LEGOF

The legitimacy of EU foreign and security policy in the age of global contestation

The EU Global Strategy and Resilience
Five Years On

This policy brief takes stock of the EU's resilience-building strategy since the publication of the European Union Global Strategy in 2016. The analysis shows that the operationalisation of resilience at the strategic level and on the ground has faced significant challenges derived from the fuzzy nature of this concept (and the EU's understanding of it) and the EU's complex and fragmented set-up. Challenges of implementation have been particularly evident on the ground, where an increasing gap between the EU's rhetoric and practice has emerged, with the EU falling back on previous policy paradigms. Securitisation processes and the impact of recent crises, such as the Covid-19 pandemic, have turned the notion of resilience into a more inward-looking, security-driven concept, in the process, limiting the transformative potential of resilience-thinking at the EU level.

Key points

- The rise of resilience at the EU level coincided with a shift from the normative ambitions of the European Security Strategy (2003) to the more pragmatic foreign policy advocated by the EU Global Strategy (2016).

- The EU's multi-level and fragmented institutional structure has complicated a consensual approach towards resilience-building within the Union.

- While the implementation of resilience has contributed to a more integrated approach to conflicts and crises, it has largely failed to foster local ownership and bottom-up approaches.

- Migration containment strategies have jeopardized resilience-building in the neighbourhood.

- The EU is increasingly focused on its own resilience rather than the resilience of others. The Covid-19 pandemic has accelerated this turn from external to internal resilience-building.

Ana E. Juncos
University of Bristol

The publication of the EU Global Strategy (EUGS) in June 2016, under the helm of HR/VP Federica Mogherini, was meant to usher a new phase in EU foreign and security policy. It responded to shifting trends at the global level with an increase in geopolitical tensions and the fragmentation of the multilateral order. The EUGS answer to these developments was to call for a stronger integration of *both* interests and norms in the pursuit of EU foreign and security objectives via the notion of principled pragmatism; implementing an integrated approach to crises and conflicts; strengthening EU security and defence capabilities; and contributing to resilience-building in the neighbourhood.[1] Resilience became the cornerstone of the EU's approach to relations with countries in the Eastern and Southern flanks of the Union after years of repeated failures. It also aligned with changes in foreign, development, and humanitarian paradigms at the international level, with a new emphasis on coping and adapting to global complexity and uncertainty.

Five years on, what has become of the goal of promoting resilience in the neighbourhood? To what extend has resilience shaped EU foreign and security policies? And more importantly, what has the implementation of an EU resilience approach achieved? This policy brief takes stock of the EU's resilience-building strategy since the publication of EUGS.

In this policy brief, I argue that the implementation of resilience has faced significant challenges, some of them derived from the vague nature of this concept (and the EU's understanding of it) and others from the EU's complex and fragmented set-up. Challenges of implementation have been particularly evident on the ground, where a gap between the EU's resilience-building narrative and its operationalisation has emerged. Securitisation processes and the impact of recent crises, such as the Covid-19 pandemic, have also turned the notion of resilience into a more inward-looking, security-driven concept, in the process, relinquishing the transformative potential of resilience-thinking at the EU level.

Resilience as a new paradigm in EU foreign and security policy: The rise and fall of a concept

The EU's Global Strategy of 2016 signified, at least rhetorically, a departure from the normative ambitions of democracy promotion contained in the

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European Security Strategy of 2003 towards a more pragmatic and more interest-driven EU foreign policy in the neighbourhood.[2] Driving this recalibration was a recognition that past EU democratisation efforts in the neighbourhood had failed. The advent of principled pragmatism, strategic autonomy, and resilience seemed to symbolise such move. The EUGS defines resilience as "the ability of states and societies to reform, thus withstanding and recovering from

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1 High Representative of the EU. (2016) 'Shared vision, common action: A stronger Europe. A global strategy for the European Union's foreign and security policy', available at: https://eeas.europa.eu/archives/docs/top_stories/pdf/eugs_review_web.pdf

2 Juncos, A.E. (2017). Resilience as the new EU foreign policy paradigm: A pragmatist turn? *European Security*, 26, 1–18.

internal and external crises".[3] While resilience had been part of the EU's development and humanitarian vocabulary prior to 2016, the EUGS elevated the significance of this notion by extending its reach to foreign and security policies and by linking resilience-building to core geostrategic interests.

