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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

### Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Lebanidze, B., Aleksanyan, A., & Gonashvili, I. (2022). The Resilience-Security Nexus in the South Caucasus: Can the EU Promote Resilience without Engaging in Geopolitics? *Caucasus Analytical Digest*, 127, 19-25. <https://doi.org/10.3929/ethz-b-000554652>

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## The Resilience-Security Nexus in the South Caucasus: Can the EU Promote Resilience without Engaging in Geopolitics?

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DOI: 10.3929/ethz-b-000554652

### Abstract

This article seeks to explore whether and to what extent the ‘resilience turn’ in the European Union’s (EU) foreign policy-making affected the EU’s (lack of) actorness in the South Caucasus region in security-related areas such as conflict and crisis management and geopolitical rivalries. While Brussels has intensified its policies in most policy sectors, the EU and its member states continue turning a blind eye to geopolitical dynamics in the region. Yet, recent empirical evidence from Armenia and Georgia shows that decoupling of sectoral cooperation from security-related issues is not sustainable in the long term since, if left unchecked, geopolitical risks can easily thwart the progress achieved in sectoral policy areas and lead to a lower degree of state and societal resilience. Therefore, the key question remains whether the EU and its member states can sustainably promote state and societal resilience if they continue ignoring geopolitical risks and other security-related issues.

### Introduction: Resilience-Security Nexus in EU Foreign Policy Thinking

In this article we explore the impact of the ‘resilience turn’ on the EU’s security governance in Armenia and Georgia. To do so, we examine the resilience-security nexus in EU foreign policy thinking and study to what extent the EU has put it to use in practice in the geographically close and strategically important South Caucasus region. Specifically, we examine the EU’s security governance in Armenia and Georgia—two countries which possess rather limited military and defence capacities and are exposed to severe security risks.

The EU Global Strategy (EUGS) introduced resilience as one of the guiding principles of the EU’s foreign and security policy in 2016. The EUGS was a response to a changed security environment and multiple crises within and beyond the Union. A clear shift can be traced from the European Security Strategy (ESS) adopted in 2003 to the EUGS—‘from transformative power to principled pragmatism’ (Tocci 2017: 494). ‘Europe has never been so prosperous, so secure nor so free’ (Council of the European Union 2003: 3) reads the opening line of the ESS, transformed into ‘[N]ever has our unity been so challenged’ in the EUGS. From the point of the adoption of the EUGS in 2016, the resilience approach became the centrepiece of EU external governance. Intended to ‘handle global pressures and local dynamics’ (European Union 2016: 4), the Strategy emphasised the need to build state and societal resilience both within the EU and in its partner countries.

Compared to the EU’s previously transformative agenda, the defining feature of the external dimension of the new strategy built on resilience is the acknowledge-

ment of the limits of the EU’s normative and transformative abilities in its international surroundings (Bendiek 2017: 6). Thus, promotion of state-building and stability via ‘blueprints’ designed in Brussels were replaced with emphasis on local ownership (Wagner/ Anholt 2016: 424). However, while resilience theoretically creates space for a bottom-up approach (Korosteleva/ Flockhart 2020: 156), it also poses a significant risk of being used as an excuse by the EU to decrease relevant efforts and budgets (Wagner/ Anholt 2016: 424–425). Therefore, the EU’s shift towards the above-mentioned ‘principled pragmatism’ has been assessed as unwillingness to commit and scale down its geopolitical actorness (Moga/ Dirdalä 2019). A ‘geopolitical actorness’ of the EU refers to the ability of the Union to compete and engage with systemic rivals, such as Russia and China, in its neighbourhood and beyond. The announced shift has raised doubts about the compatibility of pragmatism and the principles of the EU (Juncos 2017; Joseph/ Juncos 2019). Due to meagre operationalisation, the resilience narrative has not to date been reflected in the policy turn, nor has local ownership increased (Petrova/ Delcour 2020; Kakachia et al. 2021).

