**International actors’ promotion of peacebuilding in Colombia through online subsidies: the role of spatial framing**

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This paper explores the geographical nature of the promotion of peacebuilding efforts by international actors cooperating in Colombia through information published daily in their newsrooms online. This article contends that such promotion is spatially rooted as it links to narratives about places targeted for intervention, and how these places ought to be transformed. Accordingly, the notion of spatial framing is put forward as a methodological way to assess the promotion of meanings about targeted places for peace transformation. Drawing on qualitative spatial framing analysis of online subsidies analysed with the help of NVivo software, the work explores the ways in which key post-conflict donors (United States, European Union, the United Kingdom) promoted a narrative about national and local spaces of peacebuilding transformation in the transitional period in two periods between November 2016 and February 2024. The article argues that the international actors depicted spaces in function of a normative continuum between rural (less developed) and urban (more developed) spaces and promoted spatial transformation consistent with principles of state-building and market development.

Keywords: public mediated diplomacy, online information subsidies, spatial framing, peacebuilding cooperation, Colombia

# Introduction

The Colombian conflict is the longest in the Western Hemisphere and has developed from violence between liberal and conservative parties in the mid-20C, to an ‘insurgent-counterinsurgent war’ (Comisión para el Esclarecimiento de la Verdad 2022b, 27). The low intensity war in the background of the Cold War between the state and left-wing guerrillas further degenerated by the end of the 20 and beginning of the 21 centuries with the added consolidation of right-wing paramilitaries, drug trafficking and criminal organizations in the background of the U.S.-led war against drugs and terrorism, and the increased presence of international actors (Comisión para el Esclarecimiento de la Verdad 2022b; Grupo de Memoria Histórica 2013). The conflict, mainly in the countryside, has been fuelled by armed groups and political and economic networks’ competition over land, territories and legal and illegal resources, as well as dynamics of socio-political exclusion, forced displacement and human rights violations against civilians (Grupo de Memoria Histórica 2013; Ballvé 2020; Comisión para el Esclarecimiento de la Verdad 2022a, 35-36).

The Government Registry accounted for 9,781,883 Victims in total by September 2024 including 8,718,931 forced displaced people. Although there was a decrease in number of victims nationally from 3,299,760 between 2001 and 2005; 2,124,721 between 2006 and 2010; 1,546,888 between 2011 and 2015; and 835,664 between 2016 and 2020; victims reported seem to be on the increase with 1,026,602 reported between 2021 and 2025 (Unidad para la Atención y Reparación Integral a las Víctimas 2024) . Specifically, there has been an increase in violence in rural areas, afro-Colombian, Indigenous and border regions since 2016 (Human Rights Watch 2023, 2024; Oficina del Alto Comisionado de las Naciones Unidas para los Derechos Humanos 2022, 5; United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights 2023, 7; World Bank Group 2022, 56; Krause et al. 2022).

In the meantime, Colombia has attracted the greatest amount of international cooperation in the region after the signing of the peace agreement reached in November 2016 by the government of President Juan Manuel Santos (in office from 2010 to 2018) and the left-wing guerrillas Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC). This is evident in its consistently higher levels of Official Development Assistance (ODA) in comparison to other countries in the region (OECD 2022; World Bank Group 2023), multilateral peace operations by the United Nations (UN) Verification Mission and the Organization of American States Peace Mission (MAPP/OEA) as well as the establishment of five post-conflict multi-funds led by the UN, the European Union (EU), the World Bank, and the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) (Smit 2021; Agencia Presidencial de Cooperación 2016; cited by Montoya-Londoño 2023, 3)

Recent published research by the author (Montoya-Londoño 2023) has looked into the role of press offices of key peacebuilding donors in Colombia, including countries (US, UK, Sweden, Canada), intergovernmental organizations leading post-conflict multi-funds, and MAPP/OAS, in enhancing spatially rooted cooperation narratives related to peacebuilding in Colombia between October 2016 and March 2019. The research assessed the selection of places and the promotion of meaning about them and their transformation (spatial framing) in information published by press offices in the international actors’ news webpages (online subsidies). The present article aims to update and reflect on some of those original insights by focusing on three selected actors: US, EU and the UK between January 2021 and April 2024.

Online information subsidies are press releases and briefings, news stories, fact sheets, statements and other information produced and published daily by institutional press offices of governments and international organizations in their official webpages. Apart from being easily accessible for media, interested stakeholders and audiences, they have been attributed with the potential of increasing the quantity and quality of news coverage of particular issues (Lee and Lin 2015, 2017; cited by Montoya-Londoño 2023, 4). Online information subsidies are an important instrument for mediated public diplomacy efforts, defined as the use of media to foster support for foreign policies ‘among audiences beyond that country’s borders’ (Entman 2008, 88). Online subsidies are primarily directed at media to indirectly influence public debates and attitudes in favour of peacebuilding and international cooperation in targeted countries, in this case Colombia (Entman 2008, 88-89; Golan 2013, 1251-1252; Sheafer and Gabay 2009, 448; Sevin 2015, 566; Sheafer, Shenhav, and Amsalem 2018, 251; cited by Montoya-Londoño 2023).

The period between 2016 and 2019 was a key transitional period, given the ratification and first year of the Peace Agreement implementation led by President Juan Manuel Santos, the 2017 presidential campaigns and the first six months of the new government of right-wing President and opponent of the peace process Ivan Duque Márquez (2018-2022). The latter sought to reform the transitional justice mechanism created by the peace agreement, lagged in the implementation of the accords, and ended peace talks with ELN in retaliation for an attack in the Police Academy in Bogotá in January 2019 (Díaz-Pabón 2019; Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies 2019, 2020).

The period between 2021-2024 was marked by the social discontent rooted in the Covid economic fallout and unfulfilled promises of the peace agreement. Social protests in 2021 met a brutal response by security forces, while criminal organizations, FARC dissidents ̶ today grouped under the Central Major State (Estado Mayor Central, EMC), and successors of right-wing paramilitary groups advanced violent territorial capture and control (Human Rights Watch 2022, 2024). Left-wing President Gustavo Petro came to office in 2022 with a Total Peace policy geared to promote peace talks with all armed groups and harmonise the peace agreement with the institutional architecture and the National Development Plan. Despite temporal ceasefires with ELN and EMC, armed conflicts had persisted nationally along with the institutional inability to guarantee non-repetition and humanitarian protection, particularly for ethnic communities and human rights and social leaders (Alvarez et al. 2024).

In the meantime, international funding for Colombia has kept flowing into a greater extent than for other countries in the region (World Bank Group 2023). Between 2016 and 2021, it increased from USD$635.5 million in 2016 to USD$2,523 million by 2024 (Agencia Presidencial de Cooperación 2022a, 9; 2024). However, peacebuilding went down as a priority between 2018 and 2022. During the Santos Administration, most of the international funds received up to 2018 were directed towards peacebuilding (41.67 per cent) (Agencia Presidencial de Cooperación 2018). In the Duque Administration, most international funds were directed towards the migratory crisis from Venezuela (31.5 per cent), followed by territorial stabilization post-agreement (26 per cent) (Agencia Presidencial de Cooperación 2022a, 40; 2022b). By 2024, peacebuilding has again become a priority for the Petro Administration, with 48 per cent of ODA resources directed towards this aim (Agencia Presidencial de Cooperación 2024).

The actors chosen for the original analysis (2016-2019) were major donors for peacebuilding in 2016 and remained so during the period of study (Agencia Presidencial de Cooperación 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019). Likewise, the actors included in the present analysis remained as consistently important donors throughout the period of study (2021-2024) and in relation to the precedent research (Agencia Presidencial de Cooperación 2022a, 2022b, 2024). Although the selection of actors doesn’t account for all the main donors in the Colombian administrations of Presidents Juan Manuel Santos (2010-2018), Ivan Duque (2018-2022), and Gustavo Petro (2022-2026)[[1]](#endnote-1) it still captures an interesting story about the spatialised nature of transnational peacebuilding narratives to promote post-conflict transition.

# Materials and methods

This work contributes to the existing literature on framing in proposing an approach that focuses on international actors’ geographical imagination and narratives. Whilst framing analysis has explored issues, actors, or events (D'Angelo 2018, xxiv), my research proposes spatial framing as an innovative notion to capture transnational mediated discourses about places and their transformation to legitimise peacebuilding practices. Spatial framing has been defined in previous work as:

… the selection and promotion of targeted places of intervention through the organization of perceived aspects in the reality of conflict (transformation) in places ranging from the local to the national. Thus, spatial framing implies the narrative construction of meaningful spaces for peacebuilding transformation, that is, the communication of preferred meanings about what is at issue in those spaces, their process of transformation and through which peacebuilding agendas and actors at different scales of agency (Montoya-Londoño 2023, 39).

