Protracted Conflicts in the EU's Neighbourhood: Does Resilience Apply?

Agnieszka Legucka and Arkadiusz Legieć

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Europe's External Action and the Dual Challenges
of Limited Statehood and Contested Orders

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ABSTRACT

Protracted conflicts, which negatively affect the security environment and foster the emergence of Areas of Limited Statehood (ALS) and Contested Orders (CO), are present both in the eastern and southern neighbourhoods of the European Union (EU). The aim of this policy paper is to examine the EU's conflict management approach to protracted conflicts in its neighbourhood and analyse how the resilience paradigm can mitigate the effects of ALS/CO in the European neighbourhood. The revision of EU foreign policy in the past decade has resulted in a major turn in the narrative towards resilience. Its Global Strategy refers to building state and societal resilience in its neighbourhood as one of the EU's key strategic priorities. Can resilience policies address the protracted conflicts in the EU's surrounding? Obstacles include the policies of other external actors, mainly Russia in the East but also Turkey in the South.

KEYWORDS: EU, external action, neighbourhood, protracted conflict, resilience, Russia

Agnieszka Legucka is Professor of Security Science at Academy of Finance and Business Vistula, Poland, and Senior research fellow on Russia at the Polish Institute of International Affairs (PISM). Her current research focuses on Russia foreign and domestic policy, security issues in the Eastern Partnership countries and conflict resolution and crisis management. She was vice-rector for students' affairs at Academy of Defense (2015– 2016). Previously, she also held various teaching posts at Ankara University (Turkey), Vasyl Stefanyk Precarpathian National University (Ukraine).

Arkadiusz Legieć is Senior Analyst on Caucasus and Central Asia within Eastern Europe Programme at Polish Institute of International Affairs (PISM), PhD Candidate at University of Łódź (Faculty of Political and International Studies), and expert of European Expert Network on Terrorism Issues (EENet). His research interests include the political and security situation in the EU's Eastern neighbourhood, terrorism studies, and foreign fighters and mercenaries in armed conflicts.

1. PROTRACTED CONFLICTS IN THE EU'S NEIGHBOURHOOD

The aim of this paper is to examine the EU's approach to protracted conflicts in its neighbourhood and analyse the resilience paradigm in the contexts of ALS/CO in the European neighbourhood. A protracted conflict is a prolonged and unresolvable dispute due to its nature and complexity (Coleman, 2003; Petrova and Delcour, 2020). Definitions of this phenomenon are imprecise but must be seen from the perspective of the creation of *de facto* states that lack full international recognition and which are used by a stronger power in international relations (Kolstø, 2006; Secrieru, 2017). Such protracted conflicts in the EU's eastern neighbourhood have been present in Transnistria, Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Nagorno-Karabakh, and currently in Donbas. They are sometimes referred to as "frozen conflicts", but this is a misleading term which does not reflect the political context of these disputes, because the military clashes are present from time to time, so they are not "frozen" (de Waal and Twickel, 2020; Legucka, 2017). Protracted conflicts can also be found in the southern neighbourhood, for example, in Northern Cyprus, and in the creation of *de facto* statehood in Syria and Libya. On one hand they experience limited international recognition, on the other hand they are subjects of geopolitical rivalry from the outside. In the southern neighbourhood, a greater number of actors are involved—Russia, Turkey, Iran, Egypt, the Gulf States, as well as EU Member States, such as France and Italy in Libya—each supporting competing factions (Wasilewski, 2020). The elements affecting the complexity of these conflicts may be ethnic, political, and historical specificities, as well as the involvement of external actors which contribute to the escalation or prolongation of the dispute (Coleman, 2003).

2. EVOLUTION OF EU RESILIENCE POLICY

The EU has involved itself relatively late in managing conflicts in its neighbourhood (Legucka, 2013). Only towards the end of the 1990s the EU accepted the responsibility for managing armed conflicts institutionally and legally under its European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP, and since the Lisbon Treaty, the Common Security and Defence Policy, CSDP). However, European countries participated much earlier in promoting peace through diplomacy and spreading values such as democracy, the rule of law, human rights, providing development assistance and humanitarian aid, and supporting local governments and NGOs (Singh, 2007).

The approach to resilience and the peacebuilding process in the EU has evolved in the face of protracted conflicts: from a top-down institution-building approach towards a continued engagement, which makes use of diverse partnerships and instruments (Bargués-Pedreny, 2020). The document concerning the strengthening of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) in 2006 towards violent conflicts reads as follows: "These are not only our neighbours' problems. They risk producing major spill-over for the EU, such as illegal immigration, unreliable energy supplies, environmental degradation and terrorism" and confirms that the EU is "being more active in addressing frozen conflicts" (Communication, 2006). The report suggested that the EU needed to be more active and more present in regional or multilateral conflict-resolution mechanisms and in peace-monitoring or peacekeeping efforts.

The revision of EU foreign policy in 2015-2016 has resulted in a major narrative turn towards resilience, mostly because of the failure of previous top-down and institutional approaches, and reduced ambitions for power projection in the neighbouring area (Juncos, 2017). The revised ENP strategy adopted at the end of 2015 is one of the first documents to introduce resilience-building as a foreign policy goal. According to the document, "the measures set out in this Joint Communication seek to offer ways to strengthen the resilience of the EU's partners in the face of external pressures and their ability to make their own sovereign choices" (European Commission and HR/VP 2015b, p. 4). However, it also added: "the new ENP will take stabilisation as its main political priority" (Commission and HR/VP 2015b, p. 2). But there was only one reference in the ENP to these conflicts: "protracted conflicts continue to hamper development in the region", and the EU downgraded conflict resolution as a priority and continues to deal with these disputes on an *ad hoc* basis (de Waal and Twickel, 2020). The resilience approach should help better reflect the situation on the ground and make the best use of the limited set of instruments at the EU's disposal (Tocci 2020).

3. EU MISSIONS IN PROTRACTED CONFLICTS

The EU has been involved in the conflict resolution before the resilience has become the key approach toward its neighbourhood problems. The eastern and southern neighbourhoods have become areas of EU's experience in the field of security, but it occurred that the "international interventions require even more locally-sensitive initiatives that are in tune with local needs" (Bargués-Pedreny, 2020, p. 263). In September 2003, the EU was officially invited to participate in the negotiations concerning the Transnistrian conflict. Then, at the request of the presidents of Ukraine and Moldova in June 2005, the EU created the special training-and-control border assistance mission *EUBAM*, which was tasked with supporting the border and customs services of these countries. The goal of this mission was to combat smuggling, (illegal) trafficking, and customs fraud taking place on the border, especially on its Transnistrian part, and to conduct training and provide support for customs officers. The final declaration stated: "the EU hopes that the mission will contribute to wider efforts to find a viable and sustainable solution to the Transnistria conflict" (EUBAM, 2005).

The EU carried out the rule-of-law mission in Georgia, *EUJUST Themis*, at the request of the Georgian government. In August 2008, Georgia and Russia fought a five-day war over South Ossetia, Moscow recognised Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent, the United Nations mission left Abkhazia and the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) withdrew from South Ossetia because of Russia's veto of such missions. Since then, the only international forum involved in these conflicts has been the four-times-yearly Geneva International Discussions, during which the parties meet but without formal labels and in which political and status issues are not properly debated. They discuss security-related issues and humanitarian needs of the conflict-affected population and focus on improving the situation of the conflict-affected population. The EU launched the EU Monitoring Mission (*EUMM*) and since 2009 it became the only international monitoring presence in Georgia. