# Civilian Power Europe? A Reality Check of the EU's Conflict Mediation Policies in the Syrian Civil War

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**EU Diplomacy Papers**
**9/2021**

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## Abstract

In the aftermath of the 'Arab springs', the situation in Syria turned into a civil war. Located at the doorstep of the European Union (EU), the conflict has major consequences for the region and the world. Yet, the EU seems not to have undertaken significant action at the political level to lead the parties towards a conflict settlement, despite its endeavour to enhance its mediation activities and resources over the last decade.

Although the EU does not have an official political role in this conflict, it has used multiple civilian instruments to foster an agreement and a peaceful transition. Yet, to this day, no political solution has been found and the war is still ongoing. This apparent paradox touches upon the nature of the EU as a power. This paper explores to what extent the EU's mediation policies in Syria reveal shortcomings of the EU as a civilian power. It argues that there is a 'capability-expectations gap' between what the EU expects to achieve in Syria and its actions undertaken on the ground.

Hence, the paper first shows that the EU has a high level of ambition regarding the resolution of the Syrian conflict. Then the paper confronts this ambition to the realities on the ground. Based on the analytical framework provided by Julian Bergmann, it assesses the effectiveness of the EU's conflict mediation support policies in Syria as 'relatively low'. This finding shows that the EU is not well-suited to act in such an intricate field since its geopolitical aspirations cannot yet be effectively translated into actions. The paper concludes by characterizing the EU's nature in this case as a 'geopolitical-aspiring civilian normative power'.

**Introduction: The EU as an Actor in the Syrian Conflict**

The complex discussions that took place in July 2021 at the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) about whether to extend the resolution on the cross-border assistance mechanism in Syria illustrate the significance of this civil war for the international community.[1] This conflict has started in 2011 during the 'Arab springs' and opposes the Syrian regime to divided rebel forces. It has become one of the direst humanitarian disasters in the world.[2] The location of the country — at the doorstep of the European Union (EU) — and the involvement of several terrorist groups and foreign actors contributed to making the Syrian civil war an international issue. The war became an intricate field of analysis with numerous local, national, and international actors involved, each with different interests and readings of the situation. It led to a political stalemate at the global level which has been illustrated by the succession of three different UN Special Envoys since the beginning of the conflict and the repeated deadlocks during the UNSC's monthly briefing about Syria.[3]

Several reasons explain the EU's involvement in the conflict. First, the latter has a direct impact on the EU, through the influx of refugees coming from the region and the increasing need to fight regionally-establish terrorist groups such as ISIL.[4] For instance, the EU and many of its member states are part of the global coalition against Daesh.[5] Second, and perhaps even more important, humanitarian considerations drive the EU's action. The EU is very active in providing humanitarian aid to a Syrian population in desperate need,[6] and this is why during the last five years it organized the so-called 'Brussels conferences'.[7] As of now, the EU and its member states remain the leading

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[1] Natasha Hall, "The implications of the UN Cross-Border Vote in Syria", *CSIS*, 4 June 2021.

[2] Shelley Inglis, "The worst humanitarian crisis of the 21st century: 5 questions on Syria answered", *The Conversation*, 2 March 2020.

[3] The UNSC holds monthly briefings about the situation in Syria with a focus on the humanitarian situation, the political situation and the use of chemical weapons.

[4] ISIL stands for 'Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant'. The group is also referred to as ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) or Daesh.

[5] See the website of the Global coalition against Daesh, accessed 12 December 2021 [online].

[6] Martin Griffiths, United Nations Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, "Briefing to the Security Council on the humanitarian situation in Syria", Briefing, United Nations Security Council, New York, 27 October 2021.

[7] The 'Brussels conferences on supporting the future of Syria and the region' have been organized since 2017. They are organized on a yearly basis in Brussels and co-chaired by the EU and the UN. The conferences aim at gathering pledges from the public and private sector to support the international humanitarian efforts in Syria and maintain the Syrian conflict on the international agenda.

international aid donors in the country.[8] Third, the increased capacities of the EU to act abroad in conflict settings can also be considered part of the explanation of the EU's interest in the Syrian civil war. Since the creation of the European External Action Service (EEAS) in 2011, the EU greatly improved its conflict mediation capacities. It "has gained considerable experience in mediation and has become an important provider of mediation services in numerous conflict theatres around the world".[9]

Yet, the EU failed in carving out a significant political role for itself in this situation. Although the EU has laid out in 2009[10] — and reaffirmed in 2020[11] — its ambition to become more active in the field of conflict mediation worldwide, it has not taken many strong stances regarding the conflict and the regime. Thanks to the strategic guidelines on conflict mediation and the strengthening of the EEAS' conflict mediation capacities, the EU has the means and the institutional mindset to find a peaceful settlement to the conflict. Still, it did not achieve substantial results in a decade. Indeed, the civil war started in 2011, but the EU Strategy for Syria was only adopted in 2017 after many discussions among the EU member states. This apparent paradox between the EU's self-declared intentions to have a more effective mediating role in conflict theatres and its *actual* involvement — that this paper will further explore — also raises the question of the EU's capability to translate its ambitions into action. In other words, it questions the nature of the EU's power. The conflict mediation expert Antje Herrberg underlined in 2021 that "peace mediation as a practice continues to fit the original concept of civilian power".[12] From this perspective, the apparent failure of the EU's development of conflict mediation policies in Syria questions the concept of 'civilian power Europe'[13] itself. The research question thus asks: to what extent do the EU's mediation policies in Syria reveal the shortcomings of the EU as a civilian power?

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[8] European Commission, European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations. "Syria" [factsheet], last modified 5 July 2021.

[9] Patrick Müller and Julian Bergmann, "Orchestrating peace in South Sudan: Exploring the effectiveness of the European Union's mediation support", *European Security* 29, no. 2 (2020), 149-169.

[10] Council of the European Union, *Concept on Strengthening EU Mediation and Dialogue Capacities* (15779/09), Brussels, 10 November 2009.

[11] Council of the European Union, *Concept on EU Peace Mediation* (13951/20), Brussels, 7 December 2020.

[12] Antje Herrberg, "Translating the Peace Ambition into Practice: The Role of the European External Action Service in EU Peace Mediation", *European Foreign Affairs Review* 26, no. 1 (2021), 135.

[13] Karen E. Smith, "Beyond the civilian power EU debate", *Politique européenne* 17, no. 3 (2005), 63-82.

