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Ethiopia and the Tigray War: Limits and Challenges of EU Policy in a Fragmented and Contested Region

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Ethiopia and the Tigray War: Limits and Challenges of EU Policy in a Fragmented and Contested Region

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Abstract

The Horn of Africa is a main item in the Africa policy of the European Union. The EU and its member states have traditionally considered Ethiopia, due to its population, economic size and military capacities, the strategic partner for regional stability. This assumption has led the Europeans to turn a blind eye to Ethiopia's internal dynamics. In fact, the constitutional, ideological and ethnic composition of Ethiopia provides fertile ground for fragmentation to spread and even escalate into violence, as the brutal war fought between the federal government and Tigray's rebels in 2020–22 attests to. With a special focus on the war, this report analyses the measures that the EU has put in place to reduce the fragmentation in and around Ethiopia, as well as the effects of competition between external players and divisions within the EU itself.

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Introduction

The Horn of Africa (HoA) is a main item in the Africa policy agenda of the European Union. Located between the Red Sea and the Sahel, the Horn is a strategic region in terms of trade, migration and security. The Union and its member states have traditionally looked at Ethiopia, the Horn's hegemonic country thanks to its demographic and economic size as well as military capacities, as a strategic partner for regional stability. However, this assumption has led the Europeans to neglect Ethiopia's internal dynamics – thus underestimating potential instability spillovers stemming from Ethiopia's political, social and ethnic fractures. This mismatch has been particularly evident during the crisis in Tigray, Ethiopia's northern region that has been involved in an armed rebellion against the federal government in Addis Ababa for the last two years. With a special focus on the Tigray war, this report analyses the measures that the EU has put in place to reduce the fragmentation in and around the country, while also considering how the EU has – or has not – mitigated the competing actions taken by other external players and divisions within the Union itself.

1. The context of the EU policy

In this report we use the concepts of regional fragmentation, multipolar competition and intra-EU contestation as constraints on the policies of EU institutions and member states, which we consider under the broad framework of EU foreign and security policy (EUFSP). Regional fragmentation refers to geographical areas where states have a diminished ability to set and enforce rules (sub-national and state fragmentation) and are no longer capable of generating collaborative patterns of shared governance with their neighbours (regional fragmentation proper). Multipolar competition relates to the interaction between multiple powers espousing contrasting views of global and regional orders. Intra-EU contestation refers to acts by EU member states driven by domestic incentives that may curtail the Union's ability to develop a more effective foreign and security policy.¹

¹ For a lengthier discussion of the three concepts of multipolar competition, regional fragmentation and internal contestation and the ways in which they affect the governance structures of EU foreign and security policy, see Riccardo Alcaro et al., "A Joined-Up Union, a Stronger Europe. A Conceptual

1.1 The HoA: A fragmented region penetrated by multipolar rivalries

The HoA, which comprises Ethiopia, Somalia (including the *de facto* independent Somaliland), Eritrea, Djibouti, Sudan and South Sudan, is one of the world's most conflict-prone regions. From a security perspective, it offers a “cornucopia” of violence, interstate and civil wars, international military interventions, maritime piracy, jihadism and non-violent popular uprisings.²

National, ethnic and religious identity clashes, mixed with a high level of distrust in and between governments, are among the main drivers of regional fragmentation. They fuel intra-state divisions and prompt countries to focus inwardly with little or no interest in fostering regional cohesiveness. In fact, HoA countries often seize on identity dynamics to gain advantage or destabilise their neighbours. Interdependence, geographical proximity and common history have not proven sufficient for state and non-state entities to forge a regional identity that could also have political and economic meanings, making the “Horn of Africa” a mere geographical expression. As a result, regional organisations such as the Inter-Governmental Authority on Development (IGAD) are largely dysfunctional and unable to address the conflicts and crises besetting the HoA.

The perpetual weakness of states and their growing need for external financial resources, together with the region strategic geographic position, means that the HoA has been subjected to considerable external involvement.³ From the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War, to the Chinese development ambitions of the 1990s, as well as to the more recent involvement of Turkey and the Arab Gulf states out of concern that instability in the HoA could extend to the Persian Gulf, the region has been at the centre of global and regional actors' competition.

Framework to Investigate EU Foreign and Security Policy in a Complex and Contested World”, in *JOINT Research Papers*, No. 8 (August 2022), <https://www.jointproject.eu/?p=969>.

² Alex de Waal, *The Real Politics of the Horn of Africa. Money, War and the Business of Power*, Cambridge/Malden, Polity Press, 2015.

³ Aleksí Ylönen, “A Scramble of External Powers and Local Agency in the Horn of Africa”, in *CIDOB Notes Internacionals*, No. 280 (October 2022), <https://doi.org/10.24241/NotesInt.2022/280/en>.

1.2 Fragmentation and competition in and around Ethiopia

Home to about 117 million people, and with a GDP almost thrice as big as that of Sudan and much larger still than that of the other HoA countries,⁴ Ethiopia is by far the largest country in the region. It is also riven by identity-driven conflict dynamics, both internally and with its neighbours. The combination of its size and identity-based fault-lines makes it a test case to analyse how fragmentation works in the Horn, and how it interacts with larger geopolitical rivalries.

1.2.1 National and regional fragmentation

Ethiopia's main political actors are divided along ethnic lines. The ethno-federalist nature of the country's political landscape, enshrined in its constitution, reflects the existence of multiple centres of power that undermine the legitimate monopoly of the use of force and the ability of the federal state to set and enforce norms and rules. The 2020–22 civil war between the central government and the armed militia of the Tigray region, the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), is a powerful testimony to this. The conflict has had the effect of generating a process of approximation between Ethiopia's many political actors that oppose the TPLF, which was the country's dominant political force until 2018. The ruling Prosperity Party, led by Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, is a product of a merger between three different political forces which were member parties of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), namely the Amhara Democratic Party, the Oromo Democratic Party and the Southern Ethiopian People's Democratic Movement.⁵ These three founding members were joined by five other affiliate parties of the EPRDF.⁶ What brings these political parties and their elites together is the ethno-nationalist lens through which they view the Ethiopian state and its political landscape. While they feel equally threatened by TPLF's potential return to power or greater autonomy in Tigray or even its secession, their alliance

⁴ Data on HoA GDP is available on the website of the International Monetary Fund (IMF): <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/WEO/weo-database/2022/April/weo-report>.

⁵ Yohannes Gedamu, "The New Political Party of Ethiopia's Abiy Holds Much Promise But Faces Significant Hurdles", in *Quartz*, 13 December 2019, <https://qz.com/africa/1767933>.

⁶ "The EPRDF Officially Ends; The Prosperity Party Begins", in *Ezega News*, 26 December 2019, <https://www.ezega.com/News/NewsDetails/7599>.

is more tactical than ideological.⁷ Underlying the formation of the Prosperity Party is therefore not a desire to strengthen a common national identity (though some may support this), but that of preserving a system of power and resource distribution that is ethnically based.

