

RESILIENCE IN LEADERSHIP WITHIN THE EUROPEAN UNION – A WORK IN PROGRESS

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Abstract: *The aim of the present article is to analyse resilience within the European Union, in the present geopolitical context. The article shall approach the term `resilience` both in a conceptual and practical manner, focusing on its very essence in order to be able to assess its presence and manifestation in EU foreign policy. Despite the term gaining traction in the aftermath of the pandemic, within the EU, it remains to be seen to what extent can the EU be considered resilient or simply coping with the course of events.*

Keywords: resilience, leadership, attribute, prerogative, international order

1. Introduction

Resilience seems to be the hot word of today. It takes the form of a magic antidote to cure any kind of pain. Even though it seems to be a 21st century concept, capitalized by states and motivational speakers, resilience is the very trigger of the history of humanity. During prehistoric times, resilience was at its highest: fighting the forces of nature, animals of prey, seeking food, and also dealing with other tribes that were looking to establish their dominance over the land. Should we analyze the main leaders of history, we would eventually call them resilient, both in terms of their capacity to fight danger and keep it at bay, but also as a means of re- establishing a certain order and rule after each battle.

Another great example of resilience at work is in stories – there is always a shock that determines the hero of the story to react, and eventually, the bad guy is defeated and order is restored. But this restored order is the new and improved one, as the hero is

now acknowledged as such, he gets to marry the princess of the story and, in some cases, reaches high power and influence. That is why, its resilience brings along not just the previous peace, but also positive changes to it.

2. From the Concept to Reality

In the new security culture we are living in, dominated by a plethora of instruments, overshadowed by even more numerous threats, adjustment and adaptation mechanisms are required to ensure survival [1]. In other words, resilience comes to mind, as a form of societies all over the world bouncing back after shocks. In physics, resilience is the capacity of a material to return to its initial form after suffering a shock. Yet, states are more complex than the matter used in physics. And although we like to pair the resilience from physics to the statehood of political bring them back to their initial state, but rather introduces them to the route of evolution. The bouncing back of the state is

necessary in terms of ensuring stability in the face of danger, but otherwise, resilience brings forth an evolution that would not have been possible in the absence of the event that triggered it.

Building resilience is much more difficult depending on the field in which it manifests: in physics, it depends entirely on the nature of the matter involved. In international relations and political science, things are more complicated by the international rules-based order and the legally-binding instruments affected. Time has proved again and again that threats evolve at a much faster pace than international norms. Consequently, in the absence of norms that would regulate the framework of dealing with a threat, would the reaction still be a resilient one? That is why, the present article shall analyse resilience as a form of survival and an opportunity for evolution.

The gist of the article is looking at European Union resilience from the point of view of the concept being a motivational one. Before looking at resilience as a Political science/ Foreign affair/ International relations concept, you are most likely to find it spread all over manuals of motivational literature. “*Resilience at work. How to succeed no matter what life throws at you*”, “*The Resilience Plan. A Strategic Approach to Optimizing Your Work Performance and Mental Health*”, “*Developing resilience. A cognitive-behavioural approach*” are just a few titles that teach us to be resilient in our every-day lives. But states are not people, even though they are made of them. And a resilient human being is very much different from a resilient state. The mechanisms at work, the willingness to be resilient, the resources at one’s disposal are highly different from the human being to the state.

The aim of this article is two-folded: firstly, to look at resilience from a motivational perspective and secondly, to apply it to the EU perspective of resisting to challenges and danger. This gist will be rather

conceptual and philosophical, seeking answers based on the employment of the concept in EU affairs, bearing in mind two rather complicated questions: 1. Is resilience a prerogative or an attribute of leadership? and 2. How are societies resilient in the face of danger?

3. Resilience between Failure and Survival

Research has shown that the definitions of resilience vary according to the point of demonstration. As they should. There are multiple ways of looking at resilience. On the one hand,” resilience is understood to represent the ability of states and societies to deter, resist and overcome the impact of external interference, particularly in terms of demonstrating institutional capacity, good governance and societal cohesion” [2]. Another definition of resilience, other than that of physics [3], is in the work of Holling –as a “measure of the persistence of systems and of their ability to absorb change and disturbance and still maintain the same relationships between populations or state variables” [4] – a more realist definition when applied to the EU.

The resilience of one is not the resilience of all, and this might be the drawback of the concept. Unlike other state-related concepts, resilience is highly imbued with humanity. Each and every one of us is resilient to something different. Even our lifespan makes us resilient to disease and hardship. The history of the human being is a history of resilience, of taming the unfriendly and wild to its benefit. A perfect syllogism would state that just as humans are resilient, so are societies. Yet, human resilience, based only on the individual, is miles away from societal resilience, dependent on a number of variables that are, most of the time, out of its control.