Drawing on peacebuilding research which has incorporated geographic notions, preceding research by the author (Montoya-Londoño 2023) assumes that spaces are socially constructed and ever-changing through shared or contested meanings and power relations shaping peacebuilding practices (Brigg and George 2020, 410-415; Macaspac and Moore 2022, 3-5; Flint 2005; Kirsch and Flint 2011; Chojnacki and Engels 2016, 36; Bjorkdahl and Kappler 2017; Björkdahl and Buckley-Zistel 2016; Ide 2017, 155). At the same time, in line with political geography scholarship, peace is both a spatial process and a political discourse interpreted and experienced differently by different people who interact at different scales, places and times (Courtheyn 2018, 742; McConnell, Megoran, and Williams 2014; Koopman 2011, 194; 2014, 109; Vogel 2018, 433).

Both, peacebuilding, and political geography traditions, draw heavily on ethnographic research and local societal dynamics. However, no research has been done, in the best of this author’s knowledge, on implications of the aforementioned insights for the political communication of international donors. The closest work by Corredor García (2022), analyses security, liberal, constructivist, pluralist and environmental notions of peace in editorial pieces about the peace process of six Colombian newspapers from a political geography perspective. However, political geography is applied to a reflection of the implications of the newspaper’s location for the notion of peace they propose. The security notion of peace means the consolidation of sovereignty and monopoly of force over territories through demobilization and reintegration processes. Liberal notions are centred on the promotion of good governance and balance between democracy, rule of law and market freedoms. While some newspapers emphasise this should be done through the institutionalization of norms promoted by private investment and fostering links between markets at local, national and global level, others highlight the importance of attracting international investment for development. The constructivist notion of peace highlights the reconstruction of society in the post-conflict stage by all Colombians. The pluralist notion emphasises the inclusion of different society sectors. Lastly, the environmental notion of peace promotes social inclusion and environmental peace by preserving the environment for future generations through sustainable development and ecologic security.

In their work on post-liberal peace, Richmond and Franks (2009) note the progressive integration of peacebuilding and statebuilding projects since1990s due to USA and UK’s ‘support for an active, muscular and humanitarian liberal internationalism’ (p 98). The resulting framework of liberal peace encompasses ‘democratization, the rule of law, human rights, globalised markets and neoliberal development’ (p 153). In practice, for the authors, such integration compromises the needs, rights and prospects for self-sustaining communities in favour of the needs of the neoliberal territorial state. Peacebuilding implementations fall into graduations depending on the degree of cooperation of local actors, most commonly, a *conservative*, top-down peacebuilding approach shaped by coercion (via military intervention or political conditionalities closer to Corredor García’s notion of security) and the pursual of monopoly of force and security, domination and hegemony. Sometimes peacebuilding reflects a second graduation, a more state-led and multilateral *orthodox* model of liberal peace focused on state-building and local transference of international community methodologies and norms. A third *emancipatory* approach in which there is local ownership and agreement of peacebuilding by private and civil society actors has not been achieved in context although promoted theoretically.

This work engages with international relations, geography, and peacebuilding literature to understand international peacebuilding interventions from a political communication perspective. Insights from those disciplinary traditions, include that international actors signify and represent places in search of legitimising views and preferred peacebuilding practices linked to targeted places of intervention. Furthermore, these traditions suggest the discursive and contested nature of peacebuilding, as actors promote narratives about identities, relationships and ideas of place underpinning conflict and proposed transformations (Montoya-Londoño 2023, 39).

 Using NVivo software, the original research examined 207 online subsidies in English and Spanish published by the US, the EU-EEAS and the UK in the news sections of their official webpages directly referring to peacebuilding in Colombia between November 2016 and March 2019. (Montoya-Londoño 2023, 48-49). This article assessed 154 additional subsidies by the US, the European Union External Action Service (EU-EEAS), and the UK between January 2021 and May 2024[[2]](#endnote-2). The following table shows the number of items looked in both periods. Interestingly, the UK maintained a consistently lower level of use of online subsidies than EU-EEAS, who kept consistently high levels of publication throughout both periods studied. The USA, by comparison, published less online subsidies during 2021-2024 than in 2016-2019. Such difference could either been explained by either differing US Administration preferences in using this medium, or a lessening priority to report and promote US peacebuilding agendas regarding Colombia during the second period.

Table 1. Online subsidies per actor.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Country/period | 2016-2019 | 2021-2024 |
| USA  | 107 | 46 |
| EU-EEAS | 71 | 75 |
| UK  | 29 | 34 |

Source: own elaboration

To retrieve the greatest number of subsidies possible, the search for online subsidies was conducted periodically since 2017 in official webpages of the actors studied, and all of the items chosen contained explicit references to peace and peacebuilding in Colombia. To explore spatial framing, word frequency searches were combined with word searches of Colombian departments, the main administrative units in the country[[3]](#endnote-3), cities and regions in online subsidies of each international actor in order to identify places prioritised by international community actors explored in the original research (Montoya-Londoño 2023, 46) and the present follow up. Second, categories of positive and negative spatial references identified explicitly positive or negative depictions of places within each online subsidy, ‘deeply symbolic of how we define what is right and wrong and whom we identify with and against’ (Agnew 1994, 54). Third, the research identified how treatment recommendations (Entman 2004) or the actual actions, policies or strategies advanced by international actors linked explicitly with intended spatial transformations.