During the months and years that followed the publication of the EUGS, resilience would become a key discourse in the EU's foreign policy narrative, eclipsing relating concepts such as that of principled pragmatism. This was only natural given that the term 'resilience' had featured more than 40 times in the EU Global Strategy. The Joint Communication on a Strategic Approach to Resilience sought to bring together the different strands of resilience work at the EU level (from humanitarian aid, development, climate change, cybersecurity, and conflict) to develop a 'multi-faceted approach to resilience'.[4] Just like the EUGS, the 'Strategic Approach' was a truly 'global' approach because of its attempt at promoting a joined-up effort in EU external action.[5] It also sought closer integration between EU foreign policy and national foreign policies in the planning and implementation of an EU resilience approach. This document, together with the 10 principles attached to it, was meant to give policy-makers more detailed guidance to operationalise a concept that remained fuzzy for many, and an empty signifier for some. The pliability of the concept, as a 'boundary object',[6] had initially been hailed as one of its main virtues, but it would quickly turn into a problem, especially in a

polity such as the EU so attached to formally codified rules and procedures and prone to technocratic solutions. Resilience would soon become entangled with and superseded by discussions relating to the implementation of the EU's integrated approach and the emergence of a new nexus, the humanitarian-development-peace nexus.

By mid-2019, with the increase in geopolitical competition and transatlantic tensions, resilience began to disappear from debates at the EU level, sidelined by a new buzzword: 'strategic autonomy'. The 'geopolitical' Commission (and HR/VP) that was inaugurated in 2019, while remaining committed to the priorities set out in the EU Global Strategy, was to place more emphasis on the pursuit of strategic autonomy/sovereignty, shifting attention away from the EU's commitment to building resilience in the neighbourhood. As a result, resilience-building has once again become the realm of humanitarian, development, and disaster risk management actors. Resilience has gone full circle.

The implementation of the EU's resilience approach: rhetoric vs practice

The implementation of the EU's resilience approach was always going to be difficult. Born out of different pressures at the international and EU level,[7] the 'translation' of the concept of resilience in EU policies and practice would bring with it its own challenges. A gap between rhetoric and practice, between strategy

3 High Representative, 2016, op. cit., p.23.

4 High Representative, 2016, op. cit., p.25

5 European Commission and HR/VP (2017). 'Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council. A strategic approach to resilience in the EU's external action', JOIN(2017) 21 final, Brussels.

6 Juncos, A.E. (2018) Resilience in peacebuilding: Contesting uncertainty, ambiguity, and complexity, *Contemporary Security Policy*, 39:4, 559-574.

7 Joseph, J. and Juncos, A.E. (2019). Resilience as an emergent European project? The EU's place in the resilience turn. *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 41(2), 287–310.

and action, soon started to emerge.[8]

At the strategic and policy level, different (and to a great extent contrasting) forces influenced the adoption of resilience as a guiding principle in EU foreign policy. First, just like in the case of other international institutions and national strategies, neoliberal discourses of self-reliance, responsibility, learning, and adaptation in the face of global complexity and uncertainty had shaped understandings of resilience at the EU level. This translated into an emphasis on self-governance, partnerships, pragmatism, and responsibilisation of local actors, with notions of individual and societal resilience (alongside that of state resilience) becoming more prominent.

