

A NEW TYPE OF FOREIGN RELATIONS? ENHANCING EUROPE'S RESILIENCE AND ITS IMPACTS ON THE EU'S EXTERNAL ACTIONS

Dr. Peter Hefele

Policy Director,

Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies

Abstract

The „polycrisis“ Europe has been undergoing for over a decade has called for a more robust, more resilient European Union. Resilience is now a key element of policy design on the EU level and will have ground-breaking effects in all policy fields. Yet, surprisingly, the impact of this transformation on the foreign relations of the Union (and its member states) in terms of trade relations and security has hardly been discussed and understood. The article will analyse the evolution of this concept in EU Policy and its effects on reshaping EU external policies. Three dimensions of resilience: democracy promotion, trade relations and green transformation are taken as case studies. The analysis aims at contributing to a better understanding of the future of international relations and the need for modernising the toolset of the EU as a unique actor in global policies.

Key words: Resilience, International Relations, Sustainable Development, Democracy, European Union

Introduction

The ongoing Russian war against Ukraine has become a leap-frogging moment in Europe's Strategic Culture.¹ For the first time, the European Union decided to supply lethal arms and military equipment to a third country, Ukraine. This strategic turning has come with member states massively increasing their military spending. Never before has Europe engaged on such a large scale in hard power, massively stretching its limited constitutional competencies in foreign and defence relations.² This is a remarkable development given the history of EU foreign relations since the end of 1950. For decades, economic relations had overwhelmingly dominated foreign

¹ (Hefele and Novaky, 2022); (Lenne, 2022).

² For an overview on the evolution and instruments of EU foreign policy see (Keukeleire & Delreux, 2022).

relations – and by diplomacy, development and cultural cooperation, defining the EU as a self-restrained, rule-based normative power.³

The hybridisation of warfare, particularly the „energy weapon“ by Russia, has ruthlessly opened the eyes of the Europeans in terms of their dependence on monopolistic suppliers of fossil energy and raw materials. Moreover, the „weaponisation of connectivity“⁴ calls for systematically reducing Europe’s vulnerability and enhancing its resilience to (politically) induced shocks. As a result, basic assumptions on global exchange, even globalisation itself, are now questioned.⁵

From a long-term perspective, sustainable transformation, as conceptualised in the European Green Deal (EGD), is a core component of a future resilient Europe. Immediate threats and slow-offset effects call for a new calibration of the external relations *and* adjustments of the internal decision-making processes of the European Union. These objectives can be summarised under the overarching target of the European Commission to create a more resilient Europe. The concept of resilience is relatively new and still needs to be translated into practical policies.

This article will analyse *three policy fields which play a crucial role in developing a European Policy of Resilience: the defence of democracy; the concept of sustainable transformation; and the reshaping of trade relations and value chains.*

In all these policy fields, the European Union has either constitutionally exclusive rights (*trade*); has acquired a lot of competencies over the last years (*EGD*) or is trying to extend its competencies (*democracy promotion*).

The findings will be „read“ against a framework of different theories of (see Chapter 1) international relations (IR), but also in the light of the discussion of evolving integration and policy coordination instruments inside and between the European institutions (and with the member states).

The Concept of Resilience

The concept of resilience has become a strategic dimension or a „new compass“ of EU policies at the latest with the 2020 Strategic Foresight Report.⁶ Resilience is „*the ability not only to withstand and cope with challenges but also to undergo transitions in a sustainable, fair, and democratic manner.*“⁷ According to this concept, resilience is not only a reaction and policy concept to the poly-crisis Europe has been facing since 2007. It is considered an integral and necessary part of the highly ambitious project of the sustainable transformation of the EU (*transitional resilience*). As Ana E. Juncos rightly observed: „*The concept of resilience has gradually colonised the foreign policy discourse and practice of most Western states and international*

³ (European Union External Action, 2016).

⁴ (Leonhard, 2022).

⁵ (Posen, 2022).

⁶ European Commission (2020). An overview on the history of the concept of resilience provides (Juncos, 2017) and (Rita and Manca, 2017).

⁷ (European Commission, 2020a).

*organisations [...]*⁸ It would be too easy to denounce *resilience* as another buzzword, e.g., *sustainability*. But despite all criticism, Juncos correctly reminds us that those concepts usually „*have important implications on the EU's identity as a normative power in the medium and long term*.“⁹ And not only in terms of normative power, as the current reactions to the Ukraine war show. In the author's opinion, it provides a) more flexibility in reacting to internal and external shocks; b) from the point of political communication, this concept is easier to sell to the European electorate, as it is can be better linked to the idea of „a Europe that protects“;¹⁰ c) and from a more conceptual perspective, it can also be seen as a sign of an ongoing „realistic turn“ in EU policy. After backslashes in recent years in highly ambitious projects born out of a normative approach, calls for a humbler objectives in EU's outreach become louder.

