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GEORGIAN INSTITUTE OF POLITICS

POLICY BRIEF

February 2020 / Issue #21

Resilience and democracy: Can a pragmatic EU still promote democracy in Georgia?

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Executive Summary

Strengthening resilience in EU neighborhood states is a cornerstone of Brussels' new ambitious global agenda. It aims to strengthen the states and societies that make up the EU neighborhood so they can better cope with challenges and crisis and adapt to fast changing political, social and economic environment. With regard to Georgia there are a few critical issues that should be addressed properly so resilience can live up to its full potential, however. One of them is a proper delimitation of the connection between supporting societal resilience and the regime's (autocratic) stability. The failure of the EU to address this issue may turn its resilience-based approach into an autocracy-strengthening policy in Georgia and further undermine the democratization process in the country. Although this policy brief focuses solely on Georgia, its empirical and conceptual implications can also be relevant for the EU's relations with two other Associated Eastern Partnership (EaP) countries, Ukraine and Moldova.

Keywords: Resilience, democratization, EU Global Strategy, Georgia, stability, democracy promotion.

Introduction: the move toward resilience in EU's foreign policy

Over the last few years, resilience has become one of the key guiding principles of the EU's foreign and security policy.² The EU defines resilience as "the ability of states and societies to reform, thus withstanding and recovering from internal and external crisis."³ Resilience requires "a more modest and cooperative approach to EU intervention abroad."⁴ Instead of exporting or imposing European values on its neighbors, the EU "counts on local resources and operates with complex partnerships at national and regional levels to promote resilience, economic growth and war-peace transitions."⁵

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² Wagner and Anholt (2016); Börzel and Risse (2018).

³ EEAS (2016: 23).

⁴ Bargués-Pedreny (2019: 2).

⁵ Bargués-Pedreny (2019: 2).

David Chandler provides what is perhaps the most comprehensive definition of resilience as understood by the EU. According to him, resilience is “the internal capacity of societies to cope with crises, with the emphasis on the development of self-organization and internal capacities and capabilities rather than the external provision of aid, resources or policy solutions.”⁶ Hence, from a functionalist point of view, the EU’s obsession with resilience is easy to understand as it speaks to the limited governance capacity of the EU outside its borders. As many critics argue, focusing on resilience can help the EU to somewhat lower its ambition in its neighborhood, shift responsibility to local actors under the guise of joint or local ownerships and limit its direct involvement in conflict and contestation areas within the neighborhood, where the EU leadership is clearly expected.⁷

Since the resilience turn is a relatively new development in EU’s foreign policy, it is too early to judge its implications for EU’s policies in Georgia. So far, however, its implementation in countries like Georgia raises more questions than answers. One of the key issues is how compatible the resilience principle is with supporting pro-democratic actors. Even though the EU claims that resilience should not be conflated with support for authoritarian stability,⁸ it can be observed that the resilience turn coincided with a period of EU’s relative passivity towards Georgia both in terms of democratic conditionality and new incentives. Moreover, despite various attempts by the international community, the democratization trend in Georgia has reversed recently and the country has been experiencing democratic stagnation or even autocratic backlash.⁹ Therefore, it will be interesting to watch how the resilience-focused EU will tackle the problems of Georgian democracy. The remainder of the policy brief addresses the challenges of the resilience-democracy nexus and offers the EU recommendations on how to deal with them.

Resilience and the stability impulse

For many years, the EU and its member states have been the main supporters of Georgia’s democratic reforms in terms of providing capacity building and long-term advisory support.¹⁰ However, the EU has often been reluctant to employ negative reinforcement of the democratization process¹¹— or link its support and engagement with democratic progress in the country.¹² The recent developments in Georgia prove this trend. Whereas members of the US Congress have sent several critical statements to Georgia as well as open letters publicly denouncing the autocratic tendencies of Georgian authorities,¹³ the EU and its institutions (with exception of the EU parliament) remained largely silent. The criticism from the EU is more technical and lacks public visibility. It is often hidden in the long texts of EU documents that are only read and scrutinized by a narrow audience. It is something of a paradox that although the EU outperforms the US in terms of institutional, societal, trade, financial and security linkages with Georgia, it is the US political establishment and US-based

⁶ Chandler (2015).

⁷ Wagner and Anholt (2016).

⁸ EEAS (2016).

⁹ Freedom House (2018); The Economist Intelligence Unit (2019).

¹⁰ Börzel and Lebanidze (2015).

¹¹ Börzel (2016).