The main factors behind identity-induced fragmentation in Ethiopia include internal power struggles between the elites representing the three most influential ethnic groups, namely the Amhara, Oromo and Tigrayans; competition for resources (or, as bluntly put to us by an Ethiopian expert, simple “greed”);⁸ and historical grievances. The power struggle is rooted in historical allocation of power originated from the conquest and annexation of territories between Ethiopia’s various groups.⁹ Legitimate grievances are then instrumentalised by the elites to drum up support for their continued rule through the use of ethno-nationalist rhetoric that threatens incumbent centres of power, leading to the creation of political narratives that stir violent confrontation.¹⁰

Between 1991 and 2018 the TPLF-led federal government maintained a relatively stable institutional setup by tailoring special privileges to different political actors. The TPLF’s rule was based on relations of personal clientele between the federal and local governments, and the creation of subordinate power centres that provided some sort of authoritarian stability. This arrangement was ethnically defined and was therefore ultimately unsustainable as it continued to drive a wedge between the various actors to the detriment of national cohesion. Occasionally, local power centres employed repressive tactics towards those they claimed to represent. In essence, stability was maintained via ethnically defined patronage and repression.¹¹

⁷ Terrence Lyons, “The Origins of the EPRDF and the Prospects for the Prosperity Party”, in *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, Vol. 56, No. 5 (August 2021), p. 1051-1063, DOI 10.1177/00219096211007658; Interview 1 with an Ethiopian political scientist, August 2022.

⁸ Interview 1 with an Ethiopian political scientist, August 2022; Interview 2 with a European diplomat based in Ethiopia, November 2022.

⁹ Interview 2. See also Richard Reid, “A Very Ethiopian Tragedy: Tigray, the TPLF, and Cyclical History”, in *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs*, 28 January 2021, <https://gjia.georgetown.edu/?p=6188>; and Shimelis Mulugeta Kene and Solen Feyissa, *The Pitfalls of Ethiopian Elites’ War of Narratives: Part I*, McGill Centre for Human Rights and Legal Pluralism, 19 November 2020, <https://www.mcgill.ca/humanrights/node/2305>.

¹⁰ Shimelis Mulugeta Kene and Solen Feyissa, *The Pitfalls of Ethiopian Elites’ War of Narratives: Part II*, McGill Centre for human Rights and Legal Pluralism, 22 January 2021, <https://www.mcgill.ca/humanrights/node/2325>.

¹¹ Paulos Chanie, “Clientelism and Ethiopia’s Post-1991 Decentralisation”, in *The Journal of Modern*

Another major component of Ethiopia's identity problem that drives fragmentation is the ethno-ideological debate between ethno-nationalism and pan-Ethiopianism. The former is about continuity of the status quo configured by identity politics, while subscribers to the latter, who envision themselves as progressives to eradicate inequality, take a revisionist approach to the Ethiopian conception of statehood.¹²

The nature of the Ethiopian constitution itself puts a spotlight on the structural dimension of identity-induced fragmentation.¹³ The Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia accords such a level of autonomy to the (identity-based) constituent parts of the country that it can be argued that there is no such a thing as sovereignty of Ethiopia as a whole,¹⁴ which ethnic groups like the Tigrayans have attempted to use as a justification for secession claims.¹⁵ The constitution has established a structural foundation that reinforces and in fact incentivises ethnic-based political relations. It explicitly recognises the sovereign power that resides in the "Nations, Nationalities and Peoples of Ethiopia", creating the conditions where each member state of the federation can challenge the central government.¹⁶ The different regions even have the legal right to own their military. This arrangement has had some positive effects.¹⁷ For example, it has allowed regional forces in Ethiopia's Somali region to repel advances by the armed extremist Islamist group that controls much of Somalia, Al-Shabaab, without much intervention from the federal defence forces.¹⁸ This instance has remained a relatively isolated case, however. Most of the times the ethno-federalist nature of the constitution has

African Studies, Vol. 45, No. 3 (September 2007), p. 355-384, DOI 10.1017/S0022278X07002662.

¹² Interview 2 with a European diplomat based in Ethiopia, November 2022. See also Shimelis Mulugeta Kene and Solen Feyissa, "Pan-Ethiopianists vs Ethno-Nationalists: The Narrative Elite War in Ethiopia", in *The Elephant*, 27 November 2020, <https://www.theelephant.info/?p=13220>.

¹³ Interview 3 with a peace and security expert, September 2022.

¹⁴ Legesse Tigabu Mengie, "Ethnic Federalism and Conflict in Ethiopia: What Lessons Can Other Jurisdictions Draw?", in *African Journal of International and Comparative Law*, Vol. 23, No. 3 (October 2015), p. 462-475, DOI 10.3366/ajicl.2015.0131.

¹⁵ Marishet Mohammed Hamza, "TPLF-OLA Alliance is a Prelude to Tigray's Secession", in *Ethiopian Insight*, 2 September 2021, <https://www.ethiopia-insight.com/?p=317528>.

¹⁶ Ethiopia, *Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia*, 8 December 1994, Article 8. The text of the constitution is available here: <https://www.fao.org/faolex/results/details/en/c/LEX-FAOC129684>.

¹⁷ Interview 3 with a peace and security expert, September 2022.

¹⁸ "Somali Region Says Al-Shabab Militants Entered through Afdheer Zone, 'Completely Destroyed' by Regional Forces", in *Addis Standard*, 25 July 2022, <https://addisstandard.com/?p=28429>.

provided a legal basis to contest, including with armed force, the authority of the federal state. An expert interviewed for this report has gone as far as to say that the constitution is the primary mechanism used by elites to pursue agendas that undermine state authority.¹⁹

The combination of the above-mentioned elements morphed into a number of crises within Ethiopia, including the case of Benishangul-Gumuz, a regional state in north-western Ethiopia that in the last four years has experienced violent conflict linked to ethnic marginalisation, non-indigenous communities' expansionism (primarily Amhara and Oromo) and under-development issues.²⁰ Much larger and more violent is the one in Tigray, which descended into open conflict in November 2020.²¹ Oversimplifying, the Tigray crisis was fuelled by: resource competition, theft, misconception over the role of non-indigenous ethnic groups on resource deprivation, discomfort over migration trends, territorial re-arrangement that split one ethnic group into different administrative parts and merge two different ethnic groups into the same part, political exclusion, proliferation of firearms, as well as destructive use of social media on framing the issues.²²

1.2.2 Multipolar competition

The HoA has always been crowded with regional and global actors due to its geographic proximity to the Red Sea, a strategic area for trade between the East and the West. In a region where deadly and long-decade conflicts have consistently disrupted peace, Ethiopia has been widely regarded not just as key to the eventual stabilisation of the region, but as a powerful ally to pursue national goals. For instance, when the United States revamped its engagement in the HoA following the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks, Ethiopia became its major

¹⁹ Interview 2 with a European diplomat based in Ethiopia, November 2022.

²⁰ Tsegaye Birhanu, "Benishangul-Gumuz Regional State: May – November 2022", in *PRF Conflict Trend Analysis*, 2022, <https://riftvalley.net/node/1386>.

²¹ Bekalu Atnafu Taye, "Ethnic Federalism and Conflict in Ethiopia", in *African Journal on Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 17, No. 2 (December 2017), p. 41-66, <https://www.ajol.info/index.php/ajcr/article/view/167170>.