actors. The traditional 'turf-battles' between different institutions (Commission vs EEAS), Commission DGs and Services, and between the EU and its member states affected the operationalisation of resilience. Institutional fragmentation regarding funding and programming also resulted in decoupling between the original strategy/narrative and its translation into policy. It was soon obvious that the EU's own complexity became an obstacle to the implementation of a resilience approach in its foreign and security policies. This was more evident when it came to implementing the humanitarian-development-peace nexus (the so-called 'triple nexus') and the external-internal security nexus.[9]

> **" The EU's own complexity became an obstacle to the implementation of a resilience approach in its foreign and security policies.**

However, this neoliberal notion of resilience was to be mediated by the EU's own normative orientation and universal liberal conceptions of human rights, democracy and the rule of law. As a result, resilience has become a means to an end – the promotion of EU liberal values – rather than an end in itself.

Finally, and perhaps more importantly, the multi-level and fragmented institutional structure of the EU would complicate the emergence of a consensual approach towards resilience-building among EU

Perhaps tellingly, the implementation of resilience was never assigned to a particular organisation or individual, unlike the integrated approach, whose implementation was tasked to a specific unit within the EEAS hierarchy (currently, the Integrated approach for Security and Peace (ISP) Directorate). In the case of early warning, for instance, there is only a recommendation to include 'appropriate indicators of resilience' within the existing EU Early Warning System, but this is generally done on a case-by-case basis and not systematically.[10] The only long-lasting impact of resilience thinking at the EU level might be felt with the requirement for joint programming in the new Neighbourhood,

8 Joseph, J. and Juncos, A.E. (2020) A promise not fulfilled: The (non) implementation of the resilience turn in EU peacebuilding, *Contemporary Security Policy,* 41:2, 287-310; Petrova, I. and Delcour, L. (2020) From principle to practice? The resilience–local ownership nexus in the EU Eastern Partnership policy, *Contemporary Security Policy*, 41:2, 336-360. Bressan, S. and Bergmaier, A. (forthcoming) From conflict early warning to fostering resilience? Chasing convergence in EU foreign policy, *Democratization*.

9 Tocci, N. (2020) Resilience and the role of the European Union in the world, *Contemporary Security Policy*, 41:2, 176-194.

10 Bressan and Bergmaier (forthcoming), op. cit.

Development and International Cooperation Instrument of the EU's budget 2021-2027; although this can also be attributed to the EU's integrated approach and the emergence of the 'triple nexus'.

> ❝ The promise of resilience – one of self-governance by and for the local – has not materialised.

On the ground, the implementation of resilience has not been easy either. The findings are mixed so far, with most evidence pointing at missed opportunities. At the heart of these problems remains the tension between the non-linear, pragmatic and bottom-up approach advocated by resilience and the EU's pursuit of liberal templates and top-down policies and priorities. Despite its embrace of resilience, the EU still follows a linear model of modernisation guided by a belief in universal liberal values, which does not sit well with complexity thinking and the impossibility of predicting threats and risks in an uncertain world. This tension, which cannot be easily resolved, has often led to the EU to choose continuity over change and path dependent outcomes over innovative approaches to deal with conflict and crises in the neighbourhood.[11]

In terms of its contribution to the promotion of sustainable peace, it is possible to identify four key ways in which resilience can have a positive impact: with its focus on complexity and systems thinking; the promotion of an integrated approach to dealing with conflicts and crises; a shift toward bottom-up approaches and local capacities; and, finally, a stronger emphasis on human agency and self-

governance.[12] While the EU's narrative appears to be in line with the 'resilience turn', the EU's practice has failed to deliver on its promise. EU policies towards the Western Balkans are a case in point, with the EU focusing most of its efforts on developing a more integrated approach to crisis, while neglecting deeper understandings of complexity, local capacities and human agency.[13] In Bosnia and Herzegovina, for instance, despite an apparent shift in strategy 'from democratization to resilience', the EU's approach to promoting sustainable peace has failed to foster more local ownership, while the lack of progress towards accession has led to a growing frustration among the local population.[14]

The EU's policies towards its Eastern neighbours have not fared better. Although EU assistance might have contributed to strengthening societal resilience in some cases such as Ukraine and Georgia, the EU's inability to reduce external risks (e.g. in the form of Russia's aggressive foreign policy) continues to undermine the resilience of these countries.[15] Just like in the Western Balkans, EU policies show more continuity than innovation, with path

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11 Joseph and Juncos (2020), op. cit.; Petrova and Delcour (2020), op. cit.