The paper draws upon the hypothesis that the EU's self-assessment regarding its capability to play a political role in Syria is way higher than it actually is in reality, especially at the level of conflict mediation policies. As a result, there would be a 'capability-expectations gap'[14] in terms of what the European Union can achieve in Syria because the EU is not well-suited to act in such an intricate field with its military implications.

This paper is split into four distinct parts. First, the framework of analysis is explained. The second part studies the EU's expectations and ambitions regarding its involvement in the Syrian conflict. The third part analyses in more detail to what extent those aspirations correspond to the reality of what the EU can achieve in Syria, highlighting the existence of a 'capability-expectations gap'. Finally, the fourth part shifts the focus and outlines the impact of the results of the 'reality check' on the characterization of the European Union as a power on the international stage.

## Framework of Analysis

The concept of 'civilian power' constitutes the heart of the analysis. This paper understands this concept according to the definition provided by Henning Tewes in which he recalls that "it is often associated with the purely non-military conduct of foreign policy".[15] Although the concept is often criticized when applied to the EU,[16] it offers a reading grid that can be used as the starting point to further explore the nature of the EU as an international actor.[17]

Turning to the concept of mediation, the Council of the EU outlined that this activity consists in:

> assisting negotiations between conflict parties and transforming conflicts with the
> support of an accepted third party. The general goal of mediation is to enable

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[14] Christopher Hill, "The Capability-Expectations Gap, or Conceptualizing Europe's International Role", *Journal of Common Market Studies* 31, no. 3 (1993), 305-328.

[15] Henning Tewes, "What is Civilian Power", in *Germany, Civilian Power and the New Europe. New Perspectives in German Studies* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 10.

[16] Jan Orbie, "Civilian Power Europe: Review of the Original and Current Debates", *Cooperation and Conflict* 41, no. 1 (2006), 123.

[17] Henning Tewes, *op. cit*.

parties in conflict to reach agreements they find satisfactory and are willing to implement.[18]

Given its focus on the willingness of parties to implement a possible agreement, this definition is the one adopted of the purpose of this paper's analysis. Indeed, the willingness of the parties to reach an agreement and further implement it is of the utmost importance in the Syrian case due to the reluctance of the actors to engage in negotiations, let alone the implementation of a possible agreement. However, it is also worth considering the definition provided by the scholars Julian Bergmann and Arne Niemann, according to which mediation consists of:

> any efforts by single or collective actors representing the Union to assist negotiations between conflict parties and to help them bringing about a settlement to the conflict.[19]

Conflict mediation encompasses a wide range of activities, from leading a mediation process to acting behind-the-scenes and supporting mediation. In both cases, various means (e.g., political, economic, military…) can be used. The *Concept on EU Peace Mediation* defines mediation support as follows:

> Mediation support involves activities that assist and improve mediation practices, e.g. advising of mediators and mediation teams, provision of mediation services in track II and III processes training and coaching activities, developing guidance on thematic and geographically specific issues, carrying out background research, working on policy issues, offering consultation, backstopping ongoing mediation processes, networking and engaging with parties.[20]

This definition shows the wide range of instruments that can be used by an organization or state to provide support to mediation activities. It is also noteworthy that the EU understands mediation activities as part of a broader approach to conflicts and crises embodied in the 2016 Global Strategy through the "integrated approach to external conflict and crises".[21]

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[18] Council of the European Union, *Concept on EU Peace Mediation* (13951/20), Brussels, 7 December 2020.
[19] Julian Bergmann and Arne Niemann, "Mediating International Conflicts, the European Union as an Effective Peacemaker?", *Journal of Common Market Studies* 53, no. 5 (2015), 959.
[20] Council of the European Union, *Concept on EU Peace Mediation, op. cit.*, 3.
[21] European External Action Service, *Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe. A Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy,* June 2016, 29.

Furthermore, the paper uses the concept of the EU's 'capability-expectation gap', which Christopher Hill defined in 1993 as the discrepancy between what the EU is expected to achieve on the international stage and its instruments, resources, and ability to agree.[22] Assessing this EU gap in the early 1990s, he stressed that there was a "large gap between what is expected and what can be achieved".[23] For the EU's involvement in the Syrian civil war during the 2010s, it would mean that although the EU has a self-declared interest in the resolution of the conflict, it does not have the necessary leeway to fully develop and effectively implement conflict mediation policies, nor to be involved at a political level. The expectations or aspirations of the EU regarding political role in the Syrian conflict can be found in political speeches and official documents. A gap would emerge if the EU's attempt to reach the stated political objectives turn out to be constrained by its own capability to act.

The study is based on an analysis of official discourses and documents that will be compared to interviews with EU officials and other actors in the form of a 'reality check'. Documents such as political declarations by high-level officials and strategic guidelines have been analyzed and are then contrasted with interviews of EU officials and researchers working on the Syrian conflict. Six formal interviews have been conducted. However, because of the sensitivity of the topic, many interviewees — mostly EU officials — required to stay anonymous and others only agreed to have informal exchanges to be used as contextual background information. Still, the research analyses the discordance between public discourses and what is really happening in the field based on divergences between official and unofficial speeches. Drawing upon those gaps, the analysis explores the difference between what the EU expects to achieve and its actual possibilities.

The paper applies the analytical framework developed by Julian Bergmann[24] to provide readers with an assessment of the gap. More specifically, the study uses the adaptation of Bergmann's framework as set out in an article co-authored with Patrick Müller.[25] They put forward four criteria to be considered when assessing the effectiveness of the EU's conflict mediation support policies, namely endorsement,

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[22] Hill, *op. cit.*, 315.
[23] *Ibid.*, 326.
[24] See Julian Bergmann, "EU Mediation Effectiveness, An Analytical Framework", in *The European Union as International Mediator* (Cham: Palgrave MacMillan, 2020), 25-52.
[25] Müller and Bergmann, *op. cit.*

coordination, assistance, and the lending of leverage.[26] These elements are to be understood in light of the relationship of the EU with the main mediator — in the Syrian case, the UN — to assess whether the support provided is effective.

## Self-expectations of the EU regarding the Syrian Conflict

This first part aims at highlighting the EU's political stance and narrative regarding its aspirations in the Syrian conflict. It shows that (i) the EU has not been able to adopt a strong political stance and (ii) that it has become entangled between its institutional limitations in the realm of foreign policy and its willingness to play a political role.

