Resilience-building in Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine: Towards a tailored regional approach from the EU

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Abstract
The article considers the dimensions and specificity of the concept of ‘resilience’ as applied to the concrete cases of three Eastern neighbourhood states: Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. It argues that EU policymakers should acknowledge the similarities and differences between the three when considering policies to strengthen these countries’ resilience. At the same time, however, they need to recognise that the biggest common threat to their security emanates from neighbouring Russia. The article further suggests that fostering regional cooperation between Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova, as well as working with political institutions such as the political parties in these countries, will contribute to strengthening their resilience.

Keywords
Resilience, Security, Eastern neighbourhood, Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine

Introduction
‘Resilience’ has become a popular political buzzword, signifying one of the five priorities of the EU Global Strategy (European External Action Service 2016, 9). Originally a term more often used in the disaster-preparedness domain (Biermann et al. 2015, 60), the concept is nowadays increasingly applied to describe institutions and states. It refers to their toughness and their capacity to adjust to challenges and to recover from difficulties. I argue that while the concept of resilience remains ambiguous, it is still possible to operationalise and use it by acknowledging its key dimensions and the
factors affecting it. This article argues that the EU should carefully assess the different
dimensions of and trends in resilience among its Eastern partners before promoting
intra-regional and cross-regional cooperation policies as an effective way to increase
resilience through the employment of synergies and economies of scale. It also argues
that any effective policy to support state resilience should be a combination of general,
pan-regional approaches and country-specific ones that consider each country’s unique
constellation of factors and establish clear-cut benchmarks based on their stage of
Europeanisation and integration. The article first provides a definition of the concept of
resilience that draws on the existing literature and outlines the challenges to resilience
in the selected countries. This is followed by a brief discussion of the EU’s involvement
in the region. Finally, it proposes several forms of assistance that could promote resil-
ience in the selected countries.

Resilience

In the EU’s Global Strategy resilience is defined as ‘the ability of states and societies to
reform, thus withstanding and recovering from internal and external crises’ (European
External Action Service 2016, 23). The OECD defines resilience as a ‘feature of states
and more precisely social contracts’ that helps to adjust policy interventions on the abil-
ty to cope with changes in three dimensions: capacity effectiveness and legitimacy
(OECD 2008, p 17). While there is no universal agreement on the concept, resilience has
been embraced to describe a multitude of contexts, and its inherent ambiguity has helped
it to gain acceptability (Wagner and Anholt 2016, 4–5). Thus using this concept enables
new practices and forms of cooperation: according to Duffield (2012, 475–92), in the
political lingua franca, resilience refers to preparedness, adaptation and survivability,
and is radically multidisciplinary. In addition, resilience is highly context and issue spe-
cific and prompts the questions of ‘resilience to what?’ and the ‘resilience of whom?’
(Prior and Hagmann 2015, 281–98). Some analysts have expressed doubt as to whether
resilience as conceptualised in the EU’s Global Strategy can serve as a guiding princi-
ple—that is, whether it is operationalisable in the political context of the European
Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) as a way to add value to the existing approach that pro-
motes stability, prosperity and democracy (Manoli 2017, 124–40). Nevertheless, the
concept of resilience has firmly found its way into the EU’s foreign-policy discourse.
The revised ENP was one of the first documents to introduce resilience-building as a
foreign-policy goal (European Commission and High Representative of the Union for
Foreign Affairs and Security Policy 2015, 4).

Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine

This article focuses on the EU’s efforts to strengthen resilience in the three Eastern
neighbourhood countries which have signed Association Agreements with the EU and
aspire to join it eventually—Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova. The resilience of these
states is important due to their geography, and their history of ethno-territorial con-
flicts (Rezvani 2013) and/or Russian interference in their affairs. In addition to the
risk of instability at the EU periphery potentially causing an inflow of refugees,
Russian expansionism—including the ongoing militarisation of the Black Sea—can be countered here by stabilising the region while also promoting a positive model of post-Soviet development. These countries are also important due to their sheer size and economic potential, as in the case of Ukraine, where the quality of the human capital is also quite high (World Economic Forum 2014, 4–34); due to their transit function, as in case of Georgia, which has an important role in developing the Southern Gas Corridor (which will bring gas from the Caspian Basin to the EU); and due to their geographic location, as in the case of Moldova, which is situated between Ukraine and the EU member state of Romania.