To be consistent with the EU vocabulary, in this article we will follow a standard definition of resilience provided by the EUGS that conceptualises resilience as ‘the ability of states and societies to reform, thus withstanding and recovering from internal and external crises’ (EEAS 2016: 23). It is further noteworthy that, while the EU’s resilience agenda transcends all policy issues and geographic areas, its presence is the most visible in the EU Neighbourhood Policy. The EUGS emphasises EU governance in the Southern and Eastern neigh-

bourhood with the focus on state and societal resilience (EEAS 2016). Furthermore, all policy documents published after 2016 explicitly link the EU's neighbourhood regions to the resilience-based EU agenda and the EUGS calls state and societal resilience the EU's 'strategic priority in the neighbourhood' (EEAS 2016: 25). Therefore, the South Caucasus, as a part of the EU Neighbourhood Policy, presents a rich laboratory to study how EU-promoted resilience works in practice.

At the same time, the EU also closely connects the concept of resilience to its security governance. The importance of security governance is enshrined in all documents regulating the EU's external relations. According to the EUGS, 'Internal and external security are ever more intertwined' and security within the EU 'entails a parallel interest in peace in [the EU's] neighbouring and surrounding regions', including 'a broader interest in preventing conflict, promoting human security, addressing the root causes of instability and working towards a safer world' (EEAS 2016: 14). Moreover, security seems to be viewed as a precondition for resilient states and societies: 'A resilient state is a secure state, and security is key for prosperity and democracy' (EEAS 2016: 23). As we can see, in the EU's official language resilience and security are closely connected and build a nexus, with the objective to defend the security and stability of the EU and its neighbours.

For the sake of clarity, while the EU has a very broad understanding of security governance, we focus on the two specific aspects thereof that probably matter most for the EU's neighbourhood regions: conflict management and geopolitical actorness. With regard to the first, the EUGS mentions an Integrated Approach to Conflicts and Crises—which, like resilience, has a focus on the neighbourhood regions in the East and the South and encompasses multi-phased, multi-level and multi-lateral peacebuilding and conflict-resolution activities—including a security dimension of the conflicts where the EU intends to 'engage more systematically' (EEAS 2016: 28–30). In her speech on the occasion of her election as a President of the European Commission and presentation of her team, Ursula von der Leyen stated that it is the 'geopolitical Commission' that she has in mind, and that 'Europe urgently needs' (European Commission 2019). With this, von der Leyen emphasized the importance of geopolitical actorness has become a significant part of the EU foreign policy narrative. The EU's drive for strategic autonomy, designation of China as a systemic rival and a more hardened language towards Russia (European Commission 2021b) could be viewed as signs of the EU slowly becoming a geopolitical actor. This process has been accelerated after Russia's full-scale

invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 and by EU's somewhat unexpected strong counterreaction which included unprecedented sanctions against Russia and economic, political and military support for Ukraine (Council of the European Union 2022).

### **EU-Induced Resilience-Building in Armenia and Georgia**

Since the inception of resilience as a top EU priority in the neighbourhood regions, the EU has issued a few important documents that have guided its engagement in the South Caucasus countries. In 2017, the European Commission (EC) adopted a document on '20 Deliverables for 2020' that identified key priorities and guided EU external governance in the Eastern Partnership (EaP) countries between 2017 and 2020. The document followed the major EUGS objective of 'increasing the stabilisation and resilience of [the EU's] neighbours' (European Commission 2017: 3) and identified four core areas of engagement: economy, governance, connectivity and society. While strengthening resilience as a final output was not operationalised in the EU documents, it seemed to be an underlying principle across 20 deliverables, from 'climate change resilience' to resilience against 'disinformation', 'energy dependency' and 'hybrid threats' (European Commission 2017). In 2020, the EU declared it had achieved significant progress in meeting the 20 deliverables in the EaP countries, including Armenia and Georgia. Some milestones included updated legislation on gender equality, creation of new job opportunities, financial support to more than 18,000<sup>1</sup> of small and medium enterprises, increased trade volumes with the EU, reforms in the public administration, such as introducing one-stop-shops and e-government services, and joining Horizon Europe, the EU's research and innovation programme for 2021–2027, to name a few. Interestingly, goals under the 'stronger security cooperation' deliverable focused mostly on non-geopolitical issues such as action plans against cybercrime, guidelines to address floods and raise awareness about disasters, and joint investigations between EaP countries and Europol (EU Neighbours East 2020).