**Findings**

***The promotion of peace is spatially targeted***

The first proposition in this article is that peacebuilding is promoted by international actors in targeted places of intervention. In other words, international actors focus on particular areas by producing online information subsidies about those places. Although international actors focus on areas of governmental priority, they promote peace in some of these priority areas more than others by producing more online information subsidies on these. By publishing online subsidies, international actors contribute to the promotion of peace linked to specific places.

During the Santos Administration, the Peace Agreement prioritised 171 municipalities highly affected by conflict and poverty for Programmes of Development with Territorial Focus (PDET) based on community participation and government services provision located in the Departments of Cesar, La Guajira, Magdalena, Bolívar, Sucre, Córdoba, Norte de Santander, Santander, Arauca, Antioquia, Chocó, Cauca, Valle del Cauca, Tolima, Nariño, Meta, Guaviare, Caquetá, and Putumayo (Fundación Ideas para la Paz 2018; Agencia Presidencial de Cooperación 2016; cited by Montoya-Londoño 2023, 52).

The incoming Duque Administration identified the geographical concentration of international cooperation during the Santos Administration in territories of Antioquia, Meta, Nariño, Cauca and Valle del Cauca (Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores, Agencia Presidencial de Cooperación, and Planeación 2019, 24-30). During Duque’s Administration, international resources for the peace implementation framework plan (PMI) focused in Nariño, Norte de Santander and Antioquia (Quiñones et al. 2022, 38). By 2024, the Presidential Agency for International Cooperation identified Antioquia, Meta, Caquetá, Putumayo, Nariño, Nariño, Cauca, Valle del Cauca, Chocó, Córdoba, Bolívar, Norte de Santander, Guajira and Guaviare as the main departments where international funds for the peace implementation framework plan (PMI) have been directed to (Agencia Presidencial de Cooperación 2024).

This cooperation focus was not only reflected in funds assigned, but also in the references to different departments made in online subsidies by international actors studied. Between 2016 and 2019, US online subsidies promoted work in some 25 departments, mainly Antioquia (30 online subsidies), Cauca (21) and Meta (16). EU-EEAS referred to 17 Departments, mainly Cauca (11), Nariño (9), Valle del Cauca and Chocó (8 subsidies each). The UK referred to 14 Departments, each one present in one subsidy. Between 2021 and 2024, US subsidies referred to 19 departments, mainly Antioquia (6 subsidies), Amazon (5) and Bolívar (3). EU-EEAS referred to 18 departments, mainly Putumayo (8 subsidies), Nariño (7) and Antioquia (6). The UK referred to 5 departments, mainly the Amazon (4 subsidies) and Guaviare (2).

In sum, the international actors studied differed in the number of departments mentioned and in which departments received greater attention in their subsidies. Paraphrasing Pugh (Pugh 2013, 14) while local peacebuilding has been included in the architecture of peacebuilding in the first part of the 21st century, levels of local engagement differed for actors contributing to Colombian multilateral intervention.

***The absence of state and development preferences.***

A USAID statement affirmed that “Although Colombia is characterized as a middle-income country, there are actually two Colombias: a prosperous and bustling Colombia in a half-dozen urban centers, and a rural and conflict-affected Colombia plagued by insecurity and illicit economies.” (USAID 2023e). This statement is illustrative of the ways in which international actors reinforced a dualistic representation between ‘underdeveloped and developed’ Colombia, and in particular, municipalities and small cities targeted for peacebuilding projects and major cities in the country. This statement was not distant from Santos Government’s National Development Plan of 2015, depicted a urban, productive and modern Colombia with strong state provision; one starting to develop, and a rural Colombia with weak economic and institutional development and presence of illegal actors and economies (Departamento Nacional de Planeación 2015; cited by Montoya-Londoño 2023, 52). International actors were on board with the National government goal of levelling up rural areas affected by conflict by strengthening economic development, state provision and security in areas targeted for programmes of territorial development.