*A Complex Articulation yet a Weak EU Narrative about Syria*

Being the result of a peacebuilding process itself, one of the EU's core priorities laid down in the Treaty on the European Union is to "preserve peace, prevent conflicts and strengthen international security".[27] The 2016 EU Global Strategy further stresses the need to focus on the neighbourhood, including Syria. This strategic guidance has been reflected over the past decade in a succession of strategic documents and resolutions released by the European Commission, the EEAS, the Council and the European Parliament.[28] All documents called for or referred to a negotiated political transition under the mediation of the UN.

Yet, none of those documents has put forward a clear approach highlighting how the EU intends to adapt its conceptual strategy to the Syrian conflict. As underscored by the analyst Willem Oosterveld, "the European Union's strategy towards Syria little reflects the conflict's proximity".[29] *De facto*, the conflict became a very divisive issue

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[26] *Ibid.*, 153-154.

[27] European Union, "Consolidated Version of the Treaty on the European Union", *Official Journal of the European Union* (C326/13), 26 October 2012, art. 21.

[28] See European Commission and HR/VP, *Towards a comprehensive EU approach to the Syrian crisis*, JOIN (2013) 22 final, 24 June 2013; European Commission and HR/VP, *Elements for an EU regional strategy for Syria and Iraq as well as the Daesh threat*, JOIN(2015) 2 final, adopted by the Council of the European Union in its Council conclusions no. 7267/15, 16 March 2015; European Commission and HR/VP, *Elements for an EU Strategy for Syria*, JOIN(2017) 11 final, 14 March 2017, adopted by the Council of the European Union in its Council conclusions no. 7652/17, 3 April 2017; European Parliament, "European Parliament resolution of 18 May 2017 on the EU strategy on Syria (2017/2654(RSP))", *Official Journal of the European Union*, C307/18, 30 August 2018; European Parliament, "European Parliament resolution of 15 March 2018 on the situation in Syria (2018/2626(RSP))", *Official Journal of the European Union*, C162/14, 10 May 2019.

[29] Willem Oosterveld, "Does the EU have a Syria strategy?", *EUobserver,* 8 March 2018.

among the EU member states, which led to the adoption of the lowest common denominator and did not allow the EU as such to take a strong and comprehensive stance towards the conflict. Four groups of countries can be identified[30] within the EU:

(1) Member states who are vehemently opposed to any talks with Bashar al-Assad's regime (e.g., France, Germany, Sweden)

(2) Member states who do not see any specific interest in being involved in the conflict (e.g., the Baltic States and some countries of Central Europe)

(3) Member states who would consider talking with the regime (e.g., Spain, Italy)

(4) Member states who officially think that the EU should engage with the regime (Hungary, Cyprus)[31]

The split among EU member states appeared since the very beginning of the conflict and it is still relevant today.[32] Thus, it can further explain why the EU did not adopt and release a strategy for Syria before 2017 and its *EU Strategy on Syria.*[33] Divergences between member states and the absence of a strong and unanimously agreed policy among the EU member states led to the "EU's diplomatic absence"[34] in the country. Furthermore, the credibility of the EU has been severely impacted as some member states, beyond merely expressing disagreements, took a strong stance on the issue. For instance, the Czech Republic never closed its embassy in Damascus and Hungary undertook a normalization of its relations with Bashar al-Assad in 2019.[35]

And yet, despite these divergences and different understandings of the situation among the EU member states *a priori* severely limiting its possibilities of action, the EU still wants to carve out a political role for itself.

*Playing an Own Political Role: The EU's Paradoxes*

The European Commission in 2013 underlined its willingness to act as a major player regarding a crisis having direct implications for the EU and its neighbourhood.[36] In 2017,

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[30] Interview with a former EU official, video call, 11 March 2021.

[31] Rémi Baucher, "The EU's approach to the Syrian civil war. A reality-check of the EU's conflict mediation policies", Master's thesis (Bruges, College of Europe, 2021).

[32] Interview with a former EU official, *op. cit.*

[33] Council of the European Union, "Council adopts EU strategy on Syria", press release, 3 April 2017.

[34] Marc Pierini, "In search of an EU role in the Syrian war", *Carnegie Europe*, 18 August 2016, 11.

[35] Jonathan Marcus, "Syria: A Hungarian step towards diplomatic normalisation?", *BBC News*, 11 September 2019.

[36] European Commission, *Towards a Comprehensive EU Approach to the Syrian Crisis, op. cit.*, 2.

it reiterated the call to "define how the EU can play a bigger role in contributing to a lasting political solution in Syria under the existing UN-agreed framework".[37] Although the Council adopted the Commission's proposal of an *EU Strategy for Syria* in March 2017,[38] making it the official EU stance, the ambiguity persisted on *how* the EU would play a bigger role in reaching sustainable peace in Syria. Officially, the EU wants to be further involved in the settlement of the Syrian conflict whilst supporting the UN process. This was confirmed by the declarations of the HR/VP Borrell in March 2021, when he stressed the EU's ambition to "enhance dialogue among all international actors with influence in the Syrian crisis".[39] However, one EU official interviewed in the conduct of this research recognized that "in Brussels' corridors, we are fully aware since 2017 that the UN process is dead".[40] This — added to the fact that no major breakthrough has been made at the UN Security Council despite the holding of a monthly meeting about the political situation in Syria — shows how the UN process suffers from a lack of results which undermines its credibility. This is partly why several competing processes and actors have emerged to try to overcome the deadlock at the UN.[41]

Yet it appears that the EU, despite official statements in this regard, failed to acquire a more significant political role. Its self-declared commitment to multilateralism and the UN as well as the political split among the EU member states prevented it from acting to the full extent. Hence, the EU's paradox: how can the EU strengthen its stance over an issue while being politically constrained to support a failed process, or at least one that is informally recognized as such? As acknowledged by another interviewee, "theoretically, it would be nice for the EU to be the chair of the negotiating table".[42] In other words: leading the process rather than supporting it. And yet, once multilateralism failed — or at least was blocked —, the EU found itself in a stalemate as well. The strength of the EU, supporting multilateralism attempts to politically solve the Syrian conflict, became one of its weaknesses. This does, however, not mean that a multilateral approach is assessed as ineffective. It only suggests that the usual forms of multilateralism dealing with matters of conflict resolution and addressing issues related to international peace and security (mostly through the UN

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[37] European Commission and HR/VP, *Elements for a Strategy for Syria*, *op. cit.*, 2.
[38] Council conclusions no. 7652/17, *op. cit.*
[39] Council of the European Union, "Syria: Declaration by the High Representative on Behalf of The European Union on the 10 Years of the Conflict", Press release, 14 March 2021.
[40] Interview with a former EU official, video call, 11 March 2021.
[41] "Syria diplomatic talks: A timeline", *Al Jazeera*, 15 September 2017.
[42] Interview with EU official 1, video call, 5 March 2021.