The 'resilience turn' was further strengthened in the EU's most recent strategy towards the region, the 'Eastern Partnership Policy Beyond 2020: Reinforcing Resilience—an Eastern Partnership that Delivers for All' issued in March 2020 (European Commission 2020). The document was saturated with emphasis on resilience across the whole spectrum of policy areas. The Joint Staff Working Document entitled 'Recovery, resilience and reform: post 2020 Eastern Partnership priorities' issued in July 2021 further speaks of 'strengthening resilience

1 The number refers to all EaP countries.

as an overarching policy framework' and specifies five long-term objectives: resilient economies, accountable institutions and the rule of law, resilient digital transformation, climate resilience and resilient societies (European Commission 2021a).

In practical terms, since 2016, the EU's conceptual underpinning and practical implementation of its resilience-fostering agenda in Armenia and Georgia has mostly been focused on capacity-building in certain policy sectors and on boosting the sources of resilience, such as strengthening the public institutions and their legitimacy.<sup>2</sup> Next to following specific deliverables enshrined in EU documents, the EU was also heavily involved in processes of political reform and interparty political dialogue. For instance, the EU-led mediation between government and opposition after Georgia's contested 2020 elections resulted in an ambitious new reform package and stabilisation of the political situation, the aim being to strengthen the resilience of political institutions in the country (Kakachia and Lebanidze 2021). The EU was heavily involved in both countries as a major reform partner, advising and assisting them in wide-ranging reforms from strengthening the rule of law and the judiciary to approximation to trade-related EU acquis. After the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the EU also supported pandemic resilience of Armenia and Georgia by providing epidemiological as well as economic assistance to both countries (Kandelaki/ Lebanidze 2022; European Commission 2021c).

### The EU as a Security Actor in Armenia and Georgia

A quick glance at EU documents is enough to see that engagement on security-related issues such as military cooperation, conflict resolution and systemic rivalries with illiberal actors are virtually absent from the EU's resilience-building agenda in the South Caucasus region. In the '20 Deliverables for 2020' issued by the EC in 2017, out of 20 deliverables listed in the document, only one was (indirectly) related to security of EaP states. One of the deliverables focused on 'resilience of the Partner Countries to security threats, including hybrid threats, and to disasters' (European Commission 2017: 31). But the document framed security largely as a technical domestic issue and did not necessarily link it to geopolitical dynamics or territorial conflicts. The action plan to meet the objective was defined accordingly and focused on steps such as fighting against organised crime, arms trafficking and cybercrime or police-to-police cooperation and assistance in develop-

ing strategies for the Chemical, Biological, Radiological and Nuclear (CBRN) Risk Mitigation (European Commission 2017: 31–32). Implementation of the 20 deliverables in Armenia and Georgia resulted in somewhat intensified cooperation in soft security areas, but it did not have any significant impact on issues of protracted conflicts or the deteriorated security situation around the two countries. As the EU's resilience agenda moved forward, the neglect of security-related issues became ever more apparent. For instance, the 2020 communication by the EC about the future of EaP policy beyond 2020 devoted only one paragraph to issues of conflict management and security (European Commission 2020).

This is not to say that the EU's security actorness in the South Caucasus is non-existent. The European Union Monitoring Mission (EUMM) which was launched after the Russia–Georgia war in 2008 is to this day the only international presence in Georgia and provides minimal deterrence against a potential full-scale Russian invasion. In October 2017, Georgia and the EU established the annual Strategic Security Dialogue, in the framework of which the issues of common interest in the field of foreign and security policy, including the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), are discussed (Delegation of the European Union to Georgia 2017).<sup>3</sup> The EU–Georgia Work Plan on CSDP cooperation includes annual consultations on security and defence and common security policy, cybersecurity, strategic communications, supporting education institutions in defence and security sector, and providing trainings for personnel. In 2021, the European Council adopted a set of decisions establishing assistance measures under the European Peace Facility (EPF) to support Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine, and Mali. The assistance package aims to strengthen domestic resilience and peace, as well as to enhance the capacity and interoperability of local armed forces to contribute to military missions and operations in which Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova participate within the CSDP framework. Georgia is currently the largest contributor per capita among the non-EU countries to the EU operation in the Central African Republic (UK Parliament 2018) and has deployed personnel to the EU training mission in Mali and to the EU Advisory Mission to Ukraine (Bond et al. 2021: 8; Emerson/ Kovziridze 2016: 26–28). For Georgia in particular, the assistance measures include strengthening the capacities of the Georgian defence forces as well as non-lethal medical and engineering equipment, totalling €12.75 million over the period 2022–2024 (Council of the European Union 2021).