²² Mulunesh Dessie Admassu, "Causes of Ethnic Conflict in Ethiopia and Its Effect on Development: The Case of 'Amhara' and 'Gumuz' Communities", in *Journal of Sustainable Development in Africa*, Vol. 21, No. 3 (September 2019), p. 64-79, <https://jsd-africa.com/Jsda/2019%20V21%20No3%20Fall/article19-03.html>.

partner in counter-terrorism operations against al-Shabaab.²³ Ethiopia, whose economy has been growing fast for fifteen years, represents the most successful instances of China's growing involvement in Africa.²⁴ The Arab Gulf countries and Turkey have intensified their activism in the region and therefore in Ethiopia. The United Arab Emirates, which has provided aid, investment, military supplies, has looked at Ethiopia as a strategic country – indeed, after the 2018 election of Abiy, who promised privatisation and development reforms, the Ethiopian-Emirati relations experienced a boost.²⁵ Ethiopia has also become a main importer of Turkish weapons systems, which Ankara provides not just for commercial reasons but because it fears that instability in Addis Ababa could spill over into Somalia, where it has established a permanent military presence.²⁶ In recent years, Iran has also increased its presence in Ethiopia to counter-balance the influence of its Arab rivals and the United States.²⁷ Finally, Ethiopia is at the centre of Russia's Africa policy to limit Western sway in the continent.²⁸ This is the complex international context in which EUFSP unfolds.

2. The EUFSP towards Ethiopia

2.1 EUFSP towards Ethiopia before the Tigray crisis

Traditionally, the EU's policy in the Horn focused on development, but with the adoption of its first regional strategy in 2011, the Union shifted towards security

²³ Negasa Gelana Debisa and Greg Simons, "Security Diplomacy as a Response to Horn of Africa's Security Complex: Ethio-US Partnership against al-Shabaab", in *Cogent Social Sciences*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (2021), Article 1893423, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311886.2021.1893423>.

²⁴ Lukas Fiala, *Why Ethiopia's Fate Matters to China*, ISPI, 26 November 2021, <https://www.ispionline.it/en?p=58483>.

²⁵ International Crisis Group, "The United Arab Emirates in the Horn of Africa", in *Middle East and North Africa Briefings*, No. 65 (6 November 2018), <https://www.crisisgroup.org/node/7714>.

²⁶ Abdolgader Mohamed Ali, "UAE, Turkey, and Iran: Why Rival Powers Are Backing Ethiopia's Government", in *The New Arab*, 14 February 2022, <https://www.newarab.com/node/1289463>.

²⁷ Banafsheh Keynoush, "Iran to Remain a Key Partner for Ethiopia in the Tigray Conflict", in *MEI Policy Analysis*, 26 January 2022, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/iran-remain-key-partner-ethiopia-tigray-conflict>.

²⁸ Giulia Paravicini, "Lavrov Denigrates West's Stance towards Africa during Ethiopia Visit", in *Reuters*, 27 July 2022, <http://reut.rs/3PDtOA4>.

matters – especially in Somalia and Sudan – with a focus on fighting piracy²⁹ and terrorism, as well as management of irregular migration.³⁰ After the piracy threat was mostly kept at bay,³¹ the EU concentrated on terrorism and stability focusing on Sudan and especially Ethiopia.³²

The perceived need to keep strong security ties with the Horn's largest country by far has generated a certain reluctance by EU countries to single out Addis Ababa for alleged violations of human rights and international law, and to scrutinise the reach and implementation of domestic reforms. When in 2006 Ethiopia intervened in support of Somalia's weak government against the Islamic Courts Union (ICU), a broad-based extremist group that had taken control of Mogadishu, the EU backed the operation and even provided logistical support to Ethiopia's seeming invasion.³³ According to Addis Ababa, the ICU had links with terrorist groups and irredentist motives that would threaten its own sovereignty.³⁴ The conflict escalated dramatically and all parties – the Somali Transitional Federal Government, the Ethiopian military and insurgent forces – committed widespread and serious violations of the laws of war.³⁵ Human rights organisations such as Human Rights Watch accused the United States, the EU and its member states of

²⁹ In 2011 the EU established the naval counter-piracy operation, EUNAVFOR Atalanta, which provides protection to World Food Programme and AMISOM shipping, and contributes to deterring piracy and protecting vulnerable shipping prosecution and detention capacities.

³⁰ Council of the European Union, *Council Conclusions on the Horn of Africa*, 14 November 2011, https://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/en/foraff/126052.pdf. See also Eric Pichon, "EU Strategy in the Horn of Africa", in *EPRS At a Glance*, December 2016, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EPRS_ATA\(2016\)595840](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EPRS_ATA(2016)595840); Council of the European Union, *The Horn of Africa: A Geo-Strategic Priority for the EU. Council Conclusions*, 10 May 2021, <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-8135-2021-INIT/en/pdf>.

³¹ According to the EU, "the Operation ATALANTA contributed to the suppression of piracy off the coast of Somalia, with a 100% success rate in protecting World Food Programme (WFP) shipping to Somalia. No successful pirate attacks took place against merchant vessels since May 2012". See European Commission and EEAS, *Annual Report. Horn of Africa Regional Action Plan, 2015/2016* (SWD/2017/163), 11 May 2017, p. 4, <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-9095-2017-INIT/en/pdf>.

³² Alexander Rondos, "The Horn of Africa. Its Strategic Importance for Europe, the Gulf States, and Beyond", in *Horizons*, No. 6 (Winter 2016), p. 150-160, <https://www.cirsd.org/en/horizons/horizons-winter-2016--issue-no-6/the-horn-of-africa---its-strategic-importance-for-europe-the-gulf-states-and-beyond>.

³³ Jeffrey Gettleman, "Ethiopia Hits Somali Targets, Declaring War", in *The New York Times*, 25 December 2006, <https://www.nytimes.com/2006/12/25/world/africa/25somalia.html>.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Human Rights Watch, "So Much to Fear". *War Crimes and the Devastation of Somalia*, 8 December 2008, <https://www.hrw.org/node/255780>.

failing to publicly condemn violations of international humanitarian and human rights law by all parties.³⁶

When Abiy became prime minister in 2018 on a promise to ease restrictions on civil and political freedoms and tensions with the neighbours, the EU's leniency toward Ethiopia's government further consolidated. This approach was shared by the United States and combined with great reluctance among Western diplomats to undertake a comprehensive analysis of the effectiveness of Abiy's announced reforms in addressing long-simmering inter-ethnic tensions.

The Europeans could be excused for their early enthusiasm for Abiy. Shortly after being appointed prime minister in 2018, Abiy announced he would release thousands of political prisoners, lift restrictions on independent media, back a woman to become president, create a gender parity cabinet and establish a ministry of peace, all measures that won him the applause from the international community.³⁷ The positive attitude toward Abiy was further strengthened when he promoted an Ethiopia-Eritrea peace deal in July 2018, which ended a two decades-long on-and-off war over border issues, which heralded Abiy not only as a reformist, but as a regional unifier and a peacemaker. In 2019, Abiy earned the Nobel Peace Prize and was hailed in most of the European capitals and international conferences.³⁸

In 2019, the newly appointed Commission led by Ursula von der Leyen identified Abiy as the primary interlocutor to relaunch European engagement with Africa. Von der Leyen chose Addis Ababa for her first visit outside of Europe in December 2019. The main purpose of the visit was to revamp the partnership between the EU and the African Union (AU), which has its headquarter in Addis, but von der Leyen used the occasion to congratulate Ethiopia's prime minister for winning the Nobel Peace Prize and present him as a sort of African, or even global, saviour.³⁹

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ethiopian Embassy in London, *Prime Minister Abiy Receives Further Support for Reforms in Latest Whistle-Stop Tour of Europe*, 13 February 2019, <https://www.ethioembassy.org.uk/?p=4660>.

³⁸ "Ethiopia's Abiy Ahmed: The Nobel Prize Winner Who Went to War", in *BBC News*, 11 October 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-43567007>.