Online subsidies framed ethnic territories, rural areas and municipalities as affected by poverty, income inequality (including gender), difficult access, remoteness, underdevelopment, conflict, HR abuses, illegal economies and actors, lack of state infrastructure and services, and antipersonnel mines cluttering the countryside (e.g. EEAS 2016, 2017c, 2018a; FCO et al. 2016; USAID 2017d, 2017a, 2017g; EEAS 2021a, 2022d, 2022a, 2022g; FCDO and Allen-CMG 2021; FCDO and Roscoe 2021; FCDO and Woodward-DCMG-OBE 2023; USAID 2022, 2023d, 2024; U.S. Embassy in Colombia 2021c, 2021e, 2022b; USAID 2017b).

Intermediate cities and small Department capitals were also negatively depicted. Tumaco (Nariño department) was described as being affected by the armed conflict (EEAS 2018c, 2023c), violence, displacement, confinement, GBV, forced recruitment and disappearances against indigenous population Awa by armed groups in dispute for land and the drug trafficking businesses (EEAS 2022d). In addition, the city was described as one of the most affected PDET municipalities by criminal networks or groups, their illicit economies and expressions of violence (U.S. Embassy in Colombia 2021a, 2022b). Mocoa, capital of Putumayo department, was referred relation to a deadly landslide in April 2017 which took about 300 lives (EEAS 2017a; USAID 2018b), along with being traditionally forgotten and hit by conflict (EEAS 2022a). The port of Buenaventura, in Valle del Cauca Department, was linked to violence against human rights activists (FCDO and Woodward 2024), structural problems of marginalization, poverty and violence, forced recruitment, GBV (EEAS 2021e, 2022b), traditionally forgotten and hit by armed conflict (EEAS 2022e)

In contrast, major cities[[4]](#endnote-4) such as Bogota, Medellin, Cartagena, and Santa Marta were more positively framed. International actors described them as dynamic and sophisticated (USAID 2017a, reference to Bogotá and Medellín), grand, historic and with prestigious universities (USAID 2018b, reference to Bogotá; cited by Montoya-Londoño 2023, 113), ‘a city once derided for being the murder capital of the world is now proudly known as its innovation capital’ (DIT and The Rt Hon Liam Fox MP 2016, reference to Medellín; cited by Montoya-Londoño 2023, 117) city of great social and economic innovation (EEAS 2021c), with a lot of economic potential due to its tourism and economic activity based on the ports (Embajada de EE.UU. en Colombia 2018, reference to Santa Marta; quoted by Montoya-Londoño 2023, 113), fascinating, with ‘lively citizens, delicious gastronomy and booming trade, together with its tourist activity and bustling cargo port’, and the most important tourist city in the country (Mujica 2016, reference to Cartagena; cited by Montoya-Londoño 2023, 116). And cities where meetings, events, and successful peacebuilding initiatives happen (EEAS 2023b, 2023c, 2023d, 2021b).

Overall, such characterization brushed over on the one hand, inequalities, major problems in the quality of life within Colombian cities and their links with the armed conflict (Zapata 2015, García-Pinzón and Alke Jenss in this issue; Feola et al. 2019; Atuesta Ortiz 2023; Gutiérrez et al. 2013; Torres-Tovar and Rojas-Pabón 2016; Olarte and Wall 2012; Olarte-Olarte 2019; Hochmüller 2022). On the other hand, it also overlooked dynamics of order, governance, state presence in rural Colombia and its interaction with cities linked to both conflict and peace (Gutiérrez-D. 2021; Peñaranda Currie, Otero-Bahamon, and Uribe 2021; Diaz et al. 2021; Gutiérrez-Sanín 2023; Gutiérrez‐Sanín and Vargas 2017; Serje 2013; Cairo et al. 2018; Olarte-Olarte and Lara-Veloza 2018; Ballvé 2020).

Regarding such dualism, Ballvé (2020) demonstrates that the armed conflict experienced in places such as Urabá has deep roots in dynamics of state building rather than absence of state. Also, Serje (2013) has pointed that the ‘absence of the state’ rhetoric has historically legitimised a form of intervention and social order in Colombia which obscures the active role of the state in dynamics of violence, as well as the role of local powers historically embodying the state in these regions. At the same time, such rhetoric has substantiated a civilisatory enterprise in function of violent and/or paternalist capitalist integration.

The evidence presented from online subsidies is that international community tended to link positive and negative depictions to levels of interaction with institutionality and international markets, thus suggesting neoliberal choices of development and state-building. These extended beyond the rural/urban duality, to include in the ‘absence of state’ rhetoric ethnic territories, small cities such as Tumaco or Mocoa, as well as departments such as Chocó (EEAS 2017b), Meta (EEAS 2022f, 2017b; USAID 2017c, 2017f), Caquetá (FCDO and Lord Goldsmith 2022; USAID 2017c; EEAS 2017d), Putumayo (EEAS 2023b) and Antioquia (USAID 2018a) targeted for interventions.

