing (Council of the EU, 2020; 2021).

Finally, Brussels IV and V facilitated online spaces for dialogue. Some events, such as the Days for Dialogue, were opened for online public engagement, allowing multi-directional communication among Syrian organisations, international non-governmental organizations (INGOs), the population at large, and policy-makers.

**Figure 1.** Identified functions of digital technologies in ongoing EU peace mediation interventions



Source: Prepared by the author based on previously identified DT uses

## Conclusions and recommendations

The digital ecosystem cannot be ignored by EU mediation, not only because it proves to impact conflicts but because digital tools can be efficiently leveraged to promote peace. Such tools help in producing accurate conflict analysis and better informing all sorts of EU interventions or preventing the consequences of military hostilities on affected populations. They also open new opportunities for enhancing dialogue and entry points by including actors that otherwise would not be heard, or by contributing to building confidence between the conflicting parties.

The Brussels Conferences on Syria showcase some possibilities for strengthening the intersection between DT and peace mediation in the EU. Here, the EU has progressively pointed out new forms of interpreting DT incorporation into mediation that could be enhanced in the future. For example, the Syrian case shows (1) actions to strengthen digital skills and promote digital literacy among “peace-builders” at the local level (bottom-up agency), combining top-down with bottom-up approaches in mediation, (2) online consultations that promote not only a one-way communication process in which the EU benefits from participants but, even if timidly adopted, a bidirectional one through which participants receive feedback from the EU, (3) (multilateral, horizontal) knowledge-production through the launching of online repositories for Syrian CSOs, or (4) digital spaces for multilateral, horizontal dialogue and social cohesion in which Syrian CSOs could engage with each other. To boost this incorporation, this policy brief advances the following recommendations:

- 1. Strengthening existing policy development.** The current frame of reference for EU peace mediators weakly presents the potentialities of DT in peace mediation. It does not highlight how DT could enhance the EU's approach as specified in the 2020 Concept, and the lines of actions previously described on which EU practitioners are already working. While the UN Digital Toolkit was driven by a political effort, the EU's digital incorporation into peace mediation has been the result of an effort made by EU policy officers and a European community of peace practitioners. A more determined push from the EU executive level could lead to further exploring other cases of digital incorporation and, as such, propose new lines of action in which the EU can successfully use DT and present them in the current EU framework for peace mediation.
- 2. An integrative, evidence-based database on the integration of DT into EU peace mediation.** The EU is currently involved in multiple peace mediation efforts, and DT are transversally being incorporated. The EU community on peace mediation is sceptical and not always aware of the implications of these incorporations in peace efforts. An internal database with an intuitive interface could centralise these efforts, promote internal communication, help EU policy officers to know what DT are offering to EU peace mediation and what the lessons learnt were.
- 3. A digitally literate “family of EU mediation actors.”** EU mediators and their teams need to be fully prepared for grasping all the potentialities of DT in their efforts. To do so, multi-disciplinary teams encompassing IT experts can be put into motion. However, and in line with the EU's broader approach to mediation, this is not only applicable to EU mediators but local civil society and other actors relevant for peace interventions should also be digitally skilled. Bottom-up strategies to peace should rely on locally-based actors that know how to enhance their peace-building initiatives through DT.
- 4. Partnering between the technological private sector and civil society and/or other actors relevant for peace.** Multiple conflict-related needs could be addressed by bridging digital entrepreneurship with civil society's work and knowledge. The EU should facilitate spaces for bringing together these actors and encourage linkages among them that both cover conflict emergencies and promote socioeconomic growth. The Syrian Digital Lab is an example in which ongoing partnerships, such as “Maps for Syria”, were presented and promoted.

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