³⁹ European Commission, *Von der Leyen Focuses on Unity and Partnerships in Her First Visit to Africa*, 7 December 2019, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/AC_19_6713.

“You’ve shown to the continent and to the world that any conflict can be brought to an end”, she said referring to the Ethiopia-Eritrea peace deal.⁴⁰ Together with the European Commissioner for International Partnerships Jutta Urpilainen, von der Leyen announced a new package of EU support to Ethiopia to help the country’s political transition.⁴¹ In early 2020, European Council President Charles Michel visited Addis Ababa for the EU-AU Summit, addressing the following words to Abiy: “It is an honour and privilege for me to take the floor as the voice of Europe before you, in Ethiopia, the land of origins and the cradle of the last Nobel Peace Prize.”⁴² In October 2020, a month before the beginning of the Tigray war, the EU High Representative (HR) for foreign and security policy, Josep Borrell, visited Addis Ababa to keep up the momentum behind a strengthened EU-AU partnership, while 7.5 tons of coronavirus testing kits donated by Germany as part of Team Europe efforts to help partners to deal with the pandemic were delivered to the Ethiopians.⁴³

While the Europeans were still bent on investing in the relationship with the Abiy-led government, alarming signs of potential conflict in several Ethiopian regions were becoming more and more visible. In 2019 nearly three million people had fled their homes due to ethnic clashes.⁴⁴ The assassination of prominent individuals – such as the army’s chief of staff and the leader of the Amhara region aggravated ethnic tensions.⁴⁵ Violence that followed the killing of the musician Hachalu Hundessa, who belonged to the country’s largest region, Oromia, claimed

⁴⁰ Ethiopia and Eritrea, *Agreement on Peace, Friendship and Comprehensive Cooperation between the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia and the State of Eritrea*, 16 September 2018, <https://www.peaceagreements.org/view/2098>.

⁴¹ European Commission, *Von der Leyen Focuses on Unity and Partnerships in Her First Visit to Africa*, cit.

⁴² European Council, *Speech by President Charles Michel at the Official Dinner of the African Union Summit in Addis Ababa*, 9 February 2020, <https://europa.eu/!UX88Wu>.

⁴³ European Commission, *Visit to Ethiopia by High Representative/Vice-President Borrell and Commissioner Lenarčič to strengthen EU-Africa Partnership*, 8 October 2020, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_20_1859.

⁴⁴ Tom Wilson, “Ethnic Violence in Ethiopia Has Forced Nearly 3 Million People from Their Homes”, in *Los Angeles Times*, 30 May 2019, <https://www.latimes.com/world/la-fg-ethiopia-ethnic-violence-millions-displaced-20190530-story.html>.

⁴⁵ “Abiy Ahmed’s Reforms in Ethiopia Lift the Lid on Ethnic Tensions”, in *BBC News*, 29 June 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-48803815>. Also see Max Intelligence, “Assassinations of Army Chief of Staff, Amhara Region President Underscore Fragility of Political Transition – Ethiopia Alert”, in *Max Security Blog*, 25 June 2019, <https://www.max-security.com/?p=14957>.

more than 150 lives.⁴⁶ Despite Abiy being from Oromia himself, he was accused by Oromo activists of repressing dissent. In November 2019 Abiy disbanded the historical ruling coalition of regional political parties, which were then gathered into a single organisation, the Prosperity Party. Tigray's TPLF, traditionally the main political player in that coalition, became more agitated about its reduction of power, not least because in parallel Abiy was purging many TPLF appointees from federal institutions.⁴⁷ In March 2020, frictions between the government and TPLF increased after the electoral board said it could not run national polls set for August because of the Covid-19 pandemic. In defiance of the federal government, the TPLF held regional elections for its state council in September. The election was dismissed as illegal by the government, to which the TPLF replied that Abiy's administration had no authority as its term should have expired. In response, Abiy diverted funds for social welfare programmes from Tigray's executive, infuriating TPLF leaders. In parallel, tensions around the control of federal military units stationed in Tigray mounted, and in early November Abiy sent troops into Tigray. The government accused the TPLF of attacking federal troops based in the region, while the TPLF accused Abiy of punishing the region for the September vote.⁴⁸ Adding to the tensions in Tigray was the sorry state of the Ethiopia-Eritrea peace deal, with trade routes between the two countries still blocked due to simmering tensions between Asmara and the TPLF itself. Violence in Tigray escalated rapidly, with hundreds of soldiers and an untold number of civilians killed.⁴⁹ Within a month, the United Nations estimated that some two million out of a population of six were in need of assistance in and around Tigray and one million had been displaced by the fighting.⁵⁰ Three issues soon came to shape the war: the ethnicisation of the conflict; Abiy's desire to centralise power at the expense of

⁴⁶ Tom Gardner, "How a Musician's Death Unleashed Violence and Death in Ethiopia", in *The Guardian*, 3 August 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/p/eefkk>.

⁴⁷ Interview 2 with a European diplomat based in Ethiopia, November 2022; Interview 5 with a peace and security analyst specialised in Ethiopia, July 2022. See also: International Crisis Group, "Bridging the Divide in Ethiopia's North", in *Africa Briefings*, No. 156 (12 June 2020), <https://www.crisisgroup.org/node/13822>.

⁴⁸ For an analysis of the run-up and early phase of the Tigray war, see International Crisis Group, "Finding a Path to Peace in Ethiopia's Tigray Region", in *Africa Briefings*, No. 167 (11 February 2021), <https://www.crisisgroup.org/node/15767>.

⁴⁹ Simon Marks, "Ethiopia's Internal Conflict Explained", in *Politico*, 18 November 2020, <https://www.politico.eu/?p=1519474>.

⁵⁰ UN News, *Ethiopian Government and UN Strike Deal for 'Unimpeded' Humanitarian Access in Tigray*, 2 December 2020, <https://news.un.org/en/node/1079112>.

his early reformist agenda; the internationalisation of the conflict with the almost immediate involvement of Eritrean troops alongside the federal government.⁵¹

2.2 EUFSP towards Ethiopia after the outbreak of the Tigray war

In order to mitigate Ethiopia's fragmentation and potential spill-over of instability into neighbouring states, the EU has called for unhindered humanitarian access to the war-affected region, in particular Tigray, suspended financial support for the Ethiopian government, and imposed sanctions on Eritrea.⁵²

Initially, the EU prioritised the protection of civilians and humanitarian access to the Tigray region.⁵³ In late November 2020, the EU Crisis Management Commissioner Janez Lenarčič flew to Ethiopia, hoping to convince the country's peace minister, Muferiat Kamil, to end the weeks-old blockade for international aid to Tigray.⁵⁴ The EU also immediately gave support the Sudanese government, allocating four million euro to accommodate the most urgent humanitarian needs of the over 40,000 Ethiopians who had fled into Sudan.⁵⁵ Meanwhile, the EU tried to use its financial weight as leverage to de-escalate the conflict. In December 2020, the Commission suspended its nearly 90 million euro in development aid to Ethiopia from its 2021–27 budget.⁵⁶ The EU had provided Ethiopia with 815 million euro in aid during the 2014–2020 budgetary period,⁵⁷ on the top of more than 400 million euro from the EU Trust Fund for Africa, so the suspension of the aid for the next 7-year cycle was anything but irrelevant.

