



Colombia's Polls Mark a Forking Path in Peace Talks

With a presidential vote approaching, prospects for continued dialogue with armed groups to curb Colombia's conflict are uncertain. In this excerpt from the Watch List 2026 – Spring Edition, Crisis Group shows how the EU and member states can help bolster peace and counter organised crime.

Colombians will vote for a new president on 31 May (a run-off will take place on 21 June if no one gains more than 50 per cent), following a campaign that has showcased starkly different visions for how to tackle the country's burgeoning internal conflict. For the last four years, left-leaning President Gustavo Petro has sought dialogue with all remaining armed and criminal groups – a policy known as “total peace”. Iván Cepeda, the candidate on the left with the greatest chance of succeeding Petro, promises to double down on negotiations, despite the mixed results of the talks to date. But with insecurity regularly polling among the top voter concerns, nearly every other candidate affirms that they will end dialogue with armed outfits and instead endeavour to attack them with stronger military force. As the first round of voting approaches, these differences are likely to be aggravated by U.S. scrutiny of Colombia and pressure to align with Washington's hardline counter-narcotics

agenda, which could arguably play to the advantage of either left or right.

Whoever triumphs in the presidential contest would be wise to adopt a combination of tools in trying to quell Colombia's increasingly fragmented and criminalised conflict. Force and diplomacy should both have a place, along with a more decisive return to the roadmap laid out in the 2016 peace agreement that saw the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), once the country's largest insurgency, lay down its arms. That accord included steps to address the inequality and state weakness that criminal groups prey upon to recruit, control territory and extract illicit rents. The European Union and its member states have supported the 2016 accord for a decade and had a front seat in several recent negotiations, enabling them to provide nuanced advice on security policy, while investing in rural infrastructure and development and backing long-term reforms.

Electoral Violence Highlights Voter Concerns

The electoral cycle began with the assassination of right-wing presidential hopeful Miguel Uribe in broad daylight during a June 2025 campaign stop in a Bogotá neighbourhood. The attack raised the spectre of a return to the sort of high-profile political violence that once afflicted Colombia. Since then, authorities have warned of plans to target other politicians. As of early February, the Mission for Election Observation, a Colombian NGO, had recorded 415 cases of political violence, including an attack that killed a senator's bodyguards near the border with Venezuela and the separate kidnappings of three politicians – a senator, a mayor and a legislative candidate – all in the south-western region department of Cauca. Voting in the 8 March congressional and primary elections nevertheless went smoothly, with only a couple of isolated incidents.

Violence is a concern that extends far

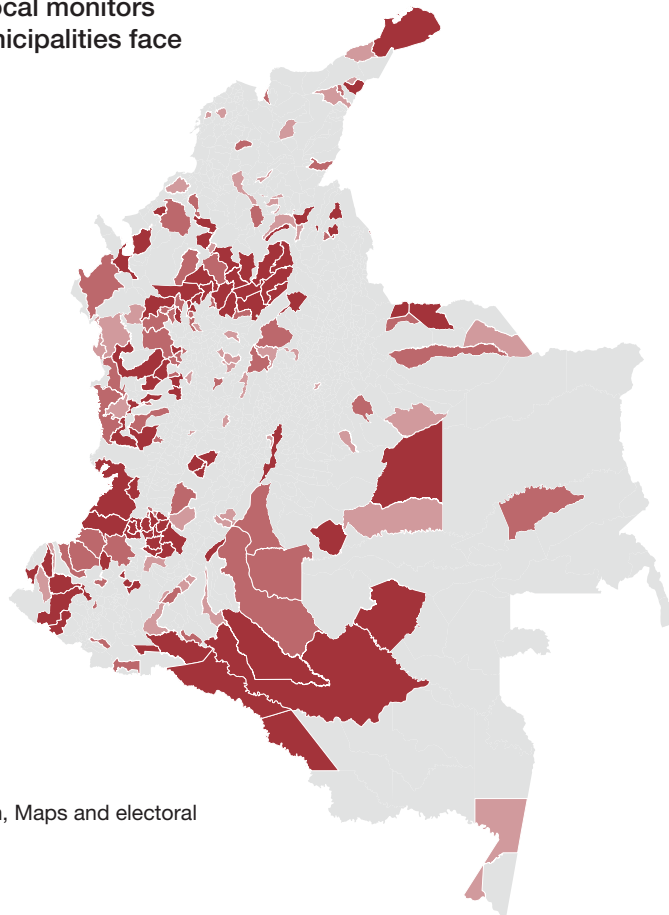
beyond electoral politics. Armed groups have ballooned in size, with an estimated 27,000 fighters throughout Colombia at the end of 2025, up roughly 5,000 from a year before. Many of these new recruits are children, lured into joining by false promises of wealth or protection. Uribe's assassin was fifteen years old at the time and had been paid by a network of criminal groups to pull the trigger. Civilians are feeling the impact: reports of kidnapping and extortion doubled between 2024 and 2025. While homicide rates saw only a slight increase nationwide, murders in conflict-affected areas rose markedly; in Cali, the third-largest city, murders were up 14 per cent. Cases of sexual violence continue to rise year on year.