The consequences for the European Union's foreign relations and the internal policy coordination mechanism will be far-reaching. If taken seriously, *resilience* can become a common denominator of EU policies and a strong momentum to the evolution of the EU policy system.¹¹ As explained later, this does not mean that the EU will now retreat into a shell and stand aside from any international responsibilities of the EU – quite the contrary. It will instead open new opportunities for cooperation with external partners based on shared interests.

As complex as resilience might be, there is no immediate need for any constitutional changes to the Treaties of the European Union so far. The future will show whether we will see an internal power shift between the Council, the European Commission, and the European Parliament. But as we could observe in the case of the Green Deal, there are good reasons to assume that it will provide a powerful tool for the Commission to increase its power of policy coordination.

Reshaping EU's Foreign Relations and Internal Policy Coordination Mechanism

The characteristics of the „Project Europe“ are reflected in its institutional settings both for internal coordination and foreign relations. Attempts to find adequate descriptions and explanations for these unique concepts and behaviour of the EU as a (global) actor *sui generis* are myriad.¹² Plenty of IR theories and of internal integration processes compete. None of those theoretical frameworks has delivered a comprehensive and satisfactory understanding; in reality, one always had to rely on complementary concepts. With this caveat, this article chooses a rather eclectic and pragmatic approach to understand the challenges, processes, policy tools, and limitations of enhancing Europe's resilience. While focusing on external relations, the implications of a new resilience policy on the EU's internal integration cannot be

⁸ (Juncos, 2017), p.1.

⁹ (Juncos, 2017), p.14.

¹⁰ (Molthof, 2019a).

¹¹ Current updates on what resilience means for different policy fields can be found at (European Commission, 2023).

¹² See among many (Keukeleire and Delreux, 2022), Chapter 13; (Bindi, 2022).

left out of this analysis. In its conclusion, this analysis will shortly tap into major EU foreign and integration policy theories such as functionalism, new institutionalism and neo-liberalism.¹³

Fields of Enhancing Resilience

Three policy fields have been chosen to show the range and challenges of a comprehensive policy of Resilience of the European Union: the defence of democracy, the concept of sustainable transformation, and the reshaping of trade relations and value chains. These cases show the complexity of resilience and the need for different policy approaches and instruments, increasing the challenges for policy coordination even more.

Protecting and Promoting European Democracy

Never since the end of the Cold War has the European way of living been under such comprehensive and sophisticated threats as during the last ten years. A „third wave of autocracy“¹⁴ is weeping away progress made in democratisation after 1990. Even within the North-Atlantic region, the global stronghold of democracy, developments in the field of political polarisation and weakening of the rule-of-law principles have raised many concerns about the resilience of democratic systems, not only in the former communist countries of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE).

Attacks by external actors on the „democratic infrastructure“ of Europe, such as interference in election campaigns or hidden party funding, had been known for many decades. Cyberattacks and disinformation in social media have aggravated the situation and multiplied the challenges but not created them *ex nihilo*, addressing both state and non-governmental and private actors. Within a comparatively short period, the EU has launched an ambitious set of anti-interference tools.¹⁵ These tools are not only designed to protect the institutions of the European Union. They aim to complement similar activities on the member states' level, which are often incapable (or unwilling?) of defending the integrity of their core democratic institution and processes. Next to enhanced resilience of institutions, civic education of European citizens is key. As the main challenge lies in balancing freedom of expression and fighting its abuse, resilience also has to grow out of society. And it can never be successfully defended only on its own turf.¹⁶

At the same time, the Union has stepped up its engagement in actively and pre-emptively promoting democracy outside its territory in third countries. For example, the 2020 - 2024 EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy¹⁷ is based on the Union's self-perceived role as the world's leading advocate of democracy. As many member nations are already engaging in those activities, a major function of the EU

¹³ For current European Integration Theories, see (Wiener et al., 2018).

¹⁴ (Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019).

¹⁵ A good overview provides (European Parliament, 2023).

¹⁶ Among many (Alliance of Democracies, 2023); (Global Democracy Coalition, 2023).

