

Anatolie CARBUNE

Centre for European Studies, Alexandru Ioan Cuza University, Iasi, Romania

# SOCIETAL RESILIENCE AND THE ROLE OF EU'S ACTORNESS IN THE EASTERN NEIGHBOURHOOD

Perspective,  
opinion and  
commentary

---

## Keywords

*Eastern neighbourhood;  
Actorness;  
Good governance*

---

## JEL Classification

F50

---

## Abstract

Particularly since the European Union Global Strategy (EUGS) was published in 2016, the EU's soft power projection in Eastern Neighbourhood revolves around the concept of resilience. EU is promoting the need for building resilience, considering that EaP states are facing many challenges associated with internal vulnerabilities and external threats, ranging from security risks to political uncertainty. However, the EUGS put a special emphasis on societal resilience, as many of states' weaknesses are linked with internal systemic issues. The aim of this paper is to recount the origins of societal resilience at the core of EU's narrative towards Eastern Neighbourhood, by focusing on the link between good governance and societal resilience. The concept of societal resilience is analysed in a wider manner; as it involves different dimensions, relevant empirical data is used to support the author's arguments. With a stronger focus on societal resilience, EU could play a more salient role in exerting its transformative power. More than that, the limits of this approach as a policy goal for long term is discussed. As EU could play only an indirect role, societal resilience can be built only gradually and EaP partners have to actively support the EU in this process. In this context, the connection between good governance, economic development and societal resilience is crucial for long term stability.

## INTRODUCTION

The enlargement of the European Union (EU) in 2004 pushed the external frontiers closer to the Eastern periphery of the European continent. The big bang enlargement brought significant opportunities for the EU's members, and risks as well. From the eastern to the southern neighbourhood, the EU was surrounded by a ring of states with fragile regimes and weak economies. The new context was defined by the EU as a matter of security, considering the peripheral uncertainty from multiple perspectives. In this situation, the EU launched in 2004 the European Neighbourhood Policy, which marked for the EU a new milestone of its presence on international arena. As the Eastern Neighbourhood was perceived by the EU as an unstable region, the need to stabilize it was the EU's first priority. In 2009, the EU updated the policy to a new level with the launch of the Eastern Partnership (EaP). The new policy tool reflected the EU's concern regarding the increasing of insecurity in the eastern dimension (Tocci, 2019). As Andrey Makarychev pointed out, "the EaP was from its very inception a political project aimed at supporting fragile democracies in Eastern Europe after the Russian-Georgian war in August 2008" (Makarychev, 2012). Despite the EU's effort, the EaP members didn't achieve remarkable results with regards to economic development, political stability, civil liberties or freedom of media (Korosteleva, 2012). The war in Georgia and then the Ukrainian crisis, which marked the peak of tension in the eastern neighbourhood, determined the EU to rethink its rhetoric towards the external policy. In this context, the EU promoted the need to build resilience as a top priority (European Union, 2016). The implications of the new concept at the core of EU's external policy marked an evident paradigmatic shift. Many authors debated the implications of resilience from both perspectives, conceptual and operational (Wagner and Anholt, 2016; Juncos, 2016; Tocci, 2016; Koenig, 2016; Ülgen, 2016; Tocci, 2019).

As resilience is a multidimensional concept, the way it should be considered in practice reflects this feature, taking into account its multiple conceptual implications. The EU is promoting the need for building resilience from various reasons, as EaP states are facing many challenges associated with internal vulnerabilities and external threats, ranging from security risks to political uncertainty. However, the EUGS put a special emphasis on societal resilience, as many of the states' weaknesses are linked with internal systemic issues. The aim of this paper is to recount the origins of societal resilience at the core of the EU's narrative towards Eastern Neighbourhood. The article is divided in three sections. In the first one

the features of the EU's actorness in the Eastern Neighbourhood are recounted, by looking to the origins of resilience building policies, with a special focus on risks related to (in)security. The second section is focused on analyzing the idea of resilience and how it evolved from an EU's global priority to a regional policy goal. The third section will explore the idea of societal resilience, by focusing on the link between good governance and societal resilience. Finally, the last section will sketch the conclusion, as well as additional comments.