***Peace projects are also transformative spatial projects.***

Although not all the agendas promoted in online subsidies were geared towards the transformation of spaces per se or directly, this dimension was present in peacebuilding intervention for international actors. For example, the US Agency for International Development (USAID) remarked ‘as peace implementation begins, the Orinoquía [region in the eastern planes of the country] is looked to as the next agricultural frontier for Colombia. Prioritization is given to agroindustry development (e.g., palm oil, soy, rice), in addition to the necessary infrastructure expansion to support it’ (USAID 2017e).

UK promoted the development of medicines, biofertilizers and pollution tackling products in the Amazonia region (Department for Business and The Rt Hon Nick Hurd MP 2016; Foreign & Commonwealth Office et al. 2016) making ‘the most of Colombia’s vast biodiversity in a sustainable way’ (Foreign & Commonwealth Office et al. 2016). Halting, reducing or reversing deforestation were spatial interventions promoted by all actors, linked to sustainable economic projects in the Amazon, including work with afro Colombian and indigenous communities and ex-combatants in production initiatives, ecotourism and the development of forestry economies. In addition, US subsidies referred to climate finance mechanisms, renewable and clean energy initiatives (EEAS 2002; U.S. Embassy in Colombia 2021d, 2021a, 2023b, 2023a; EEAS 2023a; USAID 2023c; FCDO and Lord Goldsmith 2022; FCDO and Cleverly 2023). Moreover, USAID mentioned the Pacific region as a place in the fight against climate change, the protection of the country’s biodiversity and a green future (USAID 2022), along with the Caribbean and Amazon regions, for the advancement of ‘environmentally sustainable socio-economic opportunities (USAID 2023c).

Martyn (2020) researched how private companies were invited by the Santos and Duque Administrations to contribute to the post-conflict process in line with the UNSG and Business and HR frameworks, to strengthen legal economies and opportunities for ex-combatants and people affected by violence. Incentives included tax breaks and seed funds for specific projects in areas targeted for peace (PDETs and the so called ‘Zones Future’ or Zonas Futuro in spanish). The private sector initially got on board, for example Andi foundation encompassing about 150 companies, as well as a small number of large companies who supported peacebuilding in areas previously not included in their social investments in partnership with the public and third sectors. However, according to the author, changes and uncertainties in the political climate since 2017, political polarization around the peace process, lack of clarity about the management of private sector input by the government, and the continuation of violence in many places tamed the initial drive. As a result, the private sector opted for a more cautious approach of social investment perceived as politically neutral.

Regarding international investment flows, Colombia became the second highest recipient Foreign Direct Investment in 2016 in Latin America as a percentage of GDP and ‘it was named one of the 25 top Foreign Direct Investment destinations, according to the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development’ (Procolombia 2018). However, the level of investment has been volatile so far. In 2016 (US$13.85 bn) and 2017 (US$13.84bn) FDI was still lower than in 2013 (US$16.21bn) and 2014 (US$16.17bn). In 2018 the level of investment reduced to US$11.54bn, going up again in 2019 to US$14.31bn and decreasing dramatically to US$7.69 in 2020 (Sectorial 2020). By 2024, Colombia was the fifth place in Latin America and the Caribbean for FDI flows, mainly from USA, Spain, the British Territory of Anguilla, the UK, Switzerland and Mexico (ECLA 2024). Importantly for this discussion, by 2018, Natural resources was the second highest source of investment (US$4.4bn) after services (US$5.79bn) in the country (ECLA 2019). By 2024, ‘Colombia saw a 45% increase in FDI inflows in the sector, representing the largest amount since 2014 and accounting for 24% of the regional total’(ECLA 2024).

McClanahan and others have pointed, from a critical perspective, that the environment in Colombia has been seen as a ‘key site in economic transition’ post-conflict which needs to be securitised and pacified to protect capital flows. Traditional government-led extractivism and securitization mainly in favour of private actors (Vélez Torres 2014), is added to increased attempts of multinational corporations to take advantage of areas left by FARC. The results are higher deforestation rates (by 44 per cent only in 2017), along with exploitation and violence against local and marginalised population (McClanahan, Sanchez Parra, and Brisman 2019). Krause and others account for 66 per cent of deforestation in the Amazon by 2019, accompanied by higher levels of violence against communities and social leaders after the withdrawal of FARC from those areas. Such context can’t be understood without taking into account intensified dynamics of land grabbing and speculation driven by foreign investment and integration to international markets of agricultural, livestock, extractive commodities and illicit goods (Krause et al. 2022, Jespersgaard Jakobsen et al., this issue; Roy-Grégoire and Anzueto, this issue).