¹⁷ (European Commission, 2020b).

is to coordinate those existing programmes better. However, lack of coordination is well-known, in European development cooperation, which always aimed at strengthening accountability and good governance in their partner countries.¹⁸

Sustainable Transformation and European Green Deal

When presenting the European Green Deal in 2019 as its core political project, the European Commission did not put the dimension of enhanced resilience into the centre of its communication. Admittedly, resilience has always been part of this concept and of some of its precursor projects. But it has quite lately used resilience as a core argument for the Green Deal. This observation reflects two characteristics of the Green Deal. Firstly, climate change and environmental perspectives have for (too) long dominated public communication and perceptions of the EGD. And secondly, it indicates a structural weakness of EU politics: it shows how difficult it is to implement a cross-sectoral, „unifying“ concept that enhances the understanding and propagation of complex interactions and effects between different policy fields.

The EGD is a multi-layer and multi-dimensional policy project also in the foreign relations of the European Union.¹⁹ The green transformation will have groundbreaking effects on the geopolitical system. It goes beyond the traditional discussions, e.g., of the new „geopolitics of energy transition“²⁰, and is neatly linked to internal changes in the European Union’s policy-making systems.

Following the announcement of the Green Deal in September 2019, it soon became apparent that this ambitious concept has massive impacts on major dimensions of external policies, in particular in the field of security. In 2020 the Council of Europe released a resolution on climate diplomacy,²¹ followed quickly by a communication on Defence Policy. This is a clear indicator of an increasing integration of different foreign policy dimensions. And in her latest State of the Union Address in September 2022, the President of the Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, emphasised this comprehensive understanding of security and resilience.²²

To promote resilience, the EU can build upon an impressive range of conceptual approaches and a set of tools, which the Union has developed over the last few years.²³ This offers various options for engagement and cooperation with partners outside the EU as the debate on reducing vulnerabilities has also gained momentum, e.g. in the Indo-Pacific region.²⁴ But in the past, there was sometimes too much optimism on the part of the EU when trying to forge global alliances or partnerships. Resilience as a complex social phenomenon requires a detailed and realistic view of national interests and preferences, strategic cultures and political or cultural restraints.

¹⁸ (Furness *et al.*, 2020); (Delputte and Orbis, 2019).

¹⁹ As an example of this approach, see (Chikh M’hamed, 2022); (Leonard *et al.*, 2021).

²⁰ (Hübner, 2016).

²¹ (Council of Europe, 2021).

²² (European Commission, 2022).

²³ For an overview on Foreign Policy Instruments see: (European Commission, 2023).

²⁴ (Huang and Saxena, 2021).

The case of stalled EU Free Trade Agreements (FTA) with several countries (e.g., India) also shows the limitations and danger of overburdening the trade policy instrument as one-catches-all agreements, including social and environmental aspects.

To some extent, these caveats are relevant for the whole project of sustainable transformation *per se*. How, e.g., shall different political and administrative levels within the EU interact? Acknowledging that enhancing resilience often requires a bottom-up approach²⁵, the principle of subsidiarity of the EU demands a „unity in diversity“ approach. And this motto should make it into the foreign relations of the Union, too, where usually claims for unity and „one voice“ prevail.²⁶ EU Foreign Policy should tap into Europe’s diverse capacities in its third-party relations to make „resilience policy more resilient“, mainly when predicting economic, social and political change is increasingly difficult.

The European Green Deal aims to harmonise its internal and external policies under the idea of sustainability. But there remain severe differences and contradictions with other objectives and restraints of external relations, at least in short and even mid-term perspectives.²⁷ The EU still has a long way to go in better integrating its highly complex domestic and foreign policy instruments, let aside its often weak presence on the ground and the lack of capacity to coordinate and complement already existing member states’ initiatives.

Reshaping Trade Relations and Creating Resilient Value Chains

As one of the three largest trading blocks in the world²⁸, the European economy is particularly vulnerable to external shocks.²⁹ Events such as COVID, sanctions (and counter-sanctions) in the Russian-Ukraine war or the threats of China towards Lithuania on the Taiwan question have opened the eyes of EU policymakers and business leaders about the systemic risks and naive assumptions of globalisation.³⁰ Hedging those risk factors become a significant determinant in the EU’s domestic and external economic policies. Trade and industrial policies are key areas in which we could see comprehensive and quick adaptation processes in recent years; and in which the constitutional competencies of the EU can make a significant difference.

In May 2021, the European Commission launched an update of its industrial policy strategy to reduce the vulnerability of the European economy in four key

²⁵ Among many the Global Resilience Partnership (Global Resilience Partnership, 2023).

²⁶ For the case of dealing with China, Angelos Chryssogelos correctly pointed out the strategic advantages of *not* having always one European voice (Chryssogelos, 2023).