## EUROPEAN UNION'S ACTORNESS IN THE EASTERN NEIGHBOURHOOD

The uncertain context resulted after the war in Georgia and Ukrainian crisis, and the endemic issues of the states from Eastern Neighbourhood determined the EU to rethink its rhetoric, for a more realistic adaptation to these challenges. EU's approach on Eastern neighbourhood was a subject for many scholars which have highlighted the limited capacity of EU's transformative power (Blockmans, 2015; Crombois, 2018; Youngs, 2017).

As EU is in a constant evolution, this trend being further reflected within the academic field, which is in permanent search for new concepts and tools in order to theorize EU as an actor in international relations. The concept of actorness is used by scholars in order to theorize the EU's *sui generis* character. Given its hybrid specificity, being a peculiar mix between several dimensions, actorness is highlighting the unique character of EU on a global scale. As it is still debatable to what extent the EU played a significant role in transforming its neighbours under the ENP's umbrella, actorness represents a central concept in this debate. A wide range of definitions of this concept have been formulated (Sjöstedt, 1977); however, Hill (1993) provided an idea which is relevant to the context of this analysis by mentioning the capabilities-expectations gap. According to Hill, a strong actor requires relevant practical capabilities in order to implement its policies. In the case of EU-EaP dyad, a closer look through the lens of capabilities-expectations gap is highlighting the high expectations pursued by the EU regarding its Eastern partners, which is strongly juxtaposed to EU's real capacity to produce its transformative effect. Scholars provided many definitions of actorness, as well as features a strong actor shall possess. According to Vogler and Bretherton (2006), four elements are required for a well framed actorness: domestic legitimacy, values, clear narrative and practical capacity. From these elements, a special role is played by the narrative,

as it acts as a link between legitimacy, values and practical capacity. In other words, narrative is the communication tool, through which the EU is expressing its view towards specific issues and also how EU sees itself on international arena. According to Cianciara (2017), several shifts occurred at the core of the EU's narrative, first in 2011 when EU put a special focus on democratization, and the second in 2015 when the ENP was reviewed, and later EUGS was published, therefore highlighting the need to build resilience, due to the increasing insecurity in the Eastern Neighbourhood. The constant shift of EU's narrative towards Eastern Neighbourhood is reflecting EU's limited capacity in understanding how it should deal with the six states which are facing a wide range of endemic issues and there are no concrete signs of positive change. EU appeared to be an attractive model for EaP states; however, this is not reflected in their efforts towards converting their values and norms to the EU's model. Since the ENP inception, the EU was more focused on building state capacity in order to manage internal systemic issues, by placing a strong focus on good governance and economic development. Through ENP review in 2015, the EU recognises its policy flaws. As the same experts worked closely in drafting both ENP Review and EUGS, a significant focus can be identified on social/societal issues.

#### **THE IDEA OF RESILIENCE: FROM GLOBAL TO REGIONAL**

It is assumed that the EU is currently facing a period of multiple crises like never before. We can call them as "the five crises of the EU": the failure of signing the constitutional treaty of the EU in 2005, the euro crisis, Brexit, the refugee's crisis and illiberal movements (McCormick, 2017). Furthermore, the Ukrainian crisis had a strong impact on EU's security as well. Given this set of challenges with domestic risks and significant changes projected on a global scale, EU published the Global Strategy in June 2016. Starting with this particular point, resilience became more popular, both in the academic field and across policy-making practitioners related to EU. Before this, resilience was the subject of three communications published by EU institutions: "The EU Approach to Resilience: Learning from Food Security and Crises", "Council Conclusions on the EU's approach to Resilience in 2013 and a further "Action Plan for Resilience in Crisis Prone Countries" in 2013 (European Commission, 2013). The context in which the logic of resilience was applied was more related to humanitarian action and food security (Tocci, 2019). In 2016, resilience became one of the five priorities for the EU; since

then, scholars were focused on various interpretations regarding the role of resilience, their approach ranging from its implication as a guiding principle to its practical usefulness.