Security Council) proved to be ineffective, reflecting the current state of geopolitics on the world stage.

Nonetheless, despite the aforementioned challenges and the EU's paradoxical approach, Brussels did undertake some actions. Indeed, the EU made use of most of its tools, including political ones.[43] From a civilian power perspective, such actions may be significant and are worth mentioning, although few had a genuine impact on the unfolding of the conflict.

The EU adopted a wide range of restrictive measures against the regime of Bashar-al-Assad,[44] the aim of which was to bring him to the negotiation table. Sanctions constitute one of the most powerful civilian instruments the EU has at its disposal when it comes to conflict situations. Pressing the economy of the sanctioned regime while reiterating the EU's commitment to the respect of human rights and international humanitarian law may seem to be a powerful act on the international stage. However, undertaking such actions must be done alongside a broader strategy towards the region, the conflict, or the country. Otherwise, it is very likely not to have the expected impact. The discrepancy between the adoption of the first set of sanctions against the regime (2011) and the adoption of an EU Strategy for the Syrian conflict (2017) has already been highlighted. The fact that the sanctions were dissociated from a broader approach before 2017 may partly explain their ineffectiveness. Furthermore, the support of countries such as Iran and Russia to the Syrian regime helped Bashar-al-Assad overcome the economic negative impact of the sanctions and keep the economy afloat.[45] Symbolically, it remains, however, necessary to maintain such sanctions and that was the rationale behind the renewal of the sanctions until 1 June 2022.[46] Restrictive measures could even be used as leverage in the future when — and if — a meaningful discussion about the country's reconstruction starts.[47]

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[43] Stelios Stavridris and Radka Havlová, "'Civilian Power Europe' and the Syrian Conflict", *European Foreign Affairs Review* 24, no. 4 (2019), 469-490.
[44] See the EU Sanctions Map, accessed 1 November 2021 [online].
[45] Rim Turkmani and Mustafa Haid, "The role of the EU in the Syrian conflict", paper commissioned by the Human Security Study Group, *Security in Transition*, London, 2016.
[46] Council of the European Union, "Syria: Council extends sanctions against the regime for another year", press release, 27 May 2021.
[47] Interview with Salam Kawakibi, Director of the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, Paris, via video call, 26 February 2021.

Besides the adoption of restrictive measures, the EU has also undertaken diplomatic actions such as the recognition of the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces in November 2012[48] or the removal of the EU Delegation from Damascus — now operating from Lebanon.[49] It was also part of the International Syria Support Group (ISSG), a 2015 attempt at a peaceful resolution of the conflict under the joint chairing of the US and the Russian Federation. Although the negotiations did not achieve tangible results due to divergences among the chairing countries,[50] they demonstrate the EU's willingness to be involved in international fora dealing with conflict resolution at the highest levels.

## A Reality Check of the EU's Conflict Mediation Policies in Syria

This section shows how the EU has been developing an official policy mainly through the competencies of the Commission while being obliged to act 'under the radar' at the level of the EEAS. This considerably reduced its capabilities to act and contributed to the creation of a gap when compared to the EU's high level of ambition highlighted in the previous section. The lack of an overarching strategy for Syria results in assessing the effectiveness of the EU's conflict mediation policies as 'relatively low'.

*The EU's Actions in Syria: The State of Play*

The European Commission leads a wide range of activities, including mediation activities, through the Foreign Policy Instrument (FPI) service and its Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace (IcSP).[51] The latter is entrusted since 2014 to fund peacebuilding projects across the world, in coordination with different international partners. Between its establishment and December 2021, the FPI funded 34 projects in Syria for a total amount of €109 million.[52] Among these projects, the Syria Peace Process support initiative — whose last phase ended in August 2021 — is of particular relevance. Implemented by the German Society for International Cooperation, the initiative "directly supports the UN-led mediation efforts, as well as the political

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[48] "EU recognises Syrian National Coalition as 'legitimate' representative", *France 24*, 19 November 2012.

[49] Sandrine Amiel, "Which EU states are rebuilding diplomatic relations with Assad's Syria?", *Euronews*, 19 June 2021.

[50] "Syria conflict: World powers to intensify quest for peace", *BBC News*, 30 October 2015.

[51] For the MFF 2021-2027, the activities of the IcSP have been integrated under the new Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI).

[52] European Commission, "IcSP Map", accessed 19 October 2021, https://icspmap.eu.

opposition in its engagement in the Geneva process".[53] It further aimed at "improv[ing] civilian assistance and structural support for Syrian communities".[54] Another ongoing project funded by the IcSP aims at supporting the UN-facilitated Syrian Constitutional Committee.[55] These projects allow to position the EU at every 'track' of mediation processes, namely (i) the official diplomatic discussions, (ii) the unofficial exchanges between governments and/or NGOs, and (III) local mediation activities jointly with grassroots actors, citizens and local organizations. The EU also tries to act as a bridge-builder between these different 'tracks' of the process.

Another interesting involvement that is worth mentioning in this realm is the action of the European Resource for Mediation Support (ERMES). Run by the EU and gathering many organizations, it mobilized resources to support the Syrian opposition to organize and become more efficient during the negotiations, through training programmes and workshops. As set out by the former conflict and mediation advisor of the EEAS, Elridge Adolfo, "the opposition was split, but we helped them to create a common platform for where and how they wanted to proceed".[56]

The case of the EEAS is different. Here, again, a paradox arises in the sense that the EEAS is supposed to oversee Common Foreign and Security Policy matters. Yet, substantial actions are more difficult to undertake for this EU body because of the highly political nature of the Syrian conflict. The CFSP decision-making process is an intergovernmental process, and the EEAS consequently finds itself having its hands tied whenever the member states are divided. Yet, the EEAS was creative enough to engage to a certain extent on this issue, especially at the diplomatic level. Taking advantage of its important network of EU Delegations abroad, the EEAS can reach out to many countries and organizations, expressing positions on behalf of the EU as such. It succeeded to become part of the Ceasefire Task Force (CTF) and the Humanitarian Task Force (HTF) of the ISSG in Geneva. In addition to the IcSP-funded projects managed by the Commission, the Delegation of the EU to the United Nations in Geneva also provides training to the Syrian Negotiation Commission (SNC) office.[57]

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[53] The 'Geneva process' designates the cycle of peace talks that started in 2012 under the good offices of the UN in order to find a negotiated solution to the Syrian civil war.
[54] European Commission, "IcSP Map", *op. cit.*
[55] *Ibid.*
[56] European Commission, "Negotiating the Future: European Resources for Mediation Support", *ICSP Map,* December 2016.
[57] Interview with EU official 2, video call, 11 March 2021.

