RESILIENCE AND EU TRANSFORMATIVE POWER: EU ENLARGEMENT AND THE EASTERN PARTNERSHIP

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Abstract

The EU is still dealing with the geopolitical shockwaves from the February 2022 unprovoked Russian aggression on Ukraine. The decision to grant candidate status to three of the EU's Eastern partners calls for a complete overhaul of the both the EU's Eastern Partnership and the EU's enlargement policy. In that context, the future of resilience - a key concept in the EU's approach towards its Eastern neighbours and of EU foreign policy, appears under question. This contribution has as main arguments that while the concept of resilience proved useful in the discussion on EU foreign policy before the unprovoked Russian aggression in Ukraine, it may show its limits when defining both the EU's transformative ambitions as a part of its enlargement policy objectives and the new EU identity as international actor. In other words, this article does not discuss the concept of resilience per se, but rather proposes a discussion of its policy implications in light of the changes that Russia's unprovoked aggression in Ukraine has brought to the Eastern Partnership and to the EU enlargement policy.

Keywords: Eastern partnership; EU Enlargement; EU transformative power; Resilience

Introduction

By granting EU candidate status to Moldova and Ukraine in June 2022 and then to Georgia in December 2023, the EU member states ended the fundamental difference between the EU enlargement policy and the EU's Eastern partnership (EaP). While both policies had much in common, the second was not meant to lead to EU accession for the three EaP members. In

ending this distinction, not only does the EU have to reconsider the future of its policy towards the rest of the Eastern neighbours, but it also has to include the new candidate countries in its enlargement policy aimed at transforming them in order to join the EU as member states.

In other words, the implications of the June 2022 and December 2023 decisions are far reaching. They not only call for a need to revisit both EU enlargement and EaP approaches, but they also call into question the very foundations of EU foreign policy identity. In these discussions, it is the concept of resilience and its future in EU foreign policy that are at stake.

This chapter will argue that while resilience has been a key feature of the EU's policy towards its Eastern partners, it has remained largely absent from the EU enlargement policy that aimed instead at transformation. In granting EU candidate status to three of the Eastern partners, i.e. Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia, the EU now faces the main challenge of reconciling these two concepts in its policy approaches towards the new candidate countries.

To support these arguments, the chapter is organized as follows. First, it will discuss the implications of the growing use of resilience in the EU Common and Foreign Security lexicon and its significance for the EU foreign policy identity. Second, it will look at the concept of the EU as a transformative power. Third, it will address the importance of resilience and transformation as far as EU enlargement and the EaP are concerned. Fourth, it will discuss the impact of the decision to grant candidate status to three EU Eastern partners in the aftermath of the unprovoked Russian attack on Ukraine in terms of resilience and transformation in the Eastern neighbourhood.

Resilience and EU Foreign Policy

With the EU Global Strategy [EUGS] adopted in 2016, resilience has become a key feature of EU foreign policy (Wagner and Anholt, 2016; Baldaro and Costantini, 2020; Kaunert, 2023). The concept has been subjected to different interpretations and definitions, including in the EU discourse. As such, it has been considered as a major turn in EU foreign policy (Wagner and Anholt, 2016; Baldaro and Costantini, 2020; Kaunert, 2023).

There is, however, a vibrant debate whether this turn marked if not an abandonment, then a lowering of the EU's transformative ambitions in its foreign policy, or whether it would still be in line with its normative ambitions in terms of promotion of democracy and the rule of law. For example, Bendiek argues that the use of resilience meant that for the EU: „The idea of democratic transformation of the European neighbourhood and the goal of perpetual integration of all member states are gradually sidelined" (Bendiek 2017, 27). Others, such as Juncos, offer a more nuanced assessment while seeing a contradiction between achieving resilience and principled pragmatism (Juncos, 2017: 15) or do not see much of a real change in EU policies and practices, (Nitoiu and Simionov 2023, 1082). Finally, the question of resilience has also

been approached in the context of the EU's response to the decline of the liberal international order (Bargues, Joseph and Juncos, 2023).