Regarding smaller cities such as Tumaco, previously mentioned, spatial transformation narratives have included: support for agricultural production in territorial spaces of training and reincorporation for FARC ex combatants (EEAS 2018b), support in equipment for security forces for manual eradication of coca crops and illicit economies from the countryside (Embajada de EE.UU. en Colombia 2017a; U.S. Embassy in Colombia 2021a, 2021b, 2022b, 2022c), improvements in road infrastructure, strengthening of production chains of coca and milk (EEAS 2021d), sanitation and access to drinking water (EEAS 2022c).

In Antioquia department, the European Union has promoted support for the strengthening of local production, chains of commercialization and tourism in rural areas (EEAS 2017e). In addition, the European Union reported supporting, along with FAO ‘the generation of economically and environmentally sustainable habitats’ (own translation) in FARC territorial spaces of training and reincorporation (ETCR) in several departments including Dabeiba Antioquia (EEAS 2018b). At the same time, the US Embassy in Colombia promoted a project called ‘Antioquia Free of Coca’ ‘hand in hand’ with the national and local government, security forces, the private sector and civil society in Bajo Cauca region (Embajada de EE.UU. en Colombia 2017b). The project not only included support for security forces operational capability against illicit economies, but also formalization of land, support for antipersonnel mine clearance in Briceño municipality, building and improving roads in Cáceres and Briceño, improvements in schools, bridges, and roads infrastructure in Ituango, Valdivia y Tarazá, support for production of cocoa and honey, and formalization of small-scale mining to reduce the use of mercury. According to the Embassy, the rebuilt road of 5.4. km in Cáceres would not only connect 90 families or 400 people approximately with urban areas in Cáceres and the main road between Cartagena and Medellín, but also would allow to take products to markets and bring benefits of peace, security, economic development, and education.

Cacao production has also been used as a way to counteract illicit economies through programmes such as ‘Cacao Connects’, through which USAID, along with private sector, provided technical assistance and fostered not only the produce of cacao, but also digital connectivity, use of technology and political participation by producers in the municipalities of Apartadó, Dabeiba, Necoclí, and Turbo (USAID 2023b). The U.S. Department for Agriculture led ‘Cacao for Development’ or C4D, through which it and private partners supported ‘5,500 farmers across 12,000 hectares’ to increase productivity and connect cacao production with international markets in Antioquia, Magdalena, Cesar, Córdoba, Caldas, Tolima and Huila (U.S. Embassy in Colombia 2022a). Also in order to counteract illicit economies, a project called ‘Bitter Casava for a Sweet Milk’ (USAID 2023a) was carried out in Antioquia, Cesar, Bolívar, Córdoba and Sucre. The project, worked along with the private sector, encouraged the planting of 9,000 tons casava crops to feed cattle, at the same time as providing infrastructure for production.

To sum up, one spatial transformation evident in these examples for Antioquia was related to the transforming of spaces of demobilization, training and reintegration of ex combatants as productive spaces which could interact with local, regional, and broader market structures (ETCR). In addition, making territories attractive for tourism, formalising land, and clearing up territories from coca crops and antipersonnel mines were other obvious spatial interventions accompanied by economic support to plant crops which again, could link local production with wider markets. These narratives, as Hochmüller and Müller argue in the Introduction to this issue, disentangle and obscure conflict dynamics from transnational processes, thus reinforcing the narrative of the armed conflict as an endogenous development driven by illegal actors, at the same time as international actors as portrayed as key to support state-driven peace and development efforts.

**Discussion**

The present article has explored the ways in which key post-conflict donors (USA, EU, UK) promoted a narrative of peacebuilding spaces and their transformation between November 2016 and February 2019 and January 2021 and May 2024 in Colombia. In order to do so, it proposed the notion of spatial framing to capture how international actors imagine spaces of peace transformation and project values and priorities through which such process happens through mediated public diplomacy efforts, and in particular online subsidies.

This is relevant in several ways. First, the Colombian conflict is the oldest in the western hemisphere, and the one that has attracted the biggest multilateral intervention. Beyond traditional approaches to cooperation from the perspective of financial or technical approaches, this work focuses on political communication supporting these efforts embedded in public diplomacy. The role of online subsidies specifically aimed at media, stakeholders and interested audiences in supporting cooperation aims needs to be better understood and explored.