Besides, the EEAS used multilateral fora to discuss Syria with major stakeholders, such as Russia and the USA. As expressed by one of the interviewees, the EU "raises Syria all the time during bilateral contact".[58] Likewise, although diplomatic relations are suspended with the Syrian regime, EU officials working for the EU Delegation in Damascus — relocated to Beirut — can meet with representatives of the Syrian Foreign Ministry up to a certain level of representation. Although the discussions are supposed to remain technical, one interviewee recognized that there is the possibility, "under the record, to pass on messages".[59] The monthly visit of EU officials to Damascus also allows the EEAS to engage with actors in the field, such as Iranian and Russian representatives as well as Civil Society Organizations (CSOs).[60] Therefore, although the EEAS remains severely limited by the inherently political nature of the conflict, it found several ways to play a role and have an impact at different levels thanks to its broad network of Delegations and its ambiguous position towards the regime.

*A Limited Strategy Preventing the EU from Influencing the Outcome of the Conflict*

The piecemeal approach of the EU towards the Syrian conflict is a major shortcoming. In 2013, the European Peacebuilding Liaison Office (EPLO) published a report, which includes recommendations on how to make the EEAS more effective in supporting mediation activities. It underlined (i) the need to "define clear strategies to support a peace process […] and then match the tools and the staffing to the strategic requirements",[61] and (ii) to "ensure clarity on leadership, mandate and mediation functions of EU actors involved in peace mediation efforts".[62] It appears that none of these two recommendations has been taken into account in the Syrian case.

First, regarding the need to establish clear guidelines and provide the necessary resources to match the strategic requirements, the EU expressed several times its intention to support the UN process and be further involved in the negotiation process, but no clear indication was given on *how* the EU plans to achieve it. The root problem remains the same: the lack of unanimity among the member states, thus leading to the adoption of a lowest-common-denominator position that hinders the EU's

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[58] *Ibid.*
[59] Interview with a former EU official, *op. cit.*
[60] *Ibid.*
[61] European Peacebuilding Liaison Office, "EU Support to Peace Mediation: Developments and Challenges", May 2013.
[62] *Ibid.*

ambition and reduces the possibilities of action to very punctual and relatively small interventions. However, not everything can be blamed on the legal and institutional basis of the EU. Indeed, its lack of action can also be explained by the fact that the EU is conceptually not ready to develop overarching strategies and action plans. It could indeed have developed a broader strategic framework of action towards the Syrian conflict as soon as it erupted in 2011 and alongside the adoption of restrictive measures. This would have sent a strong signal to the Syrian regime and its allies with the adoption of a real *power-based* mediation strategy.[63] However — besides the fact that the member states do not entrust the EU in going forward with such power —, the EU may also simply not be ready to develop complex conflict strategies. This was reflected by one of the interviewees who underlined that "the EU never knew how to do it",[64] meaning that Brussels, even if it had the tools, still might not use them in the most effective way.

Second, regarding the recommendation for clear leadership and mandates on mediation activities, the EU still lags behind as well. Many actors are involved, leading to a fight over competencies. Where the EEAS is severely limited because of the Treaties, the Commission tries to take over as many areas of external action as possible. Sometimes, it leads to divergences of views between different EU entities having opposite readings of the situation. This is reflected in the current tensions between DG ECHO — in favour of engaging with the Syrian regime to deliver humanitarian aid — and the EEAS, officially firmly opposed to any engagement.[65] Likewise, both the Commission and the EEAS provide negotiation training to the Syrian opposition, putting the impact, but also the credibility of the EU as a whole, in danger.

*Assessing the Effectiveness of the EU's Mediation Policies in the Syrian Conflict*

To assess the effectiveness of the EU's conflict mediation support policies, the analytical framework provided by Bergmann and Müller is very useful. They identified several variables determining the effectiveness of the EU's mediation activities, namely: endorsement; coordination; assistance; lending leverage.[66]

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[63] Initiative Mediation Support Deutschland, "Basics of Mediation: Conception and Definitions", February 2017.
[64] Interview with a former EU official, *op. cit.*
[65] *Ibid.*
[66] Müller and Bergmann, *op. cit.*, 153-154.

*Endorsement* consists of the declared support to another mediator in the conflict. Here, the EU endorsed the UN to play this role. EU endorsement is effective if it empowers the mediator.[67] While the EU's endorsement of the UN Special Envoy for Syria is deeply appreciated,[68] it appears that it does not bring further legitimacy to the UN-led process and therefore does not considerably empower it. Indeed, the UN is already perceived as a legitimate actor for main stakeholders as it does not take sides,[69] while the EU publicly supports the opposition and some of its member states adopted a very strong stance towards the regime of Bashar-al-Assad. In that sense, the argument could be made that the EU's endorsement — more than non-essential — would even weaken the UN process as it would lead some stakeholders to question its impartiality. In this regard, the EU's endorsement, symbolically important for the EU itself perhaps more than for the UN, can be assessed as rather low because it does not empower the UN process in terms of legitimacy.

*Coordination* is one of the most important factors because — as outlined in this paper —, the lack of coordination can have counter-productive impacts. The emphasis must be placed here on the role of the EU in strengthening the UN as the central mediator and the EU's ability to synchronize different processes.[70] Considering the multitude of actors involved in the Syrian conflict, coordination is even more important, as it takes place in a context that can lead to competition between mediation actors.[71] This is what happened with the launch of the 'Astana process'[72] in 2017 by Russia, Iran and Turkey, which has directly challenged and sidelined the UN process. In April 2018, the conclusions of the Council of the EU

> urge[d] the Astana guarantors, Russia, Iran and Turkey, to ensure cessation of
> hostilities and unhindered, safe and sustainable humanitarian access throughout

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[67] *Ibid.*, 153

[68] United Nations, "Note to Correspondents: UN Special Envoy for Syria Geir O. Pedersen's remarks to the Brussels V Conference 'Supporting the Future of Syria and the Region'", 30 March 2021.

[69] Interview with Salam Kawakibi, *op. cit.*

[70] Müller and Bergmann, *op. cit.*, 154.

[71] Tobias Böhmelt, "Why many cooks if they can spoil the broth? The determinants of multiparty mediation", *Journal of Peace Research* 49, no. 5 (2012), 701-715.