⁵¹ Martin Plaut, "The Tigray War", in *The Review of the African Political Economy*, 8 December 2020, <https://roape.net/?p=23003>.

⁵² Josep Borrell, "Time to Stop the Forgotten War in Tigray", in *HR/VP Blog*, 11 August 2022, <https://www.eeas.europa.eu/node/419095>.

⁵³ Theodore Murphy, "How Europe Can Stop Ethiopia's Slide into a Regional War", in *ECFR Commentaries*, 15 December 2020, <https://ecfr.eu/?p=65168>.

⁵⁴ Council of European Union, *Ethiopia: Declaration by the High Representative on behalf of the European Union*, 25 December 2020, <https://europa.eu/!Tj63tJ>.

⁵⁵ UN News, *Ethiopian Government and UN Strike Deal for 'Unimpeded' Humanitarian Access in Tigray*, cit.

⁵⁶ "EU Suspends Ethiopian Budget Support over Tigray Crisis", in *Reuters*, 15 January 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-ethiopia-conflict-eu-idUSKBN29K1SS>.

⁵⁷ European External Action Service (EEAS), *Demonstrating Europe's Commitment to Africa*, 15 October 2020, <https://www.eeas.europa.eu/node/87066>.

The EU tied the end of the suspension to three main conditions: i) a ceasefire; ii) humanitarian access not only to Tigray but also to Afar and Amhara, regions where most of the displaced population could not receive aid; iii) accountability for the crimes occurred during the conflict.⁵⁸ The Ethiopian government responded with a commitment to ease restrictions on humanitarian aid agencies' access and bring all perpetrators to justice and to accept international technical assistance to undertake the investigations, but took few steps to implement such commitments.⁵⁹

The Tigray war became a growing focus of the Africa Working Party (COAFR), the EU Council's preparatory body responsible for the management of EU external policy towards sub-Saharan Africa. Through these preparatory meetings, member states agreed on a set of broad and uncontroversial conclusions, adopted by the Council in March 2021, which expressed concerns and urged all parties to immediately end violence, respect international human rights law, international humanitarian law and international refugee law. While the document called on the Ethiopian government to guarantee access to humanitarian aid in the Tigray region, it also emphasised the EU's partnership with Ethiopia and welcomed the initial commitment by the Ethiopian government to address its main concerns.⁶⁰ In June 2021 the Council condemned the atrocities, sexual and ethnic violence and other human rights violations taking place in Tigray. It also called for an immediate cessation of hostilities, unhindered humanitarian access to all areas and the immediate withdrawal of Eritrean forces fighting alongside those of the government.⁶¹

Eritrea had gotten involved in the Tigray war from the start. Reports of Eritrean troops siding with Addis Ababa's forces and allied militias circulated already in December 2020.⁶² For Eritrea, the Tigray crisis represented an occasion to take

⁵⁸ Simon Marks, "EU Considers Aid Cut to Ethiopia Amid Violence", in *Politico*, 30 November 2020, <https://www.politico.eu/?p=1533473>.

⁵⁹ UN News, *Secretary-General Welcomes Ethiopia's Pledge to Allow Humanitarian Access to Tigray*, 9 July 2021, <https://news.un.org/en/node/1095612>.

⁶⁰ Council of the European Union, *Council Conclusions on Ethiopia*, 11 March 2021, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/48785/st06902-en21.pdf>.

⁶¹ European Council, *Conclusions on External Relations*, 24 June 2021, <https://europa.eu/!Rnq9Rq>.

⁶² Phil Stewart, "Exclusive: U.S. Says Reports of Eritrean Troops in Ethiopia's Tigray are 'Credible'", in *Reuters*, 11 December 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/ethiopia-conflict-eritrea-usa-exclusive->

revenge against the TPLF, which had ruled Ethiopia during the long years of the (often violent) Ethiopia-Eritrea border dispute in 1998–2018.⁶³ The dispute ended with a full Eritrean withdrawal while the TPLF was in power.⁶⁴ Yet, Eritrea's leader Isaias Afwerki struck the peace agreement with Abiy on the assumption that the new prime minister, determined to rein in Ethiopia's ethno-nationalism and assert the centrality of the federal government, would constrain the TPLF's power.⁶⁵

In February 2021, the EU called for Eritrea to withdraw from Ethiopia and adopted sanctions against the Isaias government for alleged human rights violations, including extra-judicial killings, torture, enforced disappearances and arbitrary arrests in March.⁶⁶ However, the EU never imposed sanctions on Ethiopia, despite HR Borrell's calls to do so throughout 2021.⁶⁷

When the Tigray crisis erupted, the United States took no action, given that it was in the middle of the turbulent presidential transition between Donald Trump and Joe Biden.⁶⁸ After Biden was inaugurated and leading foreign policy positions in his cabinet confirmed, the United States followed the European approach. In April 2021, Washington suspended its foreign assistance to Ethiopia.⁶⁹ In line with European demands, the conditions set by the US Administration to the Ethiopian government to resume budget support included unfettered humanitarian access and accountability for war crimes.⁷⁰ Later that year, the Biden Administration targeted Eritrea's senior military staff, the Eritrean Defence Force and Eritrea's sole

idUSKBN28L06R.

⁶³ Ayenat Mersie, Giulia Paravicini and Katharine Houreld, "Dual Agenda. In Ethiopia's Civil War, Eritrea's Army Exacted Deadly Vengeance on Old Foes", in *Reuters Special Reports*, 1 November 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/ethiopia-conflict-eritrea>.

⁶⁴ Martin Plaut, "The Tigray War", cit.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Georja Calvin-Smith and Laura Di Biasio, "EU Calls for Withdrawal of Eritrean Troops from Ethiopia's Tigray Region" (video), in *Eye on Africa – France 24*, 9 February 2021, <https://www.france24.com/en/tv-shows/eye-on-africa/20210209-eu-calls-for-withdrawal-of-eritrean-troops-from-tigray>.

⁶⁷ See Josep Borrell, "#Tigray is shattered by systematic violations of human rights, war crimes and crimes against humanity used as a weapon", in Twitter, 18 October 2021, <https://twitter.com/JosepBorrellF/status/1450168864155787266>.

⁶⁸ Interview 6 with a EU official, October 2021.

⁶⁹ Nike Ching, "US Continues Non-Humanitarian 'Assistance Pause' to Pressure Ethiopia to End Tigray Conflict", in *VOA News*, 27 April 2021, <https://www.voanews.com/a/6205105.html>.

⁷⁰ EEAS, *Ethiopia: EU and US Special Envoys Visit to Mekelle, Tigray*, 2 August 2022, <https://www.eeas.europa.eu/node/418834>.

political party, the People's Front for Democracy and Justice.⁷¹

Nevertheless, neither EU nor US policy had the effect of shaping the course of the war. After an initial phase in which intense fighting resulted in an apparent decisive victory of the federal government, the TPLF fought back. A TPLF counteroffensive in mid-2021 forced the government troops to withdraw. By November, the TPLF had taken control of towns just 160 miles to the northeast of the capital.⁷² An almost desperate federal government managed to fight back thanks to drones provided by Turkey and strong popular mobilisation. Defeated, the TPLF returned to their home region in December 2021.⁷³

The TPLF offensive of mid-2021 prompted the EU to adopt a more balanced stance towards the warring parties compared to its initial highly critical approach to the way the government had handled the conflict and the humanitarian crisis in Tigray. This approach had been severely criticised by Ethiopian diplomats, who described the European narrative of the war as not reflecting reality.⁷⁴ With the mid-2021 offensive the EU realised that the TPLF shared in the responsibility for the escalation of tensions into open conflict.⁷⁵ Another factor in this regard was the release of a UN report on atrocities in Ethiopia in November 2021. Based on a joint investigation between the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission (EHRC) and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), the report highlighted the deep complexity of the conflict, underlining the involvement of a plurality of local actors responsible for abuses on civilians.⁷⁶ According to the findings, the Ethiopian National Defence Forces, Eritrean Defence

⁷¹ John Bedard, "Eritrea Blasts US Sanctions Against Its Military, Ruling Party, Officials", in *VOA News*, 12 November 2021, <https://www.voanews.com/a/6311294.html>.