The breakout of the Ukrainian crisis in 2014 marked an event which deeply affected EU's actorness in international relations (Nitoiu, 2016). Moreover, it determined EU to rethink its approach towards Eastern Neighbourhood. In this context, EU was pushed towards embracing a more geopolitical stance, an idea which is supported by many scholars, in addition to EU diplomats (Mogherini, 2018; Youngs, 2017; Smith, 2016; Nitoiu, 2018). The main cause is represented by the increasing insecurity in the Eastern Neighbourhood, mainly determined by Russia's assertive presence. However, as Tocci (2019) pointed out, the idea of resilience as a geopolitical tool should be expressed with caution, as it can lead to a misunderstanding of what resilience actually means. As the concept of resilience is multidimensional, it is featuring a mix of dimensions, where security plays an important role as a precondition for promoting other key objectives, such as political stability and economic development. However, the EUGS stated that societal resilience is an important dimension as well (Tocci, 2019). By insisting on the role of societal resilience, EUGS emphasized the relevance of political participation, civil society and human rights as important elements for building societal resilience.

#### **SOCIETAL RESILIENCE AS A TOP PRIORITY IN THE EASTERN NEIGHBOURHOOD**

The EUGS put a strong focus on strengthening societal resilience in its neighbourhood as one of the key priorities of EU's actorness (Juncos, 2017). Since ENP inception in 2004 and then with the launch of Eastern Partnership in 2009, the EU sought to enhance good governance and support economic development as the main dimensions of the EU's transformative power. However, little progress has been made since all six countries are struggling to maintain domestic stability. In other words, EU was not very successful in manifesting its transformative power. As Jan Techau mentions, "importantly, EUGS stops overestimating the transformative power of the EU, which observers believed to be very strong only to find out that nearly nowhere in its wider neighbourhood has the EU had any decisive influence on how things unfolded" (Techau, 2016). The document is defining resilience as "the ability of states and societies to reform, thus withstanding and recovering from internal and external crises" (European Union, 2016). In a previous document,

resilience was defined as the ability of states and societies, communities and individuals to manage, withstand, adapt, and recover from shocks and crises (European Commission, 2012). Within the document of Joint Communication, a strong focus was placed on the idea of change: the adaptability of states, societies, communities, and individuals to different categories of shocks; “the capacities of states to build, maintain, or restore core functions and cohesion; and the ability of societies, communities, and individuals to manage risks and opportunities in peaceful and sustainable ways” (Tocci, 2019). Within the EUGS, it is mentioned that the EU seeks to build both state resilience and societal resilience, as they are linked in the light of the idea according to which “states are resilient when societies feel they are becoming better off and have hope in the future” (European Union, 2016). Ulgen considers the goal of building state and societal resilience as an important “conceptual leap” at the EU’s policy level (Ulgen, 2016). According to EUGS, by building resilience on the level of states and societies in the immediate neighbourhood, the potential impact of crises is minimised (European Union, 2016; Eickhoff and Stollenwerk, 2018). But in order to achieve this, the EU needs to know its neighbours (Eickhoff and Stollenwerk, 2018). In general, the EU didn’t achieve its transformative power on its full potential and several arguments might be brought into discussion in order to support this idea (Moga and Dirdala, 2019). Until the publication of EUGS, EU followed its objectives based on a unilateral manner, by placing its vision on a single recipe: exporting the *acquis communautaire*. Considering the emergence of different threats and internal vulnerabilities of the states in the Eastern Neighbourhood, this shows that the transformative effect is far from being achieved. In contrast to the initial approach, the new policy highlights place a greater focus on the partner’s domestic structures: “This puts local ownership at the heart of the EU’s foreign policy approach” (Petrova and Delcour, 2019).