¹² Lebanidze (2019).

¹³ Civil Georgia (2020b, 2020a, 2019).

organizations that are the most visible actors when it comes to active democracy promotion in Georgia.

Unlike the US, the EU prefers to follow a developmental and more subtle approach of democracy promotion, which may generate better results in the long term but cannot prevent democratic backslidings in the short term. The focus on the long term could put unconsolidated democracies such as Georgia at risk of adopting bad policies that impede progress for years and damage the work done by European actors.¹⁴ EU actors are often slow and more modest in reacting to autocratic tendencies in Georgia—and most European NGOs, political foundations and other non-state actors lack flagship projects or any democracy-promoting initiatives that would have a direct impact on the current phase of Georgia’s democratic development.

From this perspective, more attention to resilience measures, which is more focused on capacity building and output legitimacy in non-normative sectoral areas (conflict management, environmental issues, disaster prevention, infrastructural development, etc.), may tempt the EU to further neglect democracy and human rights in its neighborhood. The recent reenergizing relations with autocratic countries such as Belarus and Egypt prove this trend.¹⁵ However, whereas it is politically tolerable for the EU to arrange pragmatic relations with countries with autocratic credentials that have no immediate prospect of democratization, it would be premature to do the same with Georgia or Ukraine, countries that became pluralist by default and have passed the threshold of authoritarian stability—the point when political stability and an autocratic form of governance are compatible and mutually reinforcing. On the contrary, attempts to establish authoritarian governance in Georgia would probably result in more instability and social discontent, undermining EU’s main objectives in the region: peace, security and political stability.¹⁶ Hence, if the EU wants to promote resilience in Georgia, it should not shy away from challenging autocratic tendencies of Georgian authorities. Unlike many authoritarian countries in the EU neighborhood, in Georgia, active democracy promotion should be viewed not as a spoiler but as a facilitator of country’s societal and state resilience.¹⁷

Strengthening resilience in a polarized environment

Observers of Georgian politics agree that the extreme political polarization characterized by the bipartisan dominance of the ruling Georgian Dream (GD) and the main opposition party United National Movement (UNM) and its splinter groups has become one of the main challenges for Georgia’s democratic consolidation.¹⁸ The polarization is not only confined to party politics but transcends all

¹⁴ On different approaches to democracy promotion see: Carothers, T. 2009. “Democracy Assistance: Political Vs. Developmental?” *Journal of Democracy*. 20 (1). 5–19. Magen, A., Risse-Kappen, T. and McFaul, M. eds. 2009. *Promoting Democracy and the Rule of Law: American and European Strategies*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

¹⁵ European Commission (2020); Ioffe (2019); EEAS (2019a).

¹⁶ EUobserver (2019).

¹⁷ On negative aspects of democracy promotion, see: Grimm, S., and Leininger, J. 2012. “Not All Good Things Go Together: Conflicting Objectives in Democracy Promotion.” *Democratization*. 19 (3). 391–414. Jünemann, A. Ed. 2004. *Euro-Mediterranean Relations After September 11: International, Regional, and Domestic Dynamics*. London: Frank Cass. <http://site.ebrary.com/lib/alltitles/docDetail.action?docID=10093984>.

¹⁸ Zurabashvili (2019); Robakidze (2019); DRI and GYLA (2018).

areas of public life, including mainstream and social media.¹⁹ The government's backtracking from its promise to implement electoral reform in November 2019 further undermined public trust in the political process; diminished the possibility of negotiated solutions between ruling party and the opposition; and opened up a window for postelection political crisis.

Against this background, fighting the causes and symptoms behind extreme political polarization appear to be important preconditions for strengthening Georgia's state and societal resilience. In this context, there are three steps the EU can take. First, one of the reasons behind political polarization seems to be Georgia's current electoral code with its winner-takes-all nature.²⁰ Therefore, the EU needs to continue pushing the Georgian authorities to fulfill their political promise and change the election code. Second, although the government has benefited the most from demonizing the UNM for their past deeds, polarization has been a bipartisan process, driven both by the government and the opposition. Some members of the UNM, including former President Mikhail Saakashvili, have been particularly notorious in fueling political radicalism.²¹ Therefore, next to the government, the EU needs to also work with the opposition and, if need be, apply negative conditionality or naming and shaming tactics towards opposition parties as well. Third, and most importantly, the EU seems to be the only actor, perhaps next to the Georgian Orthodox Church, that has the political reputation in Georgian society to play the role of neutral arbiter between the polarized parties. Therefore, the EU needs to coordinate the process of political dialogue and support negotiated solutions if the 2020 parliamentary election or any other future political event results in a legitimacy crisis.