⁷² Martin Chulov, "Tigrayan Forces' Capture of Two Towns Raises Fears for Ethiopian Capital", in *The Guardian*, 1 November 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/p/jebe3>.

⁷³ International Crisis Group, *A Call to Action: Averting Atrocities in Ethiopia's Tigray War*, 20 October 2022, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/node/19797>.

⁷⁴ Benjamin Fox, "EU-Ethiopia Diplomatic Feud Intensifies over Tigray Criticism", in *Euractiv*, 1 March 2021, <https://www.euractiv.com/?p=1574082>.

⁷⁵ Interview 7 with a EU official, October 2022.

⁷⁶ UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, *Report of the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission (EHRC) Joint Investigation into Alleged Violations of International Human Rights, Humanitarian and Refugee Law Committed by all Parties to the Conflict in the Tigray Region of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia*, 3 November 2021, <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3947207>.

Forces, and Tigray Special Forces and allied militias all committed serious abuses and violations of human rights as well as of humanitarian and refugee law – such as attacks on civilians, unlawful killings, extra-judicial executions, acts of torture and ill-treatment, arbitrary detentions and enforced disappearances. Also, albeit with different intensity, all parties were accused of restricting humanitarian access, particularly food assistance, in Tigray. While the report's impartiality has been questioned,⁷⁷ it did move European perceptions.

The offensive of the TPLF and the UN report contributed to hinder Borrell's efforts to impose sanctions on Ethiopia, as most EU member states wanted to avoid a total breakdown in relations between the EU and the Ethiopian government.⁷⁸ In fact, the EU decided to re-engage with national authorities. In July 2022 the Commission approved 81.5 million euro for Ethiopia, mostly for health and education in conflict-affected areas, to be channelled through NGOs, the United Nations and EU member state development agencies.⁷⁹ In October 2021, EU Special Representative for the Horn of Africa Annette Weber flew to Addis Ababa with Commissioner for International Partnerships Urpilainen to re-establish a diplomatic channel with the government in Addis.⁸⁰

In the meantime, in close-coordination with the United States, the EU lent support to an AU-led peace process. The latter had gained momentum after the TPLF's defeat in late 2021, first brokering a five-month cease-fire, from March to August 2022, and eventually a peace deal in November 2022.⁸¹ The TPLF agreed to

⁷⁷ Chidi Odinkalu et al., "Neither Impartial nor Independent: The Joint UN-EHRC Human Rights Investigation in Tigray", in *Reinventing Peace*, 11 October 2021, <https://sites.tufts.edu/reinventingpeace/?p=7812>.

⁷⁸ Interview 7 with a EU official, October 2022. HR/VP Borrell did not change his opinion and went as far as to publicly acknowledge that the EU had failed to punish grave violations of human rights. In a 2021 December interview, he said that the EU was "not able to react properly to the large-scale human rights violations, mass rapes using sexual violence as a war arm, killings and concentration camps based on ethnic belonging", neither to "take coercive measures due to the lack of unanimity in the Council". See Hans von der Burchard, "EU's Borrell Criticizes Countries over Reaction to Ethiopia Conflict", in *Politico*, 13 December 2021, <https://www.politico.eu/?p=1925781>.

⁷⁹ Vince Chadwick, "EU Planning €1B for Ethiopia to 2027", in *Devex*, 11 July 2022, <https://www.devex.com/news/103618>.

⁸⁰ European Commission, "Commissioner Urpilainen Travels to Ethiopia, Rwanda and Sudan to Reaffirm the EU's Strong Partnership with Africa", in *Daily News*, 22 October 2021, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/mex_21_5429.

⁸¹ EEAS, *Ethiopia: EU and US Special Envoys Visit to Mekelle, Tigray*, cit.

disarm and re-establish the authority of the federal government in return for the restoration of access to Tigray and basic needs to Tigrayans.⁸² Even if the deal has for the time being brought mass violence to an end and, doubts persist over its full implementation.⁸³ For the TPLF, the withdrawal of Eritrea forces, accused of the worst human abuses,⁸⁴ is key. Yet, this demand is not fully addressed in the deal, which does not even include the terms of how and when Tigray's leaders should facilitate the return of the federal military.⁸⁵ Furthermore, Tigrayans want the Abiy government to distance itself from Eritrea.⁸⁶ As of February 2023, progress on the ground is beginning to be seen, with the TPLF handing over heavy weapons.⁸⁷ Eritrean troops also appear to be withdrawing, but they have not fully left the Ethiopian territory.⁸⁸ Also, the plan to install a transitional Tigray administration before the return of federal authorities has not advanced.⁸⁹ From a humanitarian perspective, 3.9 of the 5.4 million Tigrayans have received aid since the ceasefire, but some areas are still cut off.⁹⁰

As the Tigray crisis enters a period of (hopefully) conflict resolution, we can move from the description of EU policies towards Ethiopia to the analysis of the EU's relatively weak performance, and show how EU difficulties can be traced back to the interplay between Ethiopia's internal fragmentation, intra-EU divisions and multipolar competition.

⁸² Fred Harter, "Tigray Aid Access Improves as Peace Deal Makes Headway", in *The New Humanitarian*, 31 January 2023, <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/node/262719>.

⁸³ Concerned Pan-African Scholars, *Assessing the Peace Accord for Tigray*, 26 November 2022, <https://www.theelephant.info/?p=19619>.

⁸⁴ "Trauma, Anger as Tigrayans Recount Eritrea Troops' 'Grave Crimes'", in *Al Jazeera*, 1 March 2021, <https://aje.io/ra9en>.

⁸⁵ International Crisis Group, *Turning the Pretoria Deal into Lasting Peace in Ethiopia*, 23 November 2022, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/node/19947>.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Michael Fitzpatrick, "Ethiopia's Tigray Rebels Start Disarming under Terms of Pretoria Peace Deal", in *Rfi*, 11 January 2023, <https://www.rfi.fr/en/africa/20230111-ethiopia-s-tigray-rebels-start-disarming-under-terms-of-pretoria-peace-deal>.

⁸⁸ Fred Harter, "Tigray Aid Access Improves as Peace Deal Makes Headway", cit.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

3. The limits of EU mitigation strategies

The measures implemented by the EU to address the Tigray crisis have largely failed to mitigate the effects of national and regional fragmentation, as well as of multipolar competition. Intra-EU contestation has also played a role: while member states have managed to reconcile some of their initial differences, they have not found enough consensus for a comprehensive strategy that could win them more room to influence conflict resolution efforts.