As EaP countries are facing many challenges, resilience appears as a tool for governing the complexity of this situation. There are a wide variety of issues, from economic weaknesses to good governance flaws and EU struggles to collaborate with EaP partners in order to sustain transformation, which limits the effect of EU’s normative and soft power. Through the publication of ENP review and EUGS, the EU promoted the idea of building societal resilience, which appeared to introduce new approach, juxtaposed to the previous focus on state resilience.

## **SOCIETAL RESILIENCE AND GOOD GOVERNANCE**

As EUGS emphasized, a strong focus was placed on building state and societal resilience. The idea of building resilience was updated to a new level with the publication of a new Joint Communication by the European Commission in 2017 by framing “the strategic approach to resilience in the EU’s external action”. The document starts by stating that the key challenge is to sustain progress in the transformational agenda of the EU (European Commission, 2017). The EU’s response to this challenge was the need to build state and societal resilience (European Commission, 2017). Furthermore, through this policy document, EU recognizes the complexity of the new emerging context, by highlighting the rise of uncertainty and unpredictability in the evolution of its neighbourhood. In order to deal with these risks, the EU placed a strong accent on the need to follow “a more structural, long-term, non-linear approach to vulnerabilities, with an emphasis on anticipation, prevention and preparedness” (European Commission, 2017). Building societal resilience might be achieved by involving political, social, economic, and governance resources of societies to prevent shocks, as well as to cope with them, not just absorbing the shock, but also to bring change (Colombo, Dessi and Ntsousas, 2018; Tocci, 2019). In other words, in order to successfully withstand a shock, the resilience process should involve also the notion of transformation. The transformative effect is highlighted by Joseph (2018), who stated that “a state and society will and should be inherently different after a crisis occurs”.

By placing resilience as a guiding principle within its policies, the EU has made a shift from the previous unilateral, rigid and technocratic approach towards its eastern neighbourhood. The experience has shown that EaP states didn’t prove to be very active in implementing EU’s norms. In others words, the EU approached a more top-down policy, through which it sought to exercise its normative power. In order to overcome its policy rigidity, the EU needed flexibility. Juncos pointed out that pragmatism and flexibility might be reached only in case of a unified approach between “local ownership, capacity building, partnership, responsibility and a joint approach” (Juncos, 2016). Given the limited efficiency of external governance based on a top-down approach, applied in an universalist manner (Prichard, 2013), the new focus on resilience put a strong focus on communities and individuals which are the first affected after a potential crisis/shock. In its experience of working with EaP states, the EU pushed towards implementing reforms required by the normative agenda, which mostly reflects a practice for building institutions. Juxtaposed to this approach,

resilience involves building the capacity of its partners from bottom-up. However, institution building was not left aside (Haldrup and Rosén, 2013), but was rather concentrated on seeking to synchronize both, top-down and bottom-up, state and societal resilience. Building state resilience should bring benefits to society and individuals, but as the process of building resilience follows often a non-linear path, the need for anticipatory and preparedness policies is highly required. The dyad between good governance and societal resilience is a key aspect for building resilience for a long term. The EU's action in the Eastern Neighbourhood produced mixed results, as no clear progress has been made. It should be mentioned that states like Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia registered progress to a certain extent, considering that they clearly expressed their wish to join EU in the near future as their main strategic goal. However, when it comes to implementing the required reforms as part of the agreement between them and the EU, no solid progress has been made, as EaP states are struggling to sustain the process of implementing the reforms, which is a threat towards maintaining the European path as the main goal for their governments. There are many factors which influence the EU-EaP partnership and they differ from country to country. For example, Moldova could be described as a divided country, which translates into the fact that half of the population manifests support for the pro-EU path, while the other half is pro-Russian. In this case, the pro-EU forces find problematic to gain political power, considering their difficulties in attracting the electorate. In the case of Ukraine, the situation is slightly different. Ukraine is also a divided country, considering the gap between the western and the eastern part of the country towards their support for the EU and Russia. The context in the Eastern Neighbourhood became even more complex, especially after the Ukrainian crisis. The EUGS document envisages that EU would play a more pragmatic role, by adapting its policies and tools to country's specificities. The same strategy framed that positive change can only be home-grown (European Union, 2016). By publishing the Global Strategy, EU expressed the need to build more efficient tools to support its EaP partners in dealing with the challenges related to specific contexts. The EU recognised its difficulties in supporting development of its neighbours by mentioning that "fragility beyond the borders threatens all our vital interests" and that "resilience - the ability of states and societies to reform, thus withstanding and recovering from internal and external crises benefits us and countries in our countries in our surrounding regions, sowing the seeds for sustainable growth and vibrant societies" (European Union, 2016). The strategy links the resilience with security, while security ensures