Societal or state resilience?

The EU claims its resilience approach to be society-, not (only) state-centered.²² Societal resilience would presuppose the involvement of civil society and the diversification of channels of communication from the state to non-state actors. In practice, however, the EU remains a state-centered actor. Indeed, the failure of the EU's external governance platforms designed to help its eastern neighbors consolidate their fragile democracies can be partly explained by their state-centered approach and overreliance on governmental channels of cooperation.²³ The EU recently tried to establish new cooperation frameworks with its neighboring states to strengthen the involvement of civil society organizations (CSO), yet those formats remain patchy and ad hoc. At best they ascribe low-profile consultancy functions to local, non-state stakeholders. This is surprising considering the potential Georgia's vibrant civil society offers for Georgia's democratic consolidation.

A real empowerment of Georgian CSOs under the slogan of societal resilience could help the EU supplement its stability-oriented pragmatic approach by redistributing the decision-making authority on cooperation formats and reform dialogues between Georgian state agencies and local CSOs. Redistribution would mean the CSOs acquire the decision-making capacity regarding the intensity and depth of relations between EU and Georgia. This would not require the establishment

¹⁹ Kakachia and Lebanidze (2019).

²⁰ Zurabashvili (2019).

²¹ TI Georgia (2018).

²² EEAS (2016, 2019b).

²³ Falkenhain and Solonenko (2012); Gumeniuk (2010).

of new institutions or reshuffling the funding mechanisms. The empowerment of CSOs can easily be accommodated under current institutional framework. So far, however, the EU remains reluctant to empower Georgian civil society to that extent.

Conclusion and recommendations

The resilience turn is an interesting development in EU's foreign policy thinking. It could make the EU a more effective and efficient actor in its neighborhood, considering its limitations as a foreign policy actor. However, in order to live up to its full potential in democratizing countries such as Georgia, it should make sure that strengthening resilience does not interfere negatively with democracy promotion objectives. Below are a few recommendations for the EU on how to escape its low profile and passive image and become a more active player in the democratization process of Georgia.

Resilience and democratic conditionality. In urgent cases of swift democratic deterioration, next to capacity building and advisory support, the EU and its member states should also motivate political actors in Georgia by using negative reinforcement instruments. The EU's toolbox of negative conditionality may include:

- Use negative conditionality against non-compliant political actors in Georgia (threat of exclusion from the EU programs, the EU dialogue and cooperation formats);
- Use public pressure against non-compliant political actors (naming and shaming) and positive reinforcement towards the compliant actors;
- Introduce new flagship projects with a focus on active democracy promotion beyond advisory and capacity building functions;
- Actively use mainstream (Georgian TVs) and online media (Facebook, YouTube, Twitter) to deliver critical messages directly to the Georgian public.

Resilience and polarization. Fighting extreme political polarization should be an integral part of EU's measures to support Georgia's societal resilience. They could include three important steps:

- Push the government and parliamentary majority to change the current electoral code, which fuels polarization by its winner takes it all nature.
- Push the government and opposition to abandon their polarization agendas by delegitimizing political parties' polarizing behavior (such as refusing to take part in dialogue, negative campaigning, demonizing opponents, and spreading hate speech).
- Act as a neutral arbiter between polarized parties by establishing structured formats of permanent cooperation.

Resilience and civil society. In order to escape the stability-promoting trap and live up to its objective of supporting societal resilience in Georgia, the EU should abandon its state-centered approach and focus more on non-state actors. The EU can accomplish this task by:

- Empowering CSOs to have a say in what the EU does in Georgia.
- Increase financial assistance and political support for non-state actors and grassroots movements working on democracy issues.

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Georgian Institute of Politics (GIP) is a Tbilisi-based non-profit, non-partisan, research and analysis organization. GIP works to strengthen the organizational backbone of democratic institutions and promote good governance and development through policy research and advocacy in Georgia.

This publication was produced with the support of the National Endowment for Democracy (NED). The views and opinions expressed in this article are the author's alone and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Georgian Institute of Politics and the National Endowment for Democracy.

HOW TO QUOTE THIS DOCUMENT:

Bidzina Lebanidze, *"Resilience and democracy: Can a pragmatic EU still promote democracy in Georgia?"*, Policy Brief No. 21, Georgian Institute of Politics, February 2020.

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