3.1 The impact of intra-EU contestation

The EU's initial reaction to the crisis in Tigray was mainly the result of decisions taken by Commissioner Urpilainen, HR Borrell the EU Special Representative for the Horn of Africa Alexander Rondos (in office until July 2021), who all insisted on the Abiy government's responsibilities to end the war promptly and supported the withholding of financial support for Ethiopia. This can be seen from the fact that Ethiopia was rarely included in the work agenda of EU Council until after the war broke out. As an illustration, the first time Ethiopia was introduced in the COAFR provisional agenda in recent years was February 2021,⁹¹ three months after the war had begun. The same happened within the Political and Security Committee (PSC), which is responsible for the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy and the Common Security and Defence Policy. Even if the role of the PSC is to monitor the international situation, recommend strategic approaches and policy options to the Council, and ensure political control and strategic direction of crisis management operations, for the whole 2020 it never included the Ethiopia crisis in its provisional agenda.⁹²

Once the member states got more involved in the issue, the EU started to express a more balanced approach.⁹³ According to four European officials interviewed for this report, member states held different interpretations of the conflict and the

⁹¹ COAFR, *Notice of Meeting and Provisional Agenda*, 2 February 2021, <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/CM-1450-2021-INIT/en/pdf>. The author has consulted all the 2020 provisional agendas of the COAFR.

⁹² The author has consulted all the 2020 provisional agendas of the CPS.

⁹³ Council of the European Union, *Council Conclusions on Ethiopia*, cit.

related policy response. The EU's northern countries were keener to follow the Commission's and the HR's line and condemn the Ethiopian government for its human rights violations, while southern countries such as Italy, Spain and France advocated a more pragmatic approach.⁹⁴ This pragmatic approach does not seem far-fetched given the geographical proximity of these southern European countries to Africa. For example, even though Ethiopians migrate mostly to Southern Africa and the Middle East, Ethiopia remains a transit route for emigrants from Eritrea and Somalia whose destination is Europe through North Africa – especially the Central Mediterranean route.⁹⁵ This is a main reason why Italy has placed Ethiopia at the centre of its foreign policy towards the Horn.⁹⁶ Meanwhile, Ethiopia is on Spain and France's priority list in their diplomatic and economic agenda in Africa.⁹⁷ Intra-EU differences reduced the consistency, and consequently the impact, of EU policies. Germany, for instance, continued to inject development and humanitarian aid into Ethiopia even after the Commission had withheld its financial aid.⁹⁸ This decision was criticised in Brussels where, at the time, officials were pushing to create a "Team Europe" approach, meaning a set of co-ordinated actions by EU institutions and member states, to development policy.⁹⁹

3.2 The impact of national and regional fragmentation

The mitigation measures that the EU adopted in the first phase of the conflict – that is, until the TPLF's offensive of mid-2021 – did not take the dynamics of national

⁹⁴ Interviews with EU officials in October and November 2022. See also: Ilya Grindneff, "Russia's Africa Moves Force Europe Rethink on Ethiopia", in *Politico*, 28 July 2022, <https://www.politico.eu/?p=2180535>.

⁹⁵ Alice Troy-Donovan, *Interview: How the EU Is Shaping Migration Policy in Ethiopia*, Danish Institute for International Studies, 10 February 2022, <https://www.diis.dk/en/node/25471>; see Council of the European Union, *Migration Flows on the Central Mediterranean Route*, last reviewed 9 February 2023, <http://europa.eu/!GX97Dk>; and Egon Isenring et al., "Infectious Disease Profiles of Syrian and Eritrean Migrants Presenting in Europe: A Systematic Review", in *Travel Medicine and Infectious Disease*, Vol. 25 (September-October 2018), p. 65-76, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tmaid.2018.04.014>.

⁹⁶ Silvia Strangis, "Italy's Renewed Interest in the Horn of Africa", in *IAI Commentaries*, No. 22|61 (December 2022), <https://www.iai.it/en/node/16331>.

⁹⁷ Cristina Gallardo, "Spain Seeks to Increase Diplomatic and Economic Ties in Africa", in *Politico*, 29 March 2021, <https://www.politico.eu/?p=1658511>; "Ethiopia, France Exchange Views on Ways to Strengthen Economic Cooperation, Current Affairs", in *ENA*, 7 February 2023, <https://www.ena.et/en/?p=42679>.

⁹⁸ Vince Chadwick, "Ethiopia Looks to Germany amid EU Funding Fight", in *Devex*, 2 February 2021, <https://www.devex.com/news/99034>.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

fragmentation described in the first section sufficiently into account. The EU rushed into condemning the government in Addis Ababa and withdrew financial support on the assumption that Abiy was clearly in the wrong. But responsibility for the conflict could not be ascribed to the federal government only. Ethiopia's fragmentation was such that EU and member states officials struggled to get a more comprehensive picture. A reason for that is that the TPLF ruled Ethiopia from 1991 to 2018, whereby the EU and its members states had developed strong ties with Tigray's leadership.¹⁰⁰ The EU was caught unprepared by the escalation in Tigray also because it over-estimated its capacity to influence not just Abiy but also the TPLF. Over time the EU "adjusted" its policy so that condemnation and pressure was exerted not just on the federal government but also on the TPLF.

The EU's initial leaning against the federal government, coupled with its decision to withhold the multi-annual support until the November 2022 peace deal is implemented,¹⁰¹ has had consequences for its relationship with Ethiopia. This was quite evident during the peace process. While the Tigrayans always demanded that the United States and the EU lead the process, the Ethiopian government not only succeeded in keeping the negotiation in the AU's hands but also refused to grant the EU or any of its member states an observer status, contrary to the United States, the UN and IGAD.¹⁰²

3.3 The impact of multipolar competition

While the EU and the United States started to re-engage with national authorities by supporting the AU-led peace process and resuming diplomatic relations with Ethiopian authorities, Addis Ababa continued to tighten its relations with other external power such as Russia, the UAE, Turkey, China and Iran.

¹⁰⁰ Interview 5 with a peace and security analyst specialised in Ethiopia, July 2022. See also European Commission, *Visit of the Prime Minister of Ethiopia to the European Commission*, 5 June 2002, <https://reliefweb.int/node/102670>.

¹⁰¹ Chrispin Mwakideu, "Can Berlin, Paris Reset 'Strained' EU-Ethiopia Ties?", in *Deutsche Welle*, 12 January 2023, <https://www.dw.com/en/a-64343852>.

¹⁰² "The US, the UN Participating as Observers in the Ethiopia Peace Talks", in *Ethiopia Observer*, 26 October 2022, <https://www.ethiopiaobserver.com/?p=12030>.

In July 2022 Russia pledged support to Ethiopia's effort to stabilise its internal political situation and accused Western powers of retaining a colonial mind-set in the region.¹⁰³ Russia's use of an anticolonial rhetoric was a deliberate attempt to stir anti-Western sentiments already present in Ethiopia (in 2021, for instance, a self-styled "No More" movement protested against neo-colonialist interference of the United States and its Western allies, accused of having undermined the government's attempts at enforcing law and order against the TPLF).¹⁰⁴ Ethiopia's critical position toward the West was evident during the UN General Assembly votes of condemnation of Russia's invasion in March 2022 and its "illegal annexations" of Ukraine territory in September of the same year. During the 2 March 2022 United Nations General Assembly emergency session on Ukraine, Ethiopia was among the countries that did not submit a vote and later abstained from condemning Russia on 12 October 2022.¹⁰⁵ Russia has supported Ethiopia during the whole Tigray crisis, by delaying, for instance, UN Security Council meetings to discuss a declaration of famine in Tigray.¹⁰⁶ This declaration would have added pressure on Addis Ababa to allow humanitarian aid to reach Tigray. Also, together with China, Russia has insisted that the conflict was and is exclusively an internal affair of Ethiopia.¹⁰⁷ China and Russia's diplomatic support has been key for Addis as most of the international community criticised the government's *de facto* alleged blockade of humanitarian aid.¹⁰⁸

Probably more important for Ethiopia than China and Russia's diplomatic protection has been military support from Turkey, the UAE and even Iran.¹⁰⁹ Turkey

¹⁰³ Giulia Paravicini, "Lavrov Denigrates West's Stance towards Africa during Ethiopia Visit", cit.