[72] The 'Astana process' designates several rounds of talks since 2017 under the auspices of Russia, Iran, and Turkey, aiming at overcoming the political stalemate. Although officially based on the UNSC resolution 2254 calling for a political settlement in Syria, the process is often seen as a Russian attempt to take over the peace negotiations and compete with the UN negotiations.

all of Syria, and to fulfil their commitments towards achieving a nationwide ceasefire in Syria as well as sieges to be lifted.[73]

Here, the EU implicitly recognizes the stranglehold of the 'Astana three' over the situation in the ground. Therefore, instead of replacing the UN as the main leader of the process, the latter is paradoxically even more sidelined by these Council conclusions. Furthermore, by not reiterating its unequivocal support to the UN process, let alone trying to bring back the 'Astana three' under the umbrella of the UN, the EU did not manage to synchronize the parallel tracks of mediation. In consequence, the EU's coordination effectiveness is assessed as 'low' here as well, due to its ambiguous and powerless actions.

*Assistance* is the provision of material support and expertise to the mediator. This is the variable where the EU has proven to be the more effective. Indeed, it assists the UN process in various ways. It puts different organizations in contact, provides training for the Syrian opposition as well as expertise from the EEAS to the office of the UN Special Envoy. Also, the efforts of the EU at the humanitarian level (Brussels conferences) and efforts to integrate local actors into the process can be understood as a way to stabilize the situation and assist the process of mediation. Different UN Special Envoys for Syria commended the work of the EU in this regard,[74] showing the gratitude of the UN towards the EU for its support. However, it is not to be forgotten that the UN also has a pool of mediation experts and tools to efficiently carry out mediation activities.[75] This qualifies the EU's impact on this variable, whose effectiveness can be assessed as 'medium', recognizing its helpfulness while stating that it is not a game-changer.

The last variable is the ability to *lend leverage*. This is understood as "a mediation support technique where the EU uses its leverage to support the mediation activities of a third-party mediator".[76] It can consist in coercing the parties to integrate the process, but also positively incentivize them to do so.[77] As previously outlined, the EU did try to push the regime to engage meaningfully in the negotiations through the

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[73] Council of the European Union, *Council Conclusions on Syria*, *op. cit.*
[74] United Nations, "Note to Correspondents […]", *op. cit.*; United Nations, "Press Remarks by United Nations Special Envoy for Syria Geir O. Pedersen at the European Union Event on Syria", 24 September 2019.
[75] United Nations, *United Nations Activities in Support of Mediation*, Report of the Secretary-General (New York: United Nations, 2017).
[76] Müller and Bergmann, *op. cit.*, 154.
[77] Bergmann, "EU Mediation Effectiveness: An Analytical Framework", *op. cit., 33.*

adoption of sanctions. This approach did not produce the expected success. As a lesson from this failure, the EU currently intends to make issue-linkages with aspects of reconstruction, conditioning the reconstruction funds to a genuine engagement of Bashar-al-Assad in the UN process.[78] So far, however, this approach achieved no results, and the political stalemate persists more than ever. This is due to the highly sensitive nature of the conflict, touching upon historic tensions in the Middle East and illustrating the trends in the global order reflected at the UN Security Council, with the well-known opposition between Russia and the USA on this conflict. Thus, in spite of its leverage capacities, the EU has so far not been able to positively impact the stakeholders' behaviour, nor persuade them to engage in the process. The effectiveness of the EU in lending leverage to the UN in the mediation process is accordingly assessed as 'medium', with the development of an actual strategy that has yet to reach tangible results.

Out of four factors, two have a 'low' level of effectiveness in the mediation process while the two others have been assessed as 'medium', being rather effective but not decisive. According to Müller and Bergmann, assistance and lending leverage are the variables having the most direct impact on the outcome of a process.[79] However, in the specific case of the Syrian conflict, where the mediation process is led by the United Nations, the importance of assistance is relative given the high mediation capabilities of the UN. Likewise, although the idea of leverage is crucial, neither the UN nor the UN seems to be capable of effectively incentivizing the parties to negotiate in a meaningful way at this stage. Conversely, the two other variables — endorsement and coordination — are more central in the Syrian case as the UN process is often delegitimized and discredited by some actors. Those two variables consequently become more important. The assessment has shown that, in this regard, the EU is rather ineffective. Therefore, the aggregate assessment of the EU's effectiveness in supporting mediation policies in the Syrian conflict is 'relatively low'. Indeed, although the EU has indisputable strengths and assets, it has so far not succeeded in putting them together to have a strong impact.

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[78] Interview with Salam Kawakibi, *op. cit.*
[79] Müller and Bergmann, *op. cit.*, 155.

Considering that mediation policies are at the heart of the civilian power of the European Union,[80] one question arises from this assessment: can the EU still — assuming it ever was the case — be considered a civilian power in the Syrian conflict?

**The Syrian Conflict: Questioning the Nature of the EU as an International Actor**

The final part of this paper addresses the nature of the EU as an international actor in view of the findings of the previous sections. It will first show how the action of other international actors vis-à-vis the Syrian conflict made the EU's positioning very difficult. Then, it will try to characterize the nature of the EU's power in this conflict.

*The Realpolitik of International and Regional Actors: Leaving the EU out of the Room*

By definition, *realpolitik* — a "foreign policy based on calculations of power and the national interest"[81] — is opposed to the foundation of the EU's foreign policy which is based on the protection of ideals and the promotion of values.[82] In the case of Syria, it appears that the conflict has become an "agent war of global and regional powers such as the United States, Russia, Iran, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia".[83] These countries are indeed the ones that have adopted a *realpolitik* approach to the conflict, seeking to defend broader interests.

Although the Obama administration had stated, at the beginning of the civil war, that actions would be taken in case the Syrian regime would make use of chemical weapons — the 'red lines' of the American and the British administrations — this was not followed up by actions. The shift that occurred in August 2013 — when Obama decided at the last moment not to intervene against the regime despite the use of such weapons — acted as a first tipping point. Still highly relying on the US to undertake actions in the region, the EU and its member states had no choice but to follow this shift, reflected in the adoption in 2015 of an EU strategy against terrorism in the region.[84] The adoption of this document illustrates the focus on the fight against terrorism that

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[80] Herrberg, *op. cit.*
[81] Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994), 137.
[82] European Union, "Consolidated Version of the Treaty on European Union", *op. cit.*, art. 21.
[83] Zhao Chen, Jizhou Zhao and Mengmeng Huang, *Syrian Civil War and Europe* (London: Taylor and Francis, 2020), Chapter 1, section 3, "the challenges of the radicalized cosmopolitan idea", §5, Perlego.
[84] European Commission and HR/VP, *Elements for an EU regional strategy for Syria and Iraq as well as the Daesh threat*, *op. cit.*

proliferates on the ashes of the conflict rather than on the conflict itself. Furthermore, the focus on the fight against Daesh affected the credibility of the normative discourse of both the US and the EU, with the Syrian opposition and people feeling abandoned.[85] It therefore prevented the EU or any of its members from undertaking any action, being unable to act without US support.