Candidates are pitching markedly different approaches to voters as to how they might curb this violence. The right has blamed Petro's peace talks for rising crime and has called for *mano dura*, or a heavy-handed crackdown. Paloma Valencia, the candidate of ex-president

■ Ahead of May's presidential vote, local monitors warn that 185 of Colombia's 1,122 municipalities face risks including electoral violence.

Electoral risk level

- MEDIUM
- HIGH
- EXTREME



Source: Colombian Electoral Observation Mission, Maps and electoral risk factors – 2026 National Election, March 2026.

Álvaro Uribe's Democratic Centre party, has repeatedly praised U.S. President Donald Trump's counter-narcotics policy and called for closer alignment with Washington. Hard-right candidate Abelardo de la Espriella, a newcomer to national politics, has promised to carry out airstrikes on the rebel National Liberation Army (ELN), with U.S. support, from the moment he takes office. Several candidates have drawn inspiration from El Salvador's President Nayib Bukele, whose mass and often indiscriminate arrests have reduced lethal violence, albeit at the cost of violating due process and creating a huge prison population. Even centrist candidates such as former Medellín mayor Sergio Fajardo insist that the military must move onto the front foot.

These proposals contrast sharply with the approach adopted by Cepeda, of the left coalition Historic Pact, who wants to persevere with Petro's attempts at dialogue and is leading the polls. The Historic Pact has already clinched the largest share of seats in the legislature, giving it a firm foothold from which to shape policymaking in the next administration. While critical at times of the outgoing government's management of "total peace", Cepeda remains staunchly committed to negotiations as the primary means of winding down conflict. He has opposed Petro's limited military escalations, including restarting airstrikes on certain armed factions in mid-2025.

The scale of political polarisation has paved the way for Petro to question the credibility of the voting system, with the president repeatedly launching attacks on its reliability. Despite rebuttals from electoral authorities and civil society groups, Petro's comments suggest that he or his supporters may seek to cast doubt on the outcome if the results go against them.

The Highs and Lows of "Total Peace"

Stark differences on security are the culmination of a quarter-century of experimentation in how to tackle armed conflict. Government strategies have fluctuated between more and

less hardline approaches, with the militarised policy known as "democratic security" taken during the two-term presidency of Álvaro Uribe (2002-2010) at one pole and Petro's negotiation-focused "total peace" at the other. Neither of these extremes has been able to staunch the bloodshed, though each has notched successes. The most pronounced reduction in Colombia's conflict, however, involved a combination of military pressure and negotiation: the first ended the tactical stalemate between the former FARC and the Colombian statepushed the former FARC to a tactical stalemate in the early 2010s, while the second led to the 2016 accord that resulted in a drastic drop in homicides, displacement, recruitment and kidnappings.

Those achievements began to unravel well before Petro took office in 2022. When the former FARC guerrillas withdrew from their rural strongholds a decade ago, they left behind lucrative assets, including drug trafficking routes, illicit crops, illegal mines and land for farming or ranching. Other armed groups, such as the ELN and the organisation known today as the Gaitanista Army of Colombia (EGC), fixed their gaze on those resources and moved quickly to claim them. New criminal groups emerged, too, notably a menagerie of so-called FARC dissident factions, led mostly by former mid-level commanders but staffed with new recruits.

Petro was voted into office with a clear-eyed diagnosis of this challenge. State institutions and services had been slow to fill the areas vacated by the FARC in 2016. Instead, demobilising just one group had created new opportunities for others to gain strength. At first, Petro was sceptical of the merits of military firepower. As a senator, he had been a fierce critic of Uribe's reliance on the armed forces, which led to serious violations of human rights and some of the darkest episodes of the war, as right-wing paramilitaries fought insurgents in coordination with local battalions and regional elites. Petro also pointed to former President Iván Duque's inability to stem violence with a reassertion of military force from 2018 to 2022.

A demobilised guerrilla fighter himself, Petro

hoped that his administration's leftist agenda would inspire confidence and quick deal-making with insurgents and criminals. He moved swiftly to sit down with myriad groups. To pave the way for dialogue, Petro's government asked armed groups not to kill, torture or "disappear" people in exchange for a reduction in military pressure up to and including a ceasefire. At the "total peace" approach's peak in 2023-2024, Bogotá was engaged in well over a dozen sets of peace talks. Many of his supporters – including residents of the most conflict-affected areas – expressed optimism. Even some military officers whispered relief that the government would involve other state institutions in resolving conflict, rather than relying solely on front-line combat to push back armed groups.

Four years later, however, it is plain that "total peace" has come at a high cost. Armed and criminal groups did not come to the table in good faith. Instead, they took advantage of the breathing room offered by pauses in military operations to grow stronger. Combat among armed outfits also rose markedly; less concerned about state military pressure, groups fought turf wars with one another to carve out fiefdoms.

Over its last year in office, the Petro administration has had to recalibrate. Bogotá has sharply increased offensive operations and even revived controversial tactics such as airstrikes on armed and criminal groups. As one senior military officer described it, "we are only just clawing back momentum".

Even so, security improvements have remained elusive. The armed and criminal groups that dominate certain areas of Colombia today are no longer hierarchical rebel movements with political ambitions. Instead, they are factionalised local outfits seeking to dominate specific zones and assert control of illegal rents. Combatants do not always wear uniforms and can easily hide among civilians when state forces appear. Built over decades to combat large insurgencies such as the former FARC, the military now finds itself struggling to adapt to counter groups with diffuse leadership structures and profit-making goals. The tactics

that pushed the former FARC to stalemate on ground, such as bombardments, targeted killings and high-level captures, no longer have the same effect.

Hard Choices

Whoever assumes the presidency in August will need to take immediate decisions regarding Colombia's conflict. Several sets of peace talks are still under way, including with the largest armed organisation in the country, the EGC. Ending those discussions would almost certainly cause a short-term spike in violence. Keeping talks open, however, will require spending significant political capital to assemble majority support in Congress: without a new law, the legal framework permitting dialogue will expire in November.

Nor is deploying an all-out military strategy likely to yield the results that some candidates promise. At the end of Petro's administration, and after U.S. pressure to clamp down on drug trafficking, the military is already running on all cylinders. But ageing equipment, lower recruiting numbers, stagnant budgets and an overstretched officer corps mean there is little room to ratchet up pressure.

Candidates are not the only ones shaping the debate about how to proceed. Colombia's election is under close scrutiny from the U.S. The White House, which has not hidden its dislike of "total peace", has already pressed the Petro government to make major policy concessions, including promises to capture and extradite key armed group leaders, several of whom are involved in talks. Bogotá will also launch a drone-based fumigation program targeting coca crops, the raw material used to produce cocaine. The U.S. has made it clear that it will flex its muscles to guarantee that whoever takes office will toe Trump's line.