prosperity and democracy (European Union, 2016). However, in the same context it is highlighted that in order to ensure sustainable development, the process of building resilience requires also a strong focus on "individuals and the whole society" (European Union, 2016). A conclusion which can be drawn is that, when a state is not resilient, this has a negative impact on the quality of life of the citizens of that particular society. Thus, it can be stated that there is a strong link between good governance and society resilience. Nonetheless, it is debatable whether or not this approach fits the EaP context. Relevant information is provided by Gallup, which collects data from people from almost all the world's states. According to Gallup, the confidence of people in national government is very low, considering countries like the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine; only 17% said that they have confidence in their governments, while 73-78% expressed a rather negative opinion based on a research conducted in 2015. However, in the case of Azerbaijan the situation is exactly the opposite, where 78% trust their government and 0.09% do not. An interesting aspect is represented by the fact that the trust in national government is reflected in the way people perceive their life. By looking to the Global Community Well Being Index, which is a component of well-being that includes liking where people live, feeling safe and having pride in their community, 78% had a positive answer, while less than 1% believed that they are struggling in their life. In Moldova the results show 17% and 78%, while in Ukraine the gap is much larger, with less than 1% perceiving their level of life in a positive manner and 78% struggling. By looking to the evolution in the last 15 years, the negative trend continues.

## CONCLUSIONS

As the EU didn't achieve its full potential to be a transformative power in the Eastern Neighbourhood, the new focus on resilience appears as necessary update for its policies. By placing resilience as a top priority, EU recognises that the situation in the Eastern neighbourhood is complex, a context which requires new policies efficiently adapted to deal with the new challenges. The EUGS states the need to build state and societal resilience, in consideration of the aspect that during crisis and instability, society and individuals are affected the most. In others words, there is a strong interconnection between good governance and societal resilience. Therefore, according to the EUGS, change can be achieved also from bottom up, by actively involving local communities. By focusing on resilience, EU recognises the world as being complex, therefore the path towards development and stability is non-

linear and unpredictable, which requires a strong focus on adaptation, preparedness and anticipation. The concept of resilience is of utmost importance for research in the field; therefore, further contribution is expected in order to shed light on the relevance of resilience and what it can teach us about the challenges which EaP states are facing.