4. Vulnerability and Failure Lead to Resilience

Resilience entails in itself the acknowledgement of vulnerability. Being aware of one’s vulnerability will lead to a

resilient reaction. But there are also the unknown reactions that spark resilience, the black swans that determine one to react and defend a certain state of being, as well as the fear of failure. Vulnerability followed by attacks may lead to failure or resilience. Which of the two outcomes settles in, depends entirely on the actor involved.

Failure is another generator of resilience. Leaders that are not afraid of failure are the most resilient ones. Being afraid of failure entails a fear of progress, and leads one to a vicious circle: “The leader takes fewer risks and is afraid of changing course, which ultimately reduces boldness and resilience. In short, fear of failure breeds more failure than the leader needs or can afford” [5]. The best example is that of Winston Churchill, who, despite being wrong, despite being contested, carried on. Thus, he showed great resilience, and notwithstanding the divided opinions on him, he is today one of the great leaders of history. In an article of 2019 referring to the resilience turn in EU peacebuilding in the Western Balkans, Joseph and Juncos refer to the “human agency” factor [6]. The way resilience works is highly influenced by the way people, and especially leaders, perceive it.

Salvatore Maddi describes people being resilient even in the most stressful conditions: “Resilient people resolve conflicts, turn disruptive changes into new directions, learn from this process, and become more successful and satisfied in the process” [7]. Nevertheless, one must not forget that this resilient approach is also a matter of personal choice. According to A. Seibert, “while fighting destructive changes, your mind and customs will create barriers, or, on the contrary, bridges to a better future.[...] Your inner observation will help you make conscious choices on living in” [8]. Thus, one’s resilience in the face of stress stems from its own decisions and determines whether he or she succeeds or fails.

But transitioning this from the employee space to that of countries or organizations

is hard. Imagine this: how can you turn the war in Ukraine into an opportunity? Such an exercise is problematic. But then again, the war has been the outburst of change for the EU: states have gathered together in the face of threat, policies have been drawn and for the past two years, Europe was not at a standstill.

Luckily, resilience is not an attitude or behavior that one is born into, but rather one that one grows into. Resilience is the responsibility of the whole society, not just of individuals or leaders alike. Societal resilience and governmental resilience are two sides of the same coin.

5. EU Resilience at Work

Resilience became the hot topic in the EU ever since the pandemic set in, and demonstrated that the EU states lacked it. The COVID-19 pandemic followed by the Ukraine war have exposed Europe’s dependencies and vulnerabilities in the face of crises.

The evolution of EU resilience was not a matter of choice, but of facts. It was also onto the EU leadership to assess the best moment to act. A good expression of resilience is Europe pooling together to provide Ukraine with help against the unjust, illegal and unprovoked war it is facing on its very territory. We are witnessing here a multiple form of resilience – one against a power that is seeking to impose its will against the continent, one against the populist voices claiming that Ukraine should be left on its own, and one against the very odds of economic thriftiness that looms its head calling for more balance in defence spending.

According to Bargues, Joseph and Juncos, there are three understandings of the concept of “resilience” in relation with the European Union – that of transformative understanding of governance from below, pragmatism and robustness [9]. Altogether, EU resilience is understood as a form of providing targeted help where needed, in the necessary amount, but at the same time

while being alert to the surrounding circumstances and threats.

The turn from transformative to pragmatic came as a result of the EUs incapacity to take action against the war in Crimea in 2014, and the situation in Syria that later led to massive flows of refugees spilling into Europe. The BREXIT of 2016 seems to be the final nail in the coffin of transformative resilience – the EU was then faced with inner contestation and populist calls for its dismantlement. Unlike the optimist EU Security Strategy of 2003, which aimed to solve major issues such as terrorism and organized crime, the 2016 EU Global Strategy takes the focus from the organization and the continent (EU) to the global level (thus the name of “Global Strategy”), claiming that those were times of “existential crisis, within and beyond the EU” [10]. As the pandemic set in, the general discourse on governance and multilateralism tended to fade away, leaving room for a more defensive approach, aimed at protecting the Union in the face of crisis. The EU no longer sought to engage in crises elsewhere, in an attempt to empower foreign states to bounce back, but rather focused on itself and its own capacity to survive, let alone bounce back to its initial state. Unlike the transformative and pragmatic resilience, the defensive resilience comes naturally, as crises never come alone. They are joined by contestation of the state of affairs, populist discourse and the call for a return to a fundamental state of being, when each fought for itself. The pandemic sprang all these on the EU decision-makers forcing them to adapt quickly and seek the survival of the Union, background, its restoration to the pre- pandemic state.