Resilience has been defined as „the internal capacity of societies to cope with crises, with the emphasis on the development of self-organisation and internal capacities and capabilities rather than the external provision of aid, resources or policy solutions" (Chandler 2015: 13). As such, the term had already been used by other organizations than the EU as well in other EU policy documents with, at times, different definitions. In the EU GS resilience is defined as follows: „the ability of states and societies to reform thus withstanding and recovering from internal and external crises" (European Union Global Strategy 2016, 23).

In the EUGS, resilience is associated with „principled pragmaticism" (European Union Global Strategy, 2016: 16). By using the latter, the EU was not only acknowledging the shortcomings of its policies aimed at transforming its neighbours but also emphasized the need to have a more interest-based foreign policy. This led some authors to suggest that resilience was used as a way to acknowledge the EU's failure to achieve its ambitious liberal peace projects while avoiding resorting to the much less ambitious concept of stability (Wagner and Anholt 2016, 4).

According to Tocci, the main architect of the EUGS, resilience did not mean, however, that the EU was giving up on its normative and transformative ambitions (Tocci, 202:180). In other words, resilience was conceived as a means to achieve these ambitions. It has, however, been considered as a step back from the EU discourse by emphasizing stability more that the promotion of democracy (Smith 2017, 513).

For the EU, resilience is meant to reflect a new form of governance that marks a shift away from the known threats to a new form of complexity where threats are becoming more and more impossible to predict. Consequently, the EU aims at developing more adaptable and flexible approaches while emphasizing the need to acknowledge local practices and micromanagement (Juncos 2017, 10-11).

More concretely, a resilience based foreign policy would rest upon two main priorities. The first is aimed at developing long term and sustained actions. In that way, resilience would provide for a policy framework that brings together all the stakeholders and institutions under the same umbrella. Key to this framework is the need to achieve coherence between the different policies, so as to be able to tackle all the aspects of crises or conflicts. The second consists of promoting bottom-up and local ownership of addressing crises instead of externally imposed or elite driven solutions (Bargues 2021, 5).

Such a shift to resilience and „principled pragmaticism" reflects a paradigm shift in EU international identity by considerably watering down its transformative ambitions. A less pessimistic assessment considers that the recourse to resilience does not mean the end to these ambitions. According to Juncos: „the rise of

resilience can work to strengthen the idea of normative power by underscoring the non-coercive nature of his [the EU] power" (Juncos 2017:14).

The growing use of resilience and „principled pragmatism" in the EU foreign policy lexicon also needs to be put in line with the return of geopolitics and hard power in Europe, as reflected in the unprovoked Russian aggression on Ukraine since February 24, 2022. The return of geopolitics led to two fundamental changes. The first was the fact that hard power and geopolitics mattered once again. The second was that the EU proved unable to resist the willingness of some of its Eastern partners to apply for EU membership (Crombois 2023, 103-104).

At the same time, the shortcomings and elusiveness of the concept of resilience and the dramatic changes that occurred with the Covid-19 crisis and the looming Russian threats on Ukraine, led the EU to adopt a new concept supplanting the one of resilience. This new concept is one of „strategic autonomy". The concept of „strategic autonomy" was already mentioned in EU documents since 2013 and included in the 2016 EUGS. It would be considerably developed in the Strategic Compass meant to deal with its implementation in the fields of security and defense (Moltof, Zandee, Cretti 2021, 6-7). That being said, „strategic autonomy" did not necessarily mean the end of resilience. Rather, resilience would be brought under its umbrella as its essential component (Tocci 2021, 5).

Even if references to „strategic autonomy" were watered down by the member states, the concept was meant to reflect a more geopolitical view of EU foreign policy. As such, it raises the question of further retreat by the EU from its transformative ambitions for an even more pragmatic, if not realist turn and to start to come to terms with the concept and use of hard power. Simply defined, „strategic autonomy" stands for the EU capacity to act autonomously – that is without being dependent on other countries. This concept that first originated in 2016 in the context of EU defense and security has become central to EU foreign policy under the helm of the new EU HR/VP Joseph Borrel. However, if the concept of strategic autonomy was mentioned in the 2016 EUGS, but it did not form its central theme (Keonig 2021,55-62).