Based on the assumption of a mutually constitutive relation between peace and space identified by geography and peacebuilding scholarship, this article contends that the promotion of peacebuilding by international actors is sustained (at least in part) through spatial discourses. Spatial framing, or the selection and promotion of targeted places of intervention, conveys preferred meanings about what is at issue in those places and how they ought to be transformed through online subsidies. Although peacebuilding studies incorporating geographic notions, and political geography scholarship incorporating peacebuilding have recognised the interrelation between peace, conflict and space, these insights have not been, in the authors’ best knowledge, productively applied yet to mediated public diplomacy in relation to peacebuilding, in the way advanced by this work.

The results illustrate three points regarding the proposed notion of spatial framing. First, the promotion of peacebuilding targets specific spaces in a differentiated manner during multilateral interventions. Some international actors displayed greater communicative engagement in terms of the scope of departments covered by online subsidies. This would confirm differing levels of local engagement by international actors in peacebuilding, nuancing, in practice, the widespread incorporation of the local into peacebuilding practices (Pugh 2013, 14).

Second, the labelling of targeted peacebuilding spaces by international community actors not only reinforces traditional state-led representations of ‘absence of the state’, remoteness and conflictive rural and ethnic spaces subject to development interventions identified in previous works (Serje 2013; Cairo et al. 2018), but extended such characterization to intermediate cities and smaller capitals, regions and departments subject to peacebuilding cooperation, signalling capitalist development preferences linked to peacebuilding.

Third, when tackling spatial transformation directly, online subsidies referred to supply chains and market connections. This dimension was present through the transformation of the Orinoquía region into a sustainable world pantry, the protection of the Amazon and the Pacific regions in function of ‘sustainable’ production and linkages to the green and health economies, the transformation of reincorporation and rural spaces into productive spaces with market networks, the provision of infrastructure including utilities, roads, housing and schools, the formalisation of land, the clearing up of land from antipersonnel mines and illegal economies, replacing the latter with crops which could, again, connect with wider markets. This echoes Corredor García’s (2022) security, liberal and environmental notions of peace linked to spatial transformation as notions also promoted by the international actors studied. At the same time, it confirms insights in peacebuilding literature political geography literature about the discursive and spatial nature of peacebuilding as promoted by, in this case, international actors on the ground. Recalling Richmond and Franks referred to earlier (2009, 4078) ‘an orthodox liberal peace exists for elites and for the capital, while a conservative liberal peace or a completely different form of polity exists for more peripheral others’. This is certainly the case in Colombia, where the international promotion of a liberal peacebuilding has moved between conservative and orthodox graduations depending on levels of governance and security offered by targeted areas for transformation throughout the three Administrations explored.

As limitations, this work considers a narrow range international actors contributing to peacebuilding transition in Colombia, however, the ones chosen are not only key during the transitional period explored, but also allow to illustrate key communicative dimensions embedded in multilateralism through spatial framing. In addition, one mediated public diplomacy strategy (online subsidies) focused on leaving aside other potential mechanisms including social media. However, and as shown in the introduction, online subsidies are still important in feeding journalism and public information environments around international intervention with their greater ability to contextualise processes in highly polarised environments. How much agenda setting power do the external actors have in the end is a question that prompts further research around how international messages are received by media outlets or public opinion in Colombia, outside the scope of this work focused instead on the process of international frame building regarding peacebuilding. However, this focus is still important to capture complexity in the liberal peacebuilding narrative, and further understand how it interacts and negotiate with the spaces where it takes place.

Future studies can advance on this perspective not only by including a wider variety of actors in multilateral experiences of peacebuilding interventions (countries, IOs, NGOs, the private sector, etc.), but also by linking how such spatial constructions are negotiated, received, adopted, contested on the ground, shaping trajectories of conflict and peacebuilding itself.

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1. The main peacebuilding donors in 2016 were the US, the EU, Sweden, Canada and the UK (Agencia Presidencial de Cooperación 2016). These donors continued to be important by 2024, along with Norway, South Korea, Germany, Italy and Switzerland (Agencia Presidencial de Cooperación 2024). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. For the US, the search included information published in the news sections of the US Embassy in Colombia and USAID webpages. For EU/EEAS, the news section of their official webpage, and for the UK, relevant information published in the UK Embassy in Colombia and relevant information in Gov.uk. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Departments are the central administrative units in Colombia for planning and development, with their own representatives for the three branches of government, and capital cities. Colombian Departments are divided in 1101 municipalities, also with administrative autonomy in terms of public services, infrastructure, development, territorial organization, and community participation provision (DANE, Art. 298; "Constitución Política de la República de Colombia 1991" 1991; Ministerio de Educación Nacional República de Colombia; OECD 2016; cited by Montoya-Londoño 2023, 41). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. The differentiation between small and major cities has been made with reference to Statista (2020; cited by Montoya-Londoño 2023, 109). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)