<sup>2</sup> On sources of resilience, see: Stollenwerk et al. (2021).

<sup>3</sup> 'Georgia-EU high-Level dialogue on security issues launches today', Agenda.ge, 11 October 2017. Available online at <https://agenda.ge/en/news/2017/2212> (accessed 6 January 2022).

Since 2016, the EU has also taken some minor steps to boost Armenia's security, including its human security. Since 2018, the EU–Armenia security cooperation has been regulated by the EU–Armenia Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA). In particular, 'Article 5. Foreign and security policy' of the CEPA notes the importance of dialogue and effective cooperation between Armenia and the EU in the field of common security and defence policy, and, more specifically, conflict prevention, risk reduction, cybersecurity, security sector reform, regional stability, and arms and export controls. Article 7 and 8 further underline the importance of 'Conflict prevention and crisis management' and 'Regional stability and peaceful resolution of conflicts'. However, the Nagorno-Karabagh conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan itself is mentioned just once in the context of Armenia's commitment to its 'peaceful and lasting settlement'.<sup>4</sup> In practical terms, compared to Georgia, the EU's engagement in security cooperation with Armenia has been more limited. It could be due to the fact that Armenia is anchored in Russia-led security institutions that the EU's impact is more restricted, or also because the EU prioritises its ties with the associated EaP states.<sup>5</sup> A few minor steps from the EU include the attempts to mediate between Azerbaijan and Armenia by offering a platform for high-level meetings (Barseghyan 2021) and its involvement in the release of Armenian prisoners from Azerbaijani captivity (ICG 2021).

Overall, the EU's low-profile engagement in security-related areas in Georgia and even-lower-profile engagement in Armenia has been subpar considering that the two countries experience existential risks stemming from a destabilised external environment and of protracted territorial conflicts or territorial disputes with the neighbouring states. In Georgia the EU has done little to alleviate the major security-related challenges the country has been facing. Since 2016, Russia has continued its illegal demarcation process alongside the administrative boundary lines between Georgia and South Ossetia without much opposition (Larsen 2017).<sup>6</sup> The border demarcation or 'borderisation' process has been accompanied by repeated 'accidents' such as kidnappings, detentions and other human rights violations, undermining human security in conflict regions and

adjacent areas. The borderisation process can be viewed as an effective instrument of Russia's hybrid warfare as it stirs social anxieties and contributes to political instability in Georgia and limits the political legitimacy of Georgian state authorities by giving a sense that they are unable to protect the basic human rights of Georgian citizens. The EU's response was to express concern about the issue, but beyond public statements the EU did nothing to put pressure on Russia.

Since the Four-Day War over Nagorno-Karabagh in 2016, the EU has similarly ignored hard security issues in and around Armenia. It is true that the EU has always been more peripheral to the Armenian–Azerbaijani conflict and Armenia's security policy (Broers 2021). Compared to Georgia, the EU's playing field in Armenia has always been more limited due to Armenia's close security integration with Russia. However, in the last years the EU's role declined further as it was virtually absent during the recent Nagorno-Karabagh war and the geopolitical conundrum it created.<sup>7</sup> Meanwhile, Turkey established itself as a military actor and Russia consolidated its geopolitical clout in the region by negotiating a ceasefire and deploying a peacekeeping mission in the Nagorno-Karabagh region. Moreover, the influence of regional formats with participation from the EU or its member states, such as the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe's Minsk Group, have declined further after the latest Karabagh war. Instead, the new post-conflict formats such as the 3+3 format exclude the EU and are driven by regional illiberal powers such as Russia, Iran and Turkey (Coffey 2021).