¹⁰⁴ Gutu Merdasa, "#NoMore Movement. The Revival of Pan-Africanism", in *Ethiopian Business Review*, No. 103 (January 2022), <https://ethiopianbusinessreview.net/nomore-movement>.

¹⁰⁵ See Abraham White and Leo Holtz, "Figure of the Week: African Countries' Votes on the UN Resolution Condemning Russia's Invasion of Ukraine", in *Brookings Africa in Focus*, 9 March 2022, <https://wp.me/p7KzVY-6E8K>; and "African States Divided on UN Vote against Russia", in *Club of Mozambique News*, 13 October 2022, <https://clubofmozambique.com/?p=226489>.

¹⁰⁶ William Worley, "Exclusive: Russia, China Foiled UN Meetings on Tigray Famine, Says Lowlock", in *Devex*, 21 June 2022, <https://www.devex.com/news/103473>.

¹⁰⁷ Michelle Nichols, "U.N. Security Council Calls for End to Ethiopia Conflict", in *Reuters*, 5 November 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-ethiopia-conflict-un-idAFKBN2HQ29F>.

¹⁰⁸ Michelle Nichols, "U.N. Aid Chief to Ethiopia on Famine in Tigray: 'Get those Trucks Moving'", in *Reuters*, 29 September 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/un-aid-chief-ethiopia-famine-tigray-get-those-trucks-moving-2021-09-28>.

¹⁰⁹ Declan Walsh, "Foreign Drones Tip the Balance in Ethiopia's Civil War", in *The New York Times*, 20 December 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/20/world/africa/drones-ethiopia-war-turkey->

has arguably been the external player that has had the greatest influence over the conflict, as the federal government was able to stop and reverse the TPLF's counteroffensive in late 2021 only thanks to Turkish-provided armed drones (Turkey's military export to Ethiopia exploded between 2020 and 2021, from barely 234,000 to nearly 95 million dollars). Turkey has identified Ethiopia not just as a primary African destination market for its defence products, but has also secured Addis' support for Turkish construction companies to be involved in post-conflict reconstruction. In addition, as explained above, Turkey has an interest that Somalia remains as stable as possible and evidently determined that a defeat of the federal government in Addis would spread chaos across the region.¹¹⁰ The UAE has moved from similar calculations, as its considerable political, economic and military investments in the region – the UAE was a main sponsor of the Eritrea-Ethiopia peace deal of 2018, which could be upended by a TPLF victory.¹¹¹ Consequently, Abu Dhabi has provided Abiy with support – including military support – since the start of the conflict.¹¹² As for Iran, support for the Abiy government – which it has provided both diplomatically and through drone transfers – is a means to create a wedge between Western countries and their traditional ally in the Horn, as well as to expand its strategic “depth” into a region where its rivals (especially the UAE) have gained significant sway.¹¹³

The resolve with which Russia and China, but especially Turkey, the UAE and Iran, have pulled their weight behind the Abiy government contrasts with the idiosyncrasies and oscillations of EUFSP. The EU may have had solid reasons for putting pressure on Addis, yet the fact that its policy line was followed only (and belatedly) by a distracted United States, while other countries have provided arguably existential help to the federal government has greatly reduced the impact of EUFSP on the evolution of the conflict.

emirates.html.

¹¹⁰ Abdolgader Mohamed Ali, “UAE, Turkey, and Iran”, cit.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² “UAE Air Bridge Provides Military Support to Ethiopia Gov't”, in *Al Jazeera*, 25 November 2021, <https://aje.io/5nf28m>.

¹¹³ Banafsheh Keynoush, “Iran to Remain a Key Partner for Ethiopia in the Tigray Conflict”, cit.

4. Conclusion: The EU challenges to re-engage with Ethiopia

The Tigray war broke out in November 2020, not long after EU leaders had repeatedly praised Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy for his outstanding reform and peace-making agenda, which had won him the Nobel Peace Prize. The EU failed to notice that ethnic tensions between the TPLF and central authorities were soaring and the room for public dissent shrinking. A lack of capacity to analyse the situation of what was happening in the country, together with the EU's over-estimation of its influence over Ethiopia's various factions, are among the causes for the EU's lack of preparation when tensions in Tigray escalated into open conflict. This happened despite the presence of twenty-two embassies of EU member states in Addis Ababa, along with the EU delegation.

As soon as the war broke out, the EU put in place a series of mitigation measures that tried to limit the consequences of the conflict such as the fragmentation of Ethiopia and, potentially, the Horn. The EU's decision to continue conditioning the release of aid on the full implementation of the peace deal, as well as the restoration of basic needs and humanitarian access and law accountability, demonstrates a degree of coherence and a willingness to prioritise human lives. However, support for Addis by Russia and China, and even more so Turkey, the UAE and Iran, gives Addis other avenues to get what it wants, and certainly works as a disincentive to comply with EU requests. Against this sobering backdrop, we propose a few actions that the EU and its member states could take to carry out a more joined-up and effective foreign and security policy towards Ethiopia:

Invest in foreign intelligence assets. The Tigray crisis has shown how information is necessary to act consistently. Without its own intelligence, it might be difficult for the EU to act impartially and objectively. This is especially true in conflict-affected areas where people's judgement might be influenced by emotion. As explained by an EU official, "we need to be careful to not become emotional as we did with the TPLF".¹¹⁴ In order to increase its analytical capacity, the EU should strengthen its partnership with local think tanks, research centres and nongovernmental

¹¹⁴ Interview 7 with a EU official, October 2022.



organisations (NGOs).

Continue to condition its financial support to Ethiopian authorities. The EU should continue to condition its financial support on the implementation of the November 2022 peace deal. This is important in order to continue to act consistently and avoid falling into the trap of multipolar competition. However, this action should be supported by a better coordination with member states – including their implementing agencies and public development banks – as well as the European Investment Bank (EIB) and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD). This should be done through a strengthening of the “Team Europe” by developing a Joint programming (JP) for Ethiopia. JP is a strategic engagement process by Team Europe and other EU partners that develop a joint response to the challenges and opportunities of a partner country (i.e. Ethiopia) and which is based on the EU’s values and interests.

Ethiopia – as a strategic partner of the Horn – must also be at the centre of the Council’s preparatory committees on a more regular basis so as to allow for a greater synthesis of the different positions of the member states and greater coordination with the European institutions.

Offer the Ethiopian authorities’ technical support for the implementation of the agreement. Although the EU has not been accepted as an observer in the peace process, it must continue to support the implementation of the agreement financially and politically - especially through the AU. At the same time, the EU can consider funding not only the functioning of the mechanisms that will have to evaluate the implementation but also dedicate funds to NGOs that want to support the dialogue between government, opposition and civil society.

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Interviews

Interview 1 – Ethiopian political scientist, August 2022

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