Concretely, „strategic autonomy" - since renamed „open strategic autonomy" (Damen 2022, 4-5) implies a more inward-looking move that would mean to cut the EU off from global interconnections and dependencies. It would also lead the EU to give up on its partnerships with third countries where those would not fit into its geostrategic interests. Such a quest for strategic autonomy may then undermine even further the EU's transformative ambitions and its support for liberal and democratic values. Some authors even raised the danger of an „autonomy trap" for the EU. Indeed, the more the EU strives for autonomy, the more it weakens its leverage with others. For some authors, this fact reflects a new trend in EU external action towards a „protective security" in which the EU is relinquishing its transformative power for a more defensive and self-protecting one (Youngs 2021, 1-2).

EU Transformative Power

The concept of the EU as a 'transformative power' was introduced by Leonard and was defined as followed: „Europe's obsession with legal frameworks means that it transforms the countries it comes into contact with, instead of just skimming the surface. Europe doesn't change countries by threatening to invade them: its biggest threat is to cut off contact with them" (Leonard 2005, 2). This concept can also be related to the one of the EU as a 'normative power' put forward by Manners. In this vein, EU foreign policy objectives steer towards the values of democracy, respect for human and fundamental rights and the refusal to resort to hard power instruments (Manners 2002, 244-245).

The EU's transformative ambitions are deeply embedded in the experience of its enlargements into Central and Eastern Europe in 2004 and 2007 (Grabbe, 2007). They are still considered as an essential feature of EU enlargement policy as confirmed by the EU Commission in its 2023 Enlargement Communication, which referred to EU enlargement as: „A credible, merit-based prospect of EU membership is the key driver of transformation and thus enhances our collective security and socio-economic prosperity" (Communication from the Commission 2023, 2).

The EU's transformative ambitions within the context of EU enlargement rests on the conditionalities that were developed in the context of its expansion to the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. Such conditionalities take the form of setting legal, political, and economic conditions for EU accession. In short, the conditions to be accepted as a candidate country are set by Article 49 of the Treaty of the European Union, such as being a European state abiding by the EU's values of the rule of law and fundamental freedoms. Once candidate status is granted, another set of criteria, referred to as the Copenhagen criteria defined in 1993, apply for EU accession. These consisted of political criteria in terms of the rule of law, fundamental freedoms, and protection of minorities; economic criteria of sustaining the competitive pressure of the internal market; legal criteria linked with the need to transpose existing EU legislation into national legislation and also settling of disputes with their neighbours. The main principles of these conditions are rooted in designing a system by which candidate countries' governments would be rewarded if they comply with these conditions and to withhold such reward in the case of failing to comply with them (Szarek-Mason 2010, 135-156).

That being said, scholars have noticed that conditionality may quickly become a „power consumable resource" (Smith 2003, 134-135). In other words, once a candidate country joins the European Union, there is little leeway left for the EU to address shortcomings in terms of ongoing reforms. To address such issues, the EU designed ex-post accession mechanisms for monitoring the rule of law situation in the new member states, as in the cases of Bulgaria and Romania. This system has since been replaced by EU monitoring of the

rule of law in all the 27 EU member states that include coercive tools, financial tools and soft law mechanisms (Kmezić and Bieber 2020, 7-11).

In addition, any system based on conditionalities has its limits in inducing deeply rooted transformations in the countries concerned, in this case EU candidate countries. As the cases of Bulgaria and Romania showed, ex-ante conditions were not viewed as sufficient and had to be complemented by ex-post ones in the fields of justice and home affairs and in relation to the countries' participation in the internal market. Finally, the system of conditionality cannot ignore the geopolitical stakes of EU enlargement policy (Crombois, 2022, 37-38).

If the return of geopolitics has impacted the EU's Eastern partners far more than the Western Balkans with its culmination in the Russia invasion of Ukraine, the latter was not spared from it. Indeed, the region has also become a place of competition between the EU and Russia and others such as China and Turkey. Such a geopolitical dimension became more important as far as EU enlargement was concerned. For example, it led the EU to grant accession status to Bosnia in December 2022 despite the lack of tangible achievements in terms of reforms acknowledged by the European Commission (Zweers and Rosokkaska 2024, 3). It also led the EU to revive the integration process by developing, in 2023, a new EU enlargement package aimed at bringing integrating the Western Balkans into the EU single market as a step towards their future Union membership (Communication from the European Commission 2023, 9).