The lost war over Nagorno-Karabagh was preceded by the Velvet Revolution in Armenia in 2018 and a new hope for democratic state-building. The post-revolutionary dynamics in Armenia took an opposite turn, revealing the tension between geopolitical and other security-related issues and the country's drive towards democratic and institutional reforms. Armenia's new government under Nikol Pashinyan found it hard to navigate between conducting good governance reforms, keeping good relations with Russia and strengthening partnership with the EU (Poghosyan 2020). Instead, criminal cases against high-level officials close to Russia and the appointments of Russia-sceptic activists to high-level positions in local NGOs alienated the Rus-

4 'Comprehensive and enhanced Partnership Agreement between the European Union and the European Atomic Energy Community and their Member States, of the one part, and the Republic of Armenia, of the other part'. Official Journal of the European Union L 23/4, 26 January 2018. Available online at [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:22018A0126\(01\)](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:22018A0126(01)) (accessed 1 February 2022).

5 There is a consensus among representatives of the Armenian expert community that the country needs democratic values, but there is no conviction that they can underlie the foreign policy of Russia or the Collective Security Treaty Organization. Support for democratic reforms is often linked to geopolitical interests of expanding the sphere of influence, where the most important issue for the authorities is the balance between different actors and the selective approach to proposals for cooperation.

6 'Georgia Reports "Borderization" near Gori Municipality Villages', Civil.ge, 18 January 2022. Available online at <https://civil.ge/archives/469473> (accessed 7 February 2022).

7 As during the shorter 'Four-Day War' in 2016, the EU did not assume any role either. About the 'Four-Day War', see: Schmidt (2017).

sian government and made Armenia less resilient against security risks in the region (Poghosyan 2020). A fragile security situation forces Armenia to maintain disproportionately high military expenditures, which has a negative impact on local welfare and quality of human life. For instance, according to the Global Militarisation Index, Armenia was among the top ten per capita military spenders worldwide in 2009–2020 (BICC 2022).

In summary, since 2016, security-related issues have had a negative impact on strengthening state and societal resilience in both Armenia and Georgia. In Armenia, the deteriorated relations with its sole security provider, Russia, and the lost war over Nagorno-Karabagh stopped its democratic momentum, undermined the legacy of the 2018 Velvet Revolution, and resulted in increased political, societal and economic fragility. In Georgia, the continued borderisation process and frequent tensions in Russia–Georgia relations have contributed to political instability and diminished the effectiveness of Georgian institutions, as well as the country's reform capacity.

## Conclusion

Since 2016, the EU's resilience-building agenda in Armenia and Georgia has largely bypassed geopolitical and conflict-related issues and has been mostly limited to various policy sectors. The EU provided both countries with significant financial, technical, advisory, and political assistance, which resulted in improved state and societal resilience in certain areas (Kakachia et al. 2021). Moreover, some EU initiatives, such as bilateral cooperation in the area of cybersecurity, also contributed to the security resilience of the South Caucasus states.

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Still, the major challenge to the EU's resilience-building agenda remains the neglect of conflict-related issues and geopolitical risks. Considering the number of geopolitical and other security-related challenges both countries are facing, the long-term sustainability of EU-induced resilience-building can only be achieved if at the same time geopolitical risks are somewhat mitigated. Otherwise, the progress achieved in both countries can be easily reversed. The 2008 Russia–Georgia War and the 2020 Nagorno-Karabagh Conflict are recent examples of how geopolitical risks can undermine the resilience of the EU's small neighbouring countries.

As a result of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, a more security-focused resilience agenda in the South Caucasus and elsewhere may perhaps become a reality sooner than expected by many. The Russia–Ukraine war represents a major turning point which is already shaping both the EU's global agenda and the security and geopolitical environment in and around the South Caucasus. The war has been followed by a political crisis in Georgia as well as by a renewal of low-intensity military tensions in Nagorno-Karabagh. The EU itself is on the way towards fundamentally changing its approach towards its Eastern neighbourhood and becoming a more militarily engaged actor. These developments will certainly affect the EU-promoted agenda of resilience-building, once designed to link the EU's toolbox of mostly civilian and bureaucratic instruments to the local needs of Armenia, Georgia and the other EaP countries. However, more time needs to pass to see whether changes in the EU's Global Strategy can contribute to an emergence of a capable resilience-security nexus in the South Caucasus and beyond.

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