Besides the USA, the behaviour of Russia is also impacting the EU's ability to be a real stakeholder in the resolution of the Syrian conflict. Russia's intervention in Syria is based on a longstanding history of alliance with the country and geopolitical benefits to maintain the regime in power.[86] Without entering into the details of the Russian intervention, it is noteworthy that this military breakthrough was requested by Bashar al-Assad himself, fearing a victory of the armed Syrian opposition.[87] It took advantage of the decision of the USA and the UK not to intervene in August 2013, which offered Russia an opportunity to reaffirm its influence in a region that had been under US military and geopolitical influence for years. Furthermore, the strategic importance of the Russian naval base in Tartus — being the only direct access to the Mediterranean Sea for Russia[88] — helps explain Russia's willingness to militarily support Bashar al-Assad. These geopolitical aspects — predominant in Russia's choice to intervene — show how the country acted according to the preservation of its national interest and international status. Therefore, the EU and Russia seem to have contradictory interests in this case. This opposition is well reflected in the example of EU sanctions. While the EU aimed at coercing Bashar-al-Assad to genuinely negotiate a peaceful transition, Russia increased the resilience of the regime to the sanctions by providing alternative funding methods. It was also a way of ensuring that Syria would remain an importer of Russian goods.[89] Consequently, as underlined by Marc Pierini, "the Russian-induced realpolitik might not leave much room for EU standards in Syria".[90]

With the US out and Russia supporting the Syrian regime economically and militarily against 'Western' actions, the EU found itself a victim of those policies, being unable

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[85] Tim Eaton, "Six decisive points that changed Syria's war", *BBC News*, 15 March 2017.

[86] Samuel Charap, Elina Treyger and Edward Geist, "Understanding Russia's Intervention in Syria", *RAND Corporation*, 2019.

[87] "Syria's Assad wrote to Putin over military support: statement", *Reuters*, 30 September 2015.

[88] Ashraf Nageen, "U.S. and Russian Interests in the Syrian War", *Modern Diplomacy*, 25 August 2020.

[89] Thomas Schaffner, "Five Years After Russia Declared Victory in Syria: What Has Been Won?", *Russia Matters*, 18 March 2021.

[90] Pierini, *op. cit.,* 13.

to act or even influence these actors. In addition to this geopolitical, the conflict cannot be fully apprehended without analyzing the regional actors' involvement, in particular the roles of Iran and Turkey.

The Islamic Republic of Iran plays a major role in the Syrian conflict as it has engaged in the war through several means. It is perhaps the most difficult actor for the EU to deal with, as Iranian policies towards the Syrian situation encompass strategic, political, and religious elements. Iran funded militias active on the Syrian ground against the opposition groups[91] and was involved since the very beginning of the conflict.[92] Mostly based on historical and religious elements — Bashar al-Assad is an Alawite, a branch of Shia Islam —, the ties between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Assad family are strong. But, like in the Russian case, deep historical — and here, religious — ties alone cannot explain the involvement of the country. The action must be read in light of the fight against the 'sworn enemy' at the regional level: Israel. Iranian leaders are indeed convinced that "keeping Hezbollah forces prepared at the Israeli border is a deterrent to any potential Israeli aggression to the Iranian mainland".[93] To be able to do so, they must ensure that strategic roads and channels used by Iran on the Syrian territory to support Hezbollah in Lebanon will remain accessible and work with the Syrian regime for this purpose. Again, a realistic reading and approach to the conflict lead to the adoption of foreign and regional policies based on national security interests.

Likewise, the military interventions of Turkey are to be understood through the prism of regional *realpolitik*. The operations of 2016 (Euphrates Shield), 2018 (Olive Branch) and 2019 (Peace Spring) all aimed, through different means and in different contexts, to prevent Kurdish groups to establish a territory in the North of Iraq and Syria. Turkey thus became one of the major stakeholders and was able to apply pressure on other actors and be included in political platforms such as the 'Astana process' since 2017.

It appears that, in the Syrian conflict, there is a political reward for those engaging — or able to engage — militarily on the field. Conversely, actors unable to act at the

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[91] For further details about pro-Iranian militias in the Syrian conflict, see Navvar Saban, "Factbox: Iranian influence and presence in Syria", *Atlantic Council*, 5 November 2020.
[92] Anchal Vhora, "Iran Is Trying to Convert Syria to Shiism", *Foreign Policy*, 15 March 2021.
[93] Hamidrezeza Azizi, "Iran in Syria: Decision-Making Actors, Interests and Priorities", *Institute for Regional Studies, Shahid Beheshti University*, 2018, 4.

military level are left out as was the case of the European Union. As pointed out by the Senior fellow at Carnegie Europe Richard Youngs, "the Assad's regime ascendency has certainly pushed the EU and European governments onto the back foot".[94] He also stressed that the EU was not invited to a meeting between Turkey and Russia on this topic in 2018.[95] This marginalization is even further elaborated upon by one of the EU officials interviewed when he underlined that "Astana has become a way of managing their military might in Syria".[96] The political gains and losses of stakeholders in the Syrian conflict mostly rely on their military capabilities and their ability to make use of them.

*The EU between Civilian Power, Geostrategic Ambitions and Military Desires*

If the European Union needs to "learn the language of power",[97] the Syrian civil war is an interesting starting point. This paper so far showed that the EU can almost exclusively act as a civilian power in such an intricate conflict and that this very civilian power has severe limits. However, it is to be acknowledged that the EU gradually scaled up its resources in terms of defence policies and military capabilities. The launch of the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) or the European Peace Facility (EPF) — endowed with €2 billion more than the former African Peace Facility — are examples of an increased EU engagement in building up further military capacities. The development of such instruments demonstrates the EU's willingness to go beyond its limited civilian power. In line with the EU Global Strategy, this approach reveals that the EU's self-perception has evolved throughout the last decade from an idealistic approach to a more realistic one.