As far as the EaP is concerned, the impact of the war in Ukraine was far reaching. First, it further underpinned the geopolitical dimensions of the EaP in view of consolidating the relations between the EU and most of the countries that are included in it. Second, and more fundamentally, by granting accession status to three Eastern partners, i.e. Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine, it undermined the very rationale of the EaP that had been to keep the doors closed for them in terms of EU membership (Crombois 2023, 104-105). The main reason for the EU's closed-door policy laid in the willingness of the EU member states to preserve the integration process and not to antagonize Russia. As a result, the EU restricted itself to rhetoric of „EU aspirations" instead of EU membership for the EaP countries (Emmot, 2021).

By granting accession status to some of its partners, the EU further reconciled its enlargement policy with its policy towards its Eastern partners. Indeed, the two policies were broadly similar in their conception, using the same principles of benchmarking and conditionalities. The main differences between the two lay in the different levels of financial commitments and the perspective of EU membership (Crombois 2019:9).

These developments raise the question of the future of the EU as a possible transformative power both in the case of its Enlargement policy and EaP. The

growing reference to resilience in both policies also questions how much it would s impact on the EU's transformative ambitions in both cases.

Resilience and EU Transformative Power: EU Enlargement and Eastern Partnership

If the concept of resilience has mostly been used with respect to the EU's EaP, it has not been much used with regard to EU enlargement policy. Instead, enlargement policy emphasized the EU's transformation ambitions vis-à-vis the candidate countries as stated by the Commission in its 2023 Enlargement Communication. That does not mean, however, that EU enlargement had been free from geopolitical considerations, and that EU enlargement has not also become increasingly geopolitical since the war in Ukraine (Karjalainen, 2023; Lippert, 2024).

With the war in Ukraine, EU enlargement has become even more geopolitical than it used to be. Such geopolitical shifts, however, did not start with the outbreak of the hostilities in Ukraine and were already mentioned in the Commission's 2018 enlargement strategy. This strategy emphasized the need for reforms in human rights and good governance. But it also gave more say to the member states in assessing the situation in the countries concerned [A Credible Enlargement 2018, 1-4]. In other words, it strengthened the politicization of the process at the expense of the norms consensus that prevailed in the preceding waves of EU enlargement (Thomas 2022: 194-205).

Such greater political direction may go one of two ways: either in the direction of a tougher approach, or a more lenient approach according to the foreign policy preferences of the member states concerned. In any case, the need for unanimity in these decisions may well lead to other deadlocks as member states can always use enlargement decisions as a way to settle political scores with the candidate countries, as reflected in the Bulgarian veto, in November 2020, of accession negotiations with North Macedonia. That decision also affected Albania whose accession path was linked to North Macedonia (Crombois 2022, 34-35).

The net effect of EU enlargement on the candidate countries has been more than mitigated. In this respect, all the countries have seen little or no improvements since 2014-2015. New concepts such as „backsliding' or „de-democratization" or even „competitive authoritarianism" (Cianetti, Dawson and Hanle 2018) were introduced to describe the situation in the Western Balkans as far as the rule of law and fundamental freedoms were concerned. Concretely, such situations would be characterized by weak democratic institutions, and the exploitation of that weakness by authoritarian political actors to gain and retain power (Bieber 2018, 334).

However, the focus on the rule of law and fundamental freedoms in the Western Balkans should not divert attention from the evolution in some EU member

states in the same domains. Based on the indexes designed by the Bertelsmann Foundation[2], the situations in some EU member states such as Hungary, Poland, Bulgaria, Romania and in the Western Balkan candidate countries, not to mention the Eastern European candidate countries, do not differ that much; and, in some cases, EU member states, such as Hungary, scored below these countries [see table below].

Table 1: Ranking Status Index -BTI Index [3]
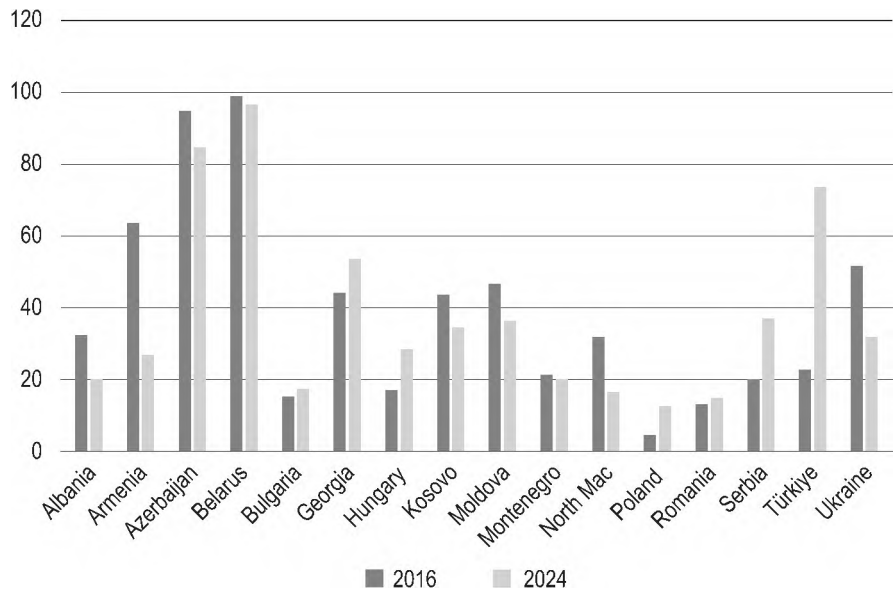
In contrast to the EU enlargement policy, the objective of resilience has increasingly supplanted the one of transformation with respect to the EU's Eastern neighbours. At its onset, the EaP was in tune with the EU's transformative ambitions. In 2008, the EU Commission made it clear that the main objective of the EaP was to guide the reform process in the Eastern partners in order to align them with EU values and norms, such as the commitment to the rule of law, good governance and the approximation of their domestic legislation to the single market acquis (European Commission 2008).

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[2] The Bertelsmann Stiftung's Transformation Index (BTI) aggregates the results of this comprehensive study of transformation processes and political management into two indices: The Status Index and the Governance Index. The Status Index, with its two analytic dimensions of political and economic transformation, identifies where each of the 137 countries stand on its path toward democracy under the rule of law and a social market economy. The Governance Index assesses the quality of political leadership with which transformation processes are steered. The lower the score, the better the situation.

[3] Source: Data can be found here: „Methodology." BTI 2024. Accessed May 25, 2024. https://bti-project.org/en/methodology

In this way, the EaP, as well as the ENP from which it emanates was deeply embedded in the EU's enlargement policy. Indeed, the use of terms and concepts such as 'conditionalities', approximation of domestic legislation and use of benchmarks were all reminiscent of the EU's enlargement policy short of the vast financial means committed to both policies.

The resilience turn in the EaP must also be seen in the context of its growing geopoliticisation since 2014 (Makarychev and Devyatkov 2014; Nitiou 2016; Cadier, 2019). Indeed, with the launching of the EaP in 2009, the EU's Eastern neighbourhood was increasingly seen as a locus of competition between Russia and the EU. These geopolitical dimensions were all too visible in the strong Russian reaction to the EU's Eastern partners when they showed a willingness to strengthen their relations with the EU through the new Association Agreements. In the end, only Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine succeeded in concluding these agreements with the EU (Youngs 2021, 320-324). Two other countries, Armenia and Belarus – the latter by choice and the former as a result of pressure from Putin – opted instead to join the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union, designed as an alternative to the EU's proposed model of cooperation (Wolczuk et al. 2022). The last Eastern partner, Azerbaijan, preferred to develop its own bilateral relations with Russia and to a lesser extent with the EU, and these are mostly restricted to cooperation on energy (Shiriyev 2019, 29-30).

With the crisis between Ukraine and Russia, the Eastern neighbourhood changed from a zone of competition to a zone of conflict with Russia. To some extent, such a shift posed some challenges for EU foreign policy that had so far refused to some extent to see itself as a geopolitical actor and had to acknowledge the limits of its policies based on values and norms instead of material interest and power politics.

The changes that occurred in March 2014 led the EU to review the ENP, of which the EaP is part. In 2017, this review led to the adoption by the EU and its Eastern partners of 20 deliverables to be completed by 2020. These revolved around three main priorities: economic development, good governance and connectivity. They also included three more general cross-cutting deliverables: gender equality, non-discrimination, and strategic communication and independence of the media. By February 2020, despite some progress in the economic and connectivity fields and some successes in the fight against corruption, especially in Ukraine, the Eastern partners had fallen short of completing any of the set objectives (20 deliverables for 2020).