²⁷ The most current dilemma is between securing Europe’s energy supply „by all means“ and emission reduction due to the Russian war.

²⁸ The annual trade volume of the EU is 4.3 trn USD and second only to China. The EU is leading in terms of services (Eurostat, 2022).

²⁹ (European Commission, 2021a). For example, see (United Nations Trade Organisation, 2019) for calculating the vulnerabilities of nations.

³⁰ See the speech of Christine Lagard, President of the Europe Central Bank, on 22 April 2022 in Washington (European Central Bank, 2022).

sectors: finance, industrial ecosystems and alliances, technology transfer, and strategic autonomy.³¹ Resilience, in this understanding, means protecting the single market mechanism and strengthening Europe's role in leading industries and services while, at the same time, contributing to its sustainable transition. The European Commission is aware of the risks of further defragmentation and industrial protectionism and emphasises, therefore, its „open strategic autonomy“ concept.³² But only the years to come will show whether Europe will find the right balance between protection and maintaining a high level of international exchange.

In terms of a broader understanding of resilience, implementing environmental and social standards in the Free Trade Agreements (FTA)³³ can contribute to enhancing resilience in EU trade relations. They will de-risk economic exchange and contribute, e.g., to carbon emission production through upgrading production technologies.

A landmark in defending the functioning of EU's internal market was the decision on an anti-coercion instrument (ACI)³⁴ in November 2022. For the first time, the EU introduced a measure of active deterrence in its trade relations with third parties, which goes beyond the tools of the World Trade Organisation (WTO), e.g., anti-dumping measures. At the same time, the EU tries to revitalise the functioning of the WTO, acknowledging that bilateral agreements, such as FTAs, cannot sufficiently contribute to preserving a rule-based international economic order.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Linking the concept of resilience and the experience in three main dimensions of EU foreign relations - democracy promotion, Green Deal, and trade relations - provides some interesting insights into the evolution and future of EU policymaking. But what do these results tell us when read against the currently dominating foreign and integration policy theories, such as *new functionalism* and *neo-liberalism*?

As the analysis has shown, there is no need for a fundamental revision of the European Treaties for the foreseeable future. The evolution of the political system of the European Union will rather proceed within the current constitutional framework, which is more flexible than often stated. Recent (external) shocks have proven that, contrary to conventional wisdom, the EU bodies can quickly use existing or create new instruments for collective decision-making and acting. What we have recently seen in the defence field can be applied to respond to other crises. There are good reasons for neo-functionalists' assumptions that we will see further integration steps. That does not mean that the member states or subnational entities should now abdicate their responsibility for enhancing the resilience of their respective societies. But in terms of preventing, mitigating or adapting external shocks, Brussels will increasingly execute actions and go beyond simple inter-governmental coordination.

³¹ (European Commission, 2021b); (Pilati & Mollet, 2021).

³² (Van den Abeele, 2021).

³³ For an overview of recent FTAs see (Blot & Kettunen, 2021); (Garcia-Duran & Eliasson, 2022).

³⁴ (Duchâtel, 2022).

Given the current international crisis, *realists of International Relations* now feel the upper hand. And yes, if resilience is perceived as a defensive reaction against external threats, one might conclude that International Relations is a kind of anarchic, zero-sum game as assumed by realist approaches to IR. But this axiom is neither an accurate description of the nature of the threats and the policy concepts of the EU nor – at least in most cases – the most efficient ways to cope with those challenges. In times of hybridisation, lines between economic and military measures are blurred. In contrast to this perspective, advocates of neo-liberalism in IR have never excluded the dimension of conflict-driven inter-state interaction, nor have they been naive about the weight of state interests. But they have equally emphasised the importance of institutions, a multilateral system of norms and procedures and the long-term gains of cooperation. This is a very accurate description of the European concept of resilience in its foreign relations. European policymakers know that long-term resilience cannot be achieved by retreating „behind the walls“. Contributing to common global goods, creating alliances with like-minded countries and searching for joint solutions are more than ever crucial given the nature of the threats. Following a realist approach would not lead to zero but to minus for all players. It is no contradiction that unilaterally hedging risks has to be part of a European resilience strategy, but it must always be accompanied by continuous engagement abroad.

It is no exaggeration to say that resilience will remain a core concept in European policy given the tectonic shifts in the geopolitical landscape and the need for revising the fundaments of our way of life under the auspices of sustainable development. Moreover, the „resilience“ is less politically „tainted“ and can create broader political support across different political camps. Furthermore, it is a more comprehensive approach that includes social policy dimensions, e.g., demography or just transition.

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