Colombia's new president will need to rethink how best to allocate limited resources to deal with a fragmented criminal landscape. Bogotá could carve out a narrow path forward that channels U.S. counter-narcotics funding into supporting its long-term goal of gaining

ground against armed outfits. Better intelligence, operations focused on territorial control rather than individual targets, judicial investigations and asset seizures could all help put the squeeze on armed and criminal groups. But Colombia's history has repeatedly shown that the military alone cannot end the war. Negotiations are an essential method of unwinding conflict, so long as talks have a clear roadmap and are paired with pressure.

What is at Stake for the EU

The European Union and its member states have invested heavily in peace in Colombia, and their voices have proven critical in ensuring that the 2016 accord remains on successive governments' agendas. The EU also monitored Colombia's congressional and presidential elections in 2022, and it has deployed an election observation mission again in 2026. European diplomatic backing, including support for civil society groups, will be more important than ever as the U.S. pulls back from providing foreign aid. EU investment mechanisms such as Global Gateway can also provide critical public-private financing for long-term development projects.

The EU and a number of member states have also served as guarantors or observers in "total peace" dialogues. This role has given the EU's delegation, as well as certain embassies, special insight into both the progress made at the negotiating tables and the missteps that have proven costly during Petro's term. European allies have vital institutional knowledge that can be deployed to support future dialogue and avoid past pitfalls.

European countries also have strong domestic reasons to cultivate good relations with Colombia. The last decade has seen a rapid increase in cocaine shipments moving from South America to European shores. Port cities where the drugs arrive have begun to experience some of the same security threats that have long affected Latin America: criminal penetration of state institutions, coercion of port workers, recruitment of young people and violence.

In response, the EU and its member states are dedicating more resources to fighting organised crime, with several European countries bolstering their cooperation with Colombian security and intelligence agencies. Under the aegis of its latest drug strategy, which lists international coordination and partnership as one of five pillars, the EU has opened negotiations to strengthen investigations and extradition cooperation between Colombian judicial authorities and Eurojust, which manages internal European legal cooperation. The EU has funded programs such as the Europe Latin America Programme of Assistance against Transnational Organised Crime (El PAcCTO) and the Cooperation Program between Latin America, the Caribbean and the European Union on Drug Policy (COPOLAD) to boost the capabilities of Latin American state and law enforcement agencies in the fight against crime. Colombia, for its part, is in a strong position to offer its European partners a wealth of experience in how to limit the violent fallout of criminal trafficking.

The EU and its member states should:

- **Serve as a trusted, credible voice in election monitoring.** The EU's election observation mission offers a critical backstop for Colombia's ballot. As they did in the legislative vote, the mission can communicate with electoral authorities and, if needed, the public, to reassure voters that the electoral system is robust. The mission should continue to support efforts by state agencies to promote a peaceful campaign and handover of power. This task will be particularly important if the U.S. or others seek to influence the vote's outcome – or if any party questions the results.
- **Continue to push for fulfilling the terms of the 2016 peace agreement,** which outlines steps to chip away at the inequalities that fuel cycles of violence, bring better services to rural areas, and keep groups such as women and ethnic minorities at a political and eco-

conomic disadvantage. Inclusive rural development is a central component of the accord, and the EU's Global Gateway initiative could seek to fund opportunities in infrastructure and rural services, as it has already done supporting rural mobile connectivity and renewable energy.

- Diplomatic efforts, meanwhile, should also seek to **safeguard the principle of negotiations** with armed and criminal groups as a way to reduce violence and end conflict. The EU can continue to advocate for talks focusing on issues such as an end to child recruitment and protection of social leaders. The EU and its member states should continue to make the case in their capitals that their support for civil society is critical, particularly now that the demise of USAID has taken away a lifeline for these groups.

- **Boost judicial and security cooperation.**

EU programs like El PAcCTO 2.0 and COPOLAD provide critical technical assistance to Colombian security forces and judicial authorities on best practices for unraveling organised criminal networks, reducing prison violence and increasing intelligence cooperation. A forthcoming agreement between Eurojust and the Colombian penal system should also improve coordination on investigations and extraditions. Now is a critical moment for Europe to invest in Colombia's security, as the country looks to lessen its historical dependence upon the U.S.

Access the full EU Watch List online