Let us first outline the similarities and differences between the three countries. All of them are experiencing the potential or immediate threat of military action and have lost control of significant parts of their territory due to the direct involvement of Russia, which maintains military bases in formally or informally annexed territories1 while militarily supporting secessionist entities2 (Pugsley and Wesslau 2016), as well as carrying out various forms of economic blackmail, sanctions and embargoes (Makkoff 2016). All are suffering from a lack of trust between their frustrated populations and marginally competent governments (European Parliament 2017, 8–75) and have experienced significant out-migration, which has caused a brain drain but also brings in important financial remittances (Barbone et al., 2013). Finally, all have signed Association Agreements with the EU, enjoying preferential treatment in trade (through Deep and Comprehensive Free-Trade Agreements) and a visa-free regime within the Schengen zone.

At the same time, there are many differences between these three countries. Ukraine is a very different case due to its size, economic potential and the ongoing military conflict in Eastern Ukraine, where Russia is leading a hybrid war, having also formally annexed Ukrainian Crimea. Ukraine and Moldova also suffer from widespread corruption, which is causing mass frustration among their citizens (Nodia et al. 2017, 12–15). In Georgia and especially Moldova there is widespread poverty, which is also present, to a lesser extent, in Ukraine (IndexMundi 2018). Georgia lost a five-day war with Russia in August 2008 and two of its secessionist territories are recognised by Russia as independent states. Moldova and Ukraine have common borders with EU member states, unlike Georgia; while Moldova, in contrast to Ukraine and Georgia, has no common border with Russia—however, up to a third of its population hold Romanian passports (Pienkowski 2018, 2).

Thus, resilience-wise the key external challenge for all three countries is an assertive and aggressive Russia, including its relative military and economic might, its neglect of international norms and its powerful propaganda. However, the outside world can or wants to do little to guarantee these countries’ security or to help reinstate their territorial integrity. Therefore, the field of security is the area where resilience is the weakest, and where external assistance is the most limited.

Another challenge is the need for good governance, which is an absolute necessity in the uncertain geopolitical and geo-economic environments of these countries, where
there are growing frustrations among the respective populations about the increasing income gap and stumbling economic development (Eurostat 2017). While everyday corruption is seen as less of a problem in Georgia than in Moldova and Ukraine (Open Media Hub 2017), this factor is offset by Georgia’s unfavourable geographic location, remoteness from the EU’s borders and lack of natural geopolitical allies, such as Romania in the case of Moldova or Poland in the case of Ukraine.

Finally, their distorted and ineffective economies pose a serious long-term threat. Ukraine, with its considerable industrial potential, needs huge, yet prudent investment (IndexMundi 2018b), along with stability and functional institutions. In the cases of Moldova (IndexMundi 2018a) and Georgia (Babich and Mzhavanadze 2018), low-productivity agriculture plays too great a role in their economies, while their industrial potential remains tragically underdeveloped as the inferior quality of education hinders the prospects of building a modern knowledge-based economy. Inefficient governance and a lack of strategic vision preclude all three countries from fully utilising their free-trade agreements with the EU and other partners.

**Resilience puzzle**

The question now is to what extent have the EU’s efforts to promote resilience in the three ENP states been effective in translating desired goals into practice (de Waal 2018). The EU is committed to using its ‘enduring power of attraction’ to ‘support different paths to resilience . . . focusing on the most acute dimensions of fragility and targeting those where it can make a meaningful difference’ (European External Action Service 2016, 25). However these efforts are not enough and, despite some tangible results achieved by all three countries in terms of the EU’s reform agenda, there remain risks that the progress achieved by these countries could be reversed and result in democratic backsliding. As these risks lie mostly in the areas of security and democracy consolidation, they require more political will, commitment, creativity and incentives on the part of the EU than simply providing traditional economic or technical assistance, which is where it excels.

To tackle this challenge without committing to too much, the EU should try to gradually shift its position away from the enlargement rhetoric and instead place emphasis on local ownership, focusing more on persuasion and less on bargaining—that is, more on adherence than on norm compliance (Marciacq and Flessenkemper 2017). However, the EU is being too vague in defining its future relationship with the Eastern Partnership (EaP) countries—this was the principal message from the Eastern Partnership Reflection Forum, a meeting of think tanks held in Minsk in December 2017 (Marciacq and Flessenkemper 2017, 2).