The ENP Review also included new terminology that emphasized stability and differentiation in the relations between the EU and its Eastern partners. The former was reflected in the partial lifting of sanctions against Belarus and the invitation of its leader Alexander Lukashenko to the EaP summit in November 2017 despite complaints from the leaders of the country's opposition (Bosse & Vieira 2018, 25). The latter was reflected in the signing of the Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement with Armenia. (Shiriyev, 2019)

This shift is important as it implied moving away from the enlargement rhetoric and a limitation of the transformative ambitions of the EU for its Eastern partners. This shift was confirmed in the new EU Global Strategy approved by the member states in 2016 (Cianciara 2017, 9-10). This strategy embraced the changes produced by the crisis in Ukraine and highlighted a new priority of strengthening the resilience of its partners, while outlining new ambitions for EU defense. These priorities were further confirmed in the EU Strategic Compass document that outlines new objectives for the Union in security and defense (Blockmans, Crosson and Paikin, 2022).

Resilience and Transformation in the Eastern Neighbourhood after the June 2022 and December 2023 Decisions

If there was a clear path dependence between the EU policies towards enlargement and the EaP, the two policies drifted increasingly away from one another. The situation changed dramatically with the outbreak of the war in Ukraine. In March 2022, what were viewed as the three most advanced Eastern partners, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine, applied for EU membership. Soon afterwards, and following the Commission's record speed opinion, the European Council, meeting in June 2022, agreed to grant candidate status to Moldova and Ukraine while the decision on Georgia was taken later in December 2023. Not without some irony, the June 2022 decision reconciled the EaP with EU enlargement since their inception but also changes its emphasis from resilience and stability to transformation and reform.

The clear impact of the June 2022 and December 2023 decisions on the EaP was to divide the Eastern partners in three groups. The first is the EU accession candidates. The second group consists of Azerbaijan and Belarus that excluded themselves from joining the EU. The third group includes Armenia, which, by acceding to the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union, excludes them from signing a DFCTA with the European Union even though the country recently showed its willingness to apply for EU membership (Volpicelli, 2024).

To address the geopolitical changes in Europe, in May 2022, French President Emmanuel Macron launched an initiative called the European Political Community (EPC). It aims to gather all the democratic European nations in a „new space for political cooperation, security, cooperation in energy, transport, investment, infrastructure, and the movement of people" (Herszenhorn, von der Burchard and de la Baume, 2022). For the French President, such a project allows him to deal with two problems at once. The first is to strengthen links between the EU and all its partners: the Eastern partners, the EU candidate countries and third countries, such as Britain. The second is to safeguard the European integration process. By severing ties with

Russia, the EPC is viewed favourably by the EU's Eastern partners, even though they remain fearful of finding themselves in yet another antechamber of EU membership alongside the other EU candidate countries (Moyer 2022).

That being said, the EPC is unlikely to provide any real anchor for the accession process for the three EaP countries, even though it could be useful for some of them to deepen their bilateral relationships with some key member states. Indeed, the initiative is largely restricted to being a forum for discussion rather than a strong policy and security provider for the EaP countries (Bechev 2022). This means that its impact on the EaP candidate countries may be limited, and it is therefore unlikely to offer a credible framework to advance their accession ambitions.

But the June 2022 and December 2023 decisions also raise the question of the future of resilience as both a central concept for EU foreign policy and for the Eastern partner countries. More fundamentally, it not only calls into question the future of the EaP, but for the same reason the future of resilience itself. However, there may be a future for resilience if used properly in the context of EU enlargement policy for the new candidate countries as well for the ones in the Western Balkans. Indeed, the relative failure of the transformative ambitions in these countries calls for a new approach.

The reasons for the lack of success of the transformative approach in the context of EU enlargement can be summarized as follows. First, the approach was very much centred on the leaders of the Western Balkan states rather than on their institutions, not to mention non state actors. This has contributed not only to strengthen their legitimacy but also to increase their state capture when they do not openly obstruct the reform process itself. Second, the EU approach has been too technical and not political enough. Moreover, the EU paid too much attention to formal processes such as the transposition of the Acquis Communautaire and not enough to the political dynamics of clientelism and corruption (Wouters and Kossokaska 2024, 5-7).