Yet, this conceptual repositioning is not sufficient. Both at what it represents in terms of resources and with regard to the legal constraints weighing on the EU — the CFSP remaining intergovernmental —, the EU finds itself unfit to act in the Syrian conflict. As pointed out by Charles Thépaut, a researcher at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, there is a discrepancy between the operational risks that one would have to face to be able to change the power balance on the ground and what the EU is

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[94] Richard Youngs, "Syria: is Europe's influence in the region finished?", *The Conversation*, 6 December 2018.
[95] *Ibid.*
[96] Interview with EU Official 1, *op. cit*.
[97] "The EU needs to learn the language of power", *Financial Times*, 1 January 2020.

capable to mobilize.[98] Furthermore, he added that EU countries need to have a joint reflection on political and military projection means in a conflict situation for the EU to become credible.[99] Such reasoning, applied to the Syrian conflict, led scholars to affirm that:

> [t]he Syrian war has formed a Hobbesian-style jungle society from the perspective of political philosophy, whereby it is clearly not a suitable 'field' for the EU to exert diplomatic influence, and in which the weakness of the EU's military power is fully exposed.[100]

Nevertheless, it is correct to say that the EU's military power is nascent rather than inexistent. In addition to the EU's conceptual shift embodied in the 2016 Global Strategy, it shows that the EU is *de facto* more than a value-based civilian power. This constitutes the paradox and the difficulty to characterize the EU's nature on the international stage, more specifically in intricate fields such as the Syrian civil war.

For years, the academic field of EU Studies has been filled with scholars seeking to characterize the EU's power and behaviour on the international stage. Some elaborated on the concept of 'transformative power Europe', "the attempt to transform political and economic structures of third countries",[101] notably through the promotion of values and diffusion of norms. The concept is directly linked with the notion of democratization, and therefore naturally faces difficulties when confronted with the so-called 'democracy-stabilization dilemma'. At the conceptual level, the ability for the EU to *actually* transform political and economic structures is questioned and, at a practical level, the EU cannot apply its policies in a consistent way.[102] Consequently, it is possible to affirm that the 'transformative power Europe' does not offer an accurate conceptualization to explain the EU's ability to act and to achieve results — or not — regarding the Syrian conflict.

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[98] Interview with Charles Thépaut, Visiting fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, video call, 11 March 2021.
[99] *Ibid.*
[100] Zhao Chen, Jizhou Zhao and Mengmeng Huang, *op. cit.*, Chapter 1, section 2, "the challenges of the radicalized cosmopolitan idea", §4, Perlego.
[101] Tanja Börzel, "Transformative Power Europe? The EU Promotion of Good Governance in Areas of Limited Statehood", *Free Universität Berlin*, 2009, 1.
[102] Tanja Börzel and Bidzina Lebanidze, "'The transformative power of Europe' beyond enlargement: the EU's performance in promoting democracy in its neighbourhood", *East European Politics* 33, no 1 (2017), 17-35.

Another concept that can be relevant to characterize the EU's stance towards the Syrian conflict is 'normative power Europe'.[103] Defined as a third path between 'civilian' and 'military' power by Ian Manners, his initial idea was that the EU has the ability to shape the conception of normality *inter alia* through the diffusion of norms.[104] In the Syrian case, the EU tried to achieve a normative objective through civilian means, but it did not succeed. As such, the vision according to which 'normative power Europe' would be a third conceptual path between civilian and military power is inaccurate. It is rather a complementary grid of analysis that can be added to the civilian or military nature of power — or even both. Manners himself acknowledged in 2009 "that, in practice, 'normative power' was often used alongside material stimuli of physical coercion".[105] Although not 'physical' in the literal sense of the terms, the EU did try to coerce the regime in the name of its values while promoting its norms. Drawing on the findings of this paper, the EU's role in the Syrian conflict can be assessed as that of a 'geopolitical-aspiring civilian normative power'.

## Conclusion: The EU Facing the Reality of Geopolitics in Syria

This paper studied the EU's involvement in the Syrian civil war with a focus on its conflict mediation policies. It explored to what extent the EU's mediation policies in Syria reveal the shortcomings of the EU as a civilian power. The paper argues that there is a discrepancy between what the EU expects to achieve in the field of conflict mediation policies in Syria and how effective it really is.

Based on official documents, secondary literature and expert interviews, the paper assessed the European Union's effectiveness as 'relatively low'. Yet, its discourses and aspirations reflect a high level of ambition — albeit full of paradoxes. The paper illustrates the existence of a gap between the EU's expectations about its own capabilities and their effectiveness. The case study illustrates that the EU's architecture, decision-making processes, and resources, are not adapted to act in such an intricate

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[103] The notion of 'normative power Europe' was thrown into the academic debate in the field of the EU studies by Ian Manners in 2002 and is still, to this day, debated among the researchers. Nonetheless, it laid down a new conceptual approach to understand the EU's actions and its identity on the international stage that grew as a new way of approaching EU studies.

[104] Ian Manners, "Normative Power Europe: A contradiction in terms?", *Journal of Common Market Studies* 40, no. 2 (2002), 235-258.

[105] Ekaterina Savorskaya, "The concept of the European Union's normative power", *Baltic Region* 7, no. 4 (2015), 69.

field as the Syrian civil war. The military dimension of the conflict and the *realpolitik* games of many stakeholders hindered the EU from undertaking substantial actions and eventually excluded it from the ongoing processes, both at the UN and in the Astana framework.

Building on this assessment, the paper further explored the impact of this finding and questioned how it can help conceptualize the nature of the EU as an international actor. The EU has, at an institutional level, gradually acknowledged the need to develop further capacities for autonomous action, including in the military sphere. More than a simple civilian actor and yet not a military power, torn between the promotion of values and the defence of its interests, the European Union has to reconcile all these elements and cannot adopt the same realistic-before-all approach as other actors. Due to its *sui generis* nature,[106] the EU is forced to develop new behaviour and approaches. Although not conclusive in the Syrian case that has underlined the weaknesses of the EU as a civilian power, Brussels' mindset can be characterized as a 'geopolitical-aspiring civilian normative power'. However, although the strategic and conceptual path is relevant with regard to the EU's aspirations, the lack of political resources is blatant. Ultimately, although composed of 27 member states, the EU remains quite alone in its strategy to face the Syrian conflict.

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[106] Laura Boşilcă, "The European Union - A 'Sui Generis' International Diplomatic Actor: Challenges Posed to the International Diplomatic Law", *Romanian Journal of European Affairs* 14, no. 1 (2014), 22-33.

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