But would, for example, acknowledging the possibility of membership prospects for the EaP states increase their resilience? The answer is not clear; such a move could both strengthen the motivation for reform and also trigger more aggressive action on the part of Russia. The experience of the Western Balkans shows that even an explicitly offered
prospect of EU membership can yield somewhat mixed results (Kmezić and Bieber 2017, 2–10). At the same time, automatically assuming that the same would happen to the three EaP countries is not fully justified, since these states have followed a fundamentally different development path and are experiencing different geopolitical pressures.

Currently the capacity of the EU to influence the security-related resilience of these three countries is rather limited, both due to disagreements within the EU regarding its EaP policy and due to its lack of hard power amid concerns over the security of its own member states, such as the Baltic countries. While special attention should be paid to demotivating Russia from making any security-related threats against these three former Soviet republics, there is not much that the EU can do without the ability to provide any form of direct military assistance. The disagreements with the US and the ambiguous attitude of the latter’s leadership towards the EU, NATO and Russia, amid the developing trade wars, are also not helpful.

As has been noted above, resilience has three main aspects: preparedness, adaptation and recovery. While the EU has limited options for helping with preparedness, it is good at providing technical and financial assistance, that is, it tends to focus more on adaptation and recovery in a post-conflict context (World Bank 2018). However, it can assist the countries with developing their internal resilience to external shocks by helping to build and strengthen institutions, including defence and security (including cybersecurity) agencies, and also by helping to strengthen internal cohesion, improve the legitimacy and effectiveness of governance systems, build the national economies, assist with technological advancement, and support regional cooperation and mutual assistance.

While security is of the greatest immediate concern for at least two out of the three countries—Ukraine and Georgia—in the long term we believe that there are other areas in which improvements would also strengthen resilience. This means that, at present, discouraging Russia from causing problems, working with other international partners (the US and NATO in the first place) to achieve this goal and strengthening defence capabilities should be balanced with other longer-term assistance priorities. Helping to build effective governments is the key to all dimensions of development, including security. It is also clear that without dramatically improving the overall quality of life, including the quality of education and healthcare, as well as ensuring smart urbanisation and the modernisation of their economies, the three countries cannot become self-sufficient and resilient in the long run.

While assisting in building resilience is a complex, multifaceted task, let us consider just two possible directions that such assistance could take. The first is the rich experience of subregional groups within the EU, such as the three Baltic or four Visegrad states, which used synergy and cooperation to great effect on their respective paths to EU accession (e.g. Schmidt 2016, 120). It is also obvious that grouping together the six countries of the EaP should be supplemented by creating more focused approaches for the three countries that have signed Association Agreements with the EU. Much can be
done to help these three countries create and institutionalise effective instruments for coordination, cooperation and synergy building, such as engaging subregional groups within the EU (e.g. the Nordic or Benelux countries in addition to the Visegrád Group and the Baltic states) and helping to create regional forums, parliamentary associations and so on.

Engaging Euro-parties is another interesting and promising area of work. While some of the bigger Euro-parties and their affiliated institutions do assist their fully fledged or associate member parties from Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine in the areas of reforming and streamlining internal structures, developing political agendas and communication strategies, assisting with integration into multilateral political institutions, and providing educational programmes for the leadership or the rank and file of sister parties, there could be a more specific focus on supporting regional integration. The European People’s Party has started to acknowledge the need for regional integration, and in its resolution on the EaP explicitly encourages the relevant countries to take advantage of the synergies created by such cooperation (European People’s Party 2017). There should also be more focus on how to build resilient institutions within these respective countries—as the parties in Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine play key political roles, either as the ruling entities or as the opposition.

Conclusion

Various dimensions of resilience must be considered when planning action to support these states that exist in this complex geopolitical environment: threatened by an external aggressive power, that is, Russia, and also burdened by the legacy of a totalitarian past and centralised economy, widespread poverty, weak institutions and unconsolidated democracy. Promoting resilience in Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine requires more proactive and effective policies, but also more political commitment and smart resource allocation. The EU should design policies tailored to the specific needs of each of the three countries, with security being the common main concern. Supporting cooperation between the three countries should become a priority, as regional cooperation has already demonstrated its usefulness in the European integration process. However, it is also important to engage more non-state actors in this process. This should include involving Euro-parties that possess significant potential for promoting democratic development in friendly societies.

Notes

1. Crimea, Transnistria, South Ossetia and Abkhazia.
2. To the above list Eastern Ukraine should be added.

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