The comparison between the situation, in terms of reforms, between the Western Balkan candidate countries and some of the Eastern partners, with the exceptions of Belarus, Turkey and Azerbaijan, shows very similar results with few major differences.

In terms of the liberal democracy index designed by the V-Dem Institute (Democracy Report, 2024: 62-63), the Western Balkans showed only slightly better scores (Serbia excluded) than the Eastern partners, excluding Belarus (see Table 2).

In terms of economic criteria, the Eastern partner countries have performed better than their Western Balkans counterparts. This fact does not discount the fact that performances between these countries may show significant differences [Emerson et alt., 2021: V-VI).

Table 2: Liberal Democracy Index - Score 2024[4]
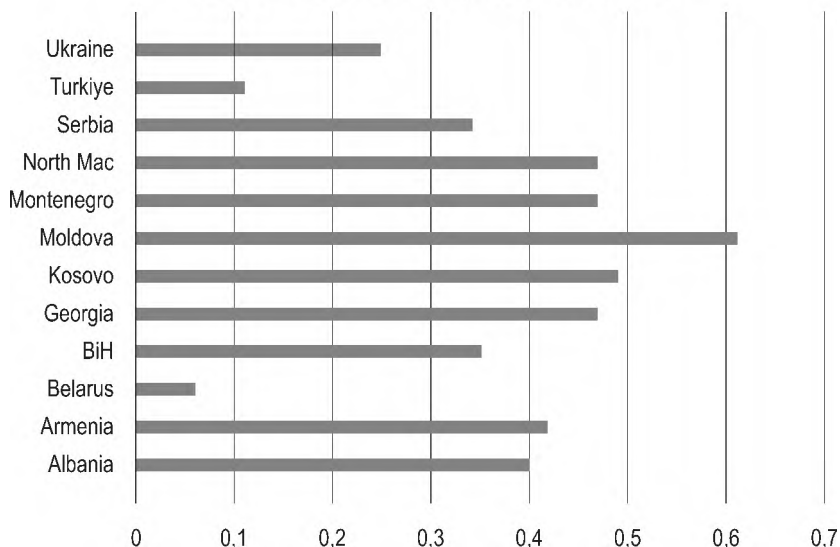
To some extent, the resilience challenges are similar between all the candidate countries save from the security and military aspects in the three Eastern partner candidate countries. These challenge concerns low levels of social trust, the low legitimacy of governance actors and of government institutions.

Conclusion

The uncertainties surrounding the future of resilience as a key concept in EU foreign policy reflect the extent to which the EU is still dealing with the geopolitical shock waves caused by the Russian aggression against Ukraine. By granting EU candidate status to three of its Eastern partners, the EU has to rethink its approach towards them that was very much anchored on the concept of resilience. In other words, the blending of the EU's enlargement policy and the EaP raises the question of the possible future of the concept of resilience and its compatibility with the transformative ambitions of the EU.

The decision to grant candidate status to the three Eastern partners also calls into question the future of EU enlargement policy towards the Western Balkans. While emphasizing their transformation as a main policy objective,

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4   „The V-Dem Liberal Democracy Index (LDI) captures both liberal and electoral aspects of democracy based on the 71 indicators included in the Liberal Component Index (LCI) and the Electoral Democracy Index (EDI). The EDI reflects a relatively ambitious idea of electoral democracy where a number of institutional features guarantee free and fair elections such as freedom of association and freedom of expression. The LCI goes even further and captures the limits placed on governments in terms of two key aspects: The protection of individual liberties, and the checks and balances between institutions". The higher the score, the better the situation. Source: Democracy winning and losing at the ballot. Accessed May 19, 2024. 52 https://www.v-dem.net/documents/44/v-dem_dr2024_highres.pdf.

this is far from being achieved, considering the mixed results so far in terms of reforms.

In this context, resilience may offer some interesting tools when dealing with social trust, trust in the governance actors and legitimacy of the institutions while emphasizing the need for strong bottom-up approaches that may enable bypassing possible obstruction by some of the Western Balkans' national leaders. In the short term, however, resilience may prove insufficient to deal with the particularly difficult situations in Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia that are still marked by the war or the aftermath of their own conflict with Russia.

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