‘Faced with the sudden and devastating effects of the crisis, our fellow citizens are fully aware of the need for a resilient and autonomous Europe, assertive of its values, strong in its convictions, firm in its ambitions and confident of its means’ [11]. If we were to apply the motivational lens here, Europe is in dire need for a panacea.

The Strategic Compass calls also for the enhancement of resilience in times of crisis, highlighting the inward look it has – “[t]he more hostile security environment requires us to make a quantum leap forward and increase our capacity and willingness to act, strengthen our resilience and ensure solidarity and mutual assistance’ [12].

Resilience in EU, in general, and within EU foreign policy, in particular, must be seen as a form of survival and advancement, especially in the current context of the past and recent events that have shattered EU order – BREXIT, the pandemic and the war in Ukraine. Currently, the main threats to its resilience range from attacks on its critical infrastructures, free media and cyber networks, followed by the vulnerability of information and populist tendencies.

The fact that the EU perceives resilience as progress and advancement resides in the Resilience Dashboards hosted by the EU Commission. These dashboards analyse the ability of EU member states to progress among challenges and transformations on four main dimensions: social and economic, green (environmental), digital and geopolitical [13]. The EU was fast in building instruments of resilience in trade such as the Recovery and Resilience Facility, the Anti-Coercion Instrument, the International Procurement Instrument, the 5G Toolbox, and the Foreign Subsidy Instrument. Yet, in terms of foreign and security policy, it has not evolved much. It does have the Joint Framework of Countering Hybrid Threats, the Joint Communication on Increasing Resilience and Bolstering Capabilities to Address Hybrid Threats, A Joint Communication on A Strategic Approach to Resilience in the EU’s External Action and the Hybrid Fusion Cell as part of the EU Intelligence and Situation Center, and the three EEAS StratCom Forces geographically focused on the East, the Western Balkans and the South. Also, the Joint Research Center of the European Commission has been publishing since 2015 onwards several

reports on the evolution of resilience in the EU. However, most of these reports are focusing on EU resilience to societal issues and the latest, which dates back to 2022, analyses the extent of individual resilience –that is the human capacity to bounce back and cope, as a form of ensuring societal resilience. Therefore, EU emphasis tends to lie more on inner society issues, in an attempt to enhance its inner capabilities to solve crises.

6. Conclusions

It is a fact that European resilience will be constantly put to test by hybrid wars, populism, contestation of the liberal order and multilateralism alike. Consequently, “the EU cannot afford the luxury of not making resilience its top priority” [14]. The first time the concept appeared on an EU level was in 2012, to address the humanitarian and food crises in Sahel and the Horn of Africa, and while it managed to get a boost until 2016, the EU Global Strategy featured a more temperate concept of resilience, aimed at tackling and ensuring survival from the complex crises of the international environment. That means making the EU itself more resilient, rather than providing help to others to become resilient. This is a result of the changes occurred within the international environment throughout time and the forcing of organizations to have a more inward approach, rather than an outward one. It was the same with the EU: while in 2012, the EU was proposing to help communities become more resilient, in

2024, its focus is on itself, looking towards transforming itself into a resilient entity.

Resilience is a complex of multiple qualities such as connectivity, reflexivity, flexibility, and quick processing” [15]. The EU seems to have accomplished just a part of them: connectivity, both inward and outward, and enough reflexivity to permanently assess its future and the odds of achieving it. Flexibility and quick processing are its faults. But they cannot be held against it. Paradoxically, the only political formats that are flexible in the true sense of the word are dictatorships – laws change there by the hour at the whim of the dictator. In a world of legally binding documents that tell one what he/she is not supposed to do, but do not punish those who actually ‘do the forbidden’, the EU is doing its best to achieve flexibility. As for the quick processing, EU leadership has long understood the need to act immediately, but is having its hands tied by the very legally binding documents it has put into place.

Is resilience an attribute or a prerogative of EU leadership in the present case? If it were an attribute, it would have to be one of its features. Yet, EU resilience is functional up to a certain point. If it were a prerogative, then it should be seen as a privilege used to empower the Union in its fight against all dangers. However, the EU is struggling to be one step ahead of the dangers looming in, in an effort to be resilient. Bottom line, the EU is resilient, but to what extent, only history will tell us more.

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