## REFERENCES

- [1] Blockmans, S. (2015). *The 2015 ENP Review: A policy in suspended animation*. Centre for European Policy Studies.
- [2] Cianciara, A. K. (2017). Stability, security, democracy: explaining shifts in the narrative of the European Neighbourhood Policy. *Journal of European Integration*, 39(1), 49-62.
- [3] Colombo, S., Dessì, A., & Ntsousas, V. (2018). The EU, resilience and the MENA region. Rome: IAI and FEPS.
- [4] Crombois, J. (2018), The Eastern Partnership: Geopolitics and policy inertia. *European View*, 18(1), 89–96.
- [5] Eickhoff, K., & Stollenwerk, E. (2018). Strengthening resilience in the EU's neighbourhood. EU-Listco. *Policy Papers Series*.
- [6] European Commission (2013). *Action Plan for Resilience in Crisis Prone Countries 2013-2020*. SWD 227 final. Brussels, 19 June European Commission.
- [7] European Commission, (2012, October 3). The EU approach to resilience. Learning from food security crises (COM/2012/586) (retrieved from [http://ec.europa.eu/echo/files/policies/resilience/com\\_2012\\_586\\_resilience\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/echo/files/policies/resilience/com_2012_586_resilience_en.pdf)).
- [8] European Commission (2017). Joint Communication - A Strategic Approach to Resilience in the EU's External Action.
- [9] European Union (2016). Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe. A Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy. ([http://europa.eu/globalstrategy/sites/globalstrategy/files/eugs\\_review\\_web.pdf](http://europa.eu/globalstrategy/sites/globalstrategy/files/eugs_review_web.pdf)).
- [10] Haldrup, S.V., & Rosén, F. (2013). Developing resilience: a retreat from grand planning. *Resilience*, 1(2), 130-145.
- [11] Hill, C. (1993). The Capability-Expectations Gap or Conceptualizing Europe's International Role. *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 31(3), 305-328.
- [12] Joseph, J. (2018). *Varieties of resilience*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- [13] Juncos, A. (2016). Resilience as the new EU foreign policy paradigm: a pragmatism turn?. *European Security*, 26(1), 1-18.
- [14] Juncos, A. E. (2017). Resilience as the new EU foreign policy paradigm: a pragmatist turn?. *European security*, 26(1), 1-18.
- [15] Koenig, N. (2016). Taking the ENP beyond the Conception-Performance Gap, Jacques Delors Institut Policy Paper 160. Berlin.
- [16] Korosteleva, E. (2012). *The European Union and its eastern neighbours: Towards a more ambitious partnership?* Abingdon: Routledge.
- [17] Makarychev, A. (2012). Eastern Partnership: Still a missing link in EU strategy? CEPS Commentary.
- [18] McCormick, J. (2017). *Understanding the European Union: a concise introduction*. Palgrave.
- [19] Moga T.L. & Dirdala L.D. (2019). The EU's Actorness in the Eastern Neighbourhood. In: Rouet G., Pascariu G. (eds.), *Resilience and the EU's Eastern Neighbourhood Countries*. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham.
- [20] Mogherini, F. (2018). Remarks by high representative/vice-president Federica Mogherini at the Joint press point with Wang Yi, State Councillor and Minister of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China following the EU-China Strategic Dialogue.
- [21] Nițoiu, C. (2016). Increasingly geopolitical? The EU's approach towards the post-soviet space. *Journal of Regional Security*, 11(1), 9-32.
- [22] Nițoiu, C. (2018). The European Union's 'Ideal Self' in the Post-Soviet Space. *Europe-Asia Studies*, 70(5), 692-710.
- [23] Petrova, I., & Delcour, L. (2019). From principle to practice? The resilience–local ownership nexus in the EU Eastern Partnership policy. *Contemporary Security Policy*, 1-25.
- [24] Prichard, A. (2013). Justice and EU foreign policy. *Journal of contemporary European studies*, 21(3), 413-429.
- [25] Sjöstedt, G. (1977). *The External Role of the European Community*. Westmead: Saxon House.
- [26] Smith, N. R. (2016). *EU–Russian relations and the Ukraine crisis*. Edward Elgar Publishing.
- [27] Techau, J. (2016). The EU's new global strategy: Useful or pointless. *Carnegie Europe*.
- [28] Tocci, N. (2016). The making of the EU global strategy. *Contemporary Security Policy*, 37, 461–472.
- [29] Tocci, N. (2019). Resilience and the role of the European Union in the world. *Contemporary Security Policy*.
- [30] Ülgen, S. (2016, July 5). Resilience as the Guiding Principle of EU External Action. *Strategic Europe*. Brussels: Carnegie Europe (retrieved from <http://carnegieeurope.eu/strategieurope/?fa=64007>).

- [31] Vogler, J., & Bretherton, C. (2006). The European Union as a protagonist to the United States on climate change. *International Studies Perspectives*, 7(1), 1-22.
- [32] Wagner, W., & Anholt, R. (2016). Resilience as the EU global strategy's new leitmotif: Pragmatic, problematic or promising? *Contemporary Security Policy*, 37, 414-430.
- [33] Youngs, R. (2017). Europe's Eastern crisis. The return of geopolitics. Washington, DC: Carnegie.