12 Joseph and Juncos (2020), op. cit.

13 Joseph and Juncos (2020), op. cit.

14 Joseph and Juncos (2020), op. cit.; Bargués, P. and Morillas, P. (forthcoming) From democratization to fostering resilience: EU intervention and the challenges of building institutions, social trust, and legitimacy in Bosnia and Herzegovina, *Democratization*.

15 Kakachia, K., Legucka, L. and Lebanidze, B. (forthcoming) Can the EU's new global strategy make a difference? Strengthening resilience in the Eastern Partnership countries, *Democratization*.

dependency and reliance of past policy frameworks resulting in a gap between the rhetoric of resilience and local ownership and its implementation.[16] EU policies in Eastern Europe have not resulted in a turn to 'local ownership' or more people-centred approaches; instead, approximation with EU templates continues to drive policy (possibly undermining societal resilience in the mid- and long-term too). Unfortunately, the promise of resilience - one of self-governance by and for the local – has not materialised when it comes to EU foreign and security policies.[17]

> ❝ Resilience has become a security-driven and inward-looking narrative that has little to do with its roots in complexity and systems thinking.

In all these cases, what has become obvious is that EU resilience-building practices have often put EU security interests ahead of those of local populations. As resilience becomes a means to achieve EU ends (democratisation, risk management, stability), we have witnessed 'a return to "the EU normal" via resilience as a governing regime'.[18] For many living in the EU's borderlands, EU policies are working to maintain the status quo and stability at best, or as a migration management strategy at worst. For instance, EU resilience-building in the Southern neighbourhood has become a 'refugee containment strategy', another manifestation of Fortress Europe, that risks not only destabilizing the host countries (e.g. Jordan, Lebanon), but ultimately threatening

the security of Europe.[19] In other cases, security interests and, more generally, the securitisation of EU external policies have hindered the implementation of resilience thinking. For instance, the containment of migration in Libya pursued by several EU member states has gotten in the way of strengthening societal and state resilience in the country.[20] Given the evidence of increasing securitisation of EU resilience policies, how has the EU's resilience turn managed increased pressures from geopolitical competition and the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic?

Resilience-building, geopolitical competition and Covid-19

The arrival of a new 'geopolitical' Commission in 2019 has meant a more inward-looking approach to resilience, which is now reserved for internal security policies and/or the EU's own (societal) resilience. The 'external' dimension of resilience has vanished from policy debates in Brussels. As the competition between the US and China intensified and the tensions across the two sides of the Atlantic became more palpable, the new European Commission team sought to increase the EU's ability to act independently when required. In this context, the political programme of the 2019-2024 Commission only refers to resilience once.[21]

16 Petrova and Delcour (2020), op. cit.

17 Korosteleva, E.A. (2020) Reclaiming resilience back: A local turn in EU external governance, *Contemporary Security Policy*, 41:2, 241-262.

18 Korosteleva (2020), p. 248.

19 Anholt, R. and Sinatti, G. (2020) Under the guise of resilience: The EU approach to migration and forced displacement in Jordan and Lebanon, *Contemporary Security Policy*, 41:2, 311-335.

20 Tocci (2020), op. cit.

21 Von der Leyen, U. (2019) 'A Europe that strives for more. My agenda for Europe', available at https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/political-guidelines-next-commission_en_0.pdf

> **The implementation of resilience has exposed an increasing gap between the EU's rhetoric and practice.**

Tellingly, this reference appears in the section 'Defending Europe', where it is mentioned in relation to hybrid threats. This trend would continue for the years to come. Resilience-building understood in terms of facilitating adaptive capacities, bottom-up approaches and long-term strategies in the neighbourhood is now generally reserved for EU humanitarian and development policies, and to some extent, disaster risk reduction strategies. EU foreign and security policy has instead turned its attention to debates about geopolitical competition and achieving strategic autonomy.

If anything, the Covid-19 pandemic has diverted more political energy and resources away from the goal of 'building resilience to the East and the South'. Resilience is still present in the EU's narrative. However, this time the focus is not on facilitating or engineering resilience in the neighbourhood, but *of* the EU itself and *within* the EU (i.e. societal resilience against pandemics). For instance, resilience is at the heart of the new 'Recovery and Resilience Facility', which is seen as 'the key instrument at the heart of Next Generation EU to help the EU emerge stronger and more resilient from the current crisis'.[22] References to resilience also appear in current discussions about the Strategic Compass, intended to guide the use of military capabilities at the EU level, but here it is strongly associated with the protection of critical infrastructures, fighting misinformation and disinformation, and cybersecurity within the

EU. Together with the above-mentioned trends of securitisation of the EU's external action, this suggests that resilience has become a security-driven and inward-looking narrative that has little to do with its roots in complexity and systems thinking. This undermines the potential of resilience as an approach guiding the EU's *external* action, a foreign policy paradigm of the sorts.

Conclusion

With the adoption of the EUGS, resilience became a central element in the EU's ambition to address key challenges in the neighbourhood. What is not clear is whether resilience has driven some recent changes in EU foreign policy or been used to justify those changes ex-post. For instance, over the past decade, the EU has sought to foster a more integrated approach to its external action, instruments, and policies. The move towards complexity and system-thinking has served to rationalise such changes but the search for consistency/coherence was always there, as a key challenge in EU foreign and security policy. The same goes for local ownership. The move towards less intrusive interventions and towards a more 'hands off' approach (through capacity-building operations) might have resulted from a more realistic assessment of the EU's own limitations rather than resilience-thinking. In that sense, resilience fits well with past and current trends in EU foreign policy, which explains why it was so widely embraced across different policy sectors in the first place.

The implementation of resilience, however, has exposed an increasing gap between the EU's rhetoric

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22 European Commission (2021) 'Recovery and Resilience Facility', available at: https://ec.europa.eu/info/business-economy-euro/recovery-coronavirus/recovery-and-resilience-facility_en

and practice. The enduring turf-wars and lack of consensus among different policy communities at the EU level can explain to some extent challenges relating to the operationalisation of a concept that for many remains too vague to guide policy practice. In other cases, path dependency and the technocratic and incremental nature of institutional change at the EU level has prevented innovation on the ground. Other times, the EU's reluctance to 'let go' has negatively impacted the promotion of local ownership and more bottom-up approaches. Last but not least, EU interests, including security interests in the form of migration containment strategies, have jeopardized resilience-building in the neighbourhood.

Despite problems of implementation in the neighbourhood, resilience is here to stay. However, the meaning and use of resilience has shifted along the way, turning into a more EU-centred notion, a means to secure the self.[23] While resilience has always had an internal purpose as a way to affirm the EU's identity as a global actor and manage the EU's own complexity,[24] such purpose has become more evident in recent years. Resilience has become increasingly linked to internal (e.g. resilience of EU critical infrastructures, cybersecurity, resilience of EU democratic systems and its societies) rather than external dynamics. When it comes to EU external policies, resilience has, once again, become circumscribed to development and humanitarian policies. The Covid-19 pandemic has only accelerated this turn from external to internal resilience, with the focus of the new recovery plan being on building state and societal resilience, but this time *within* the EU.

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23 Mälksoo, M. (2016) 'From the ESS to the EU Global Strategy: external policy, internal purpose', *Contemporary Security Policy*, 37:3, 374-388.

24 Joseph and Juncos (2019), op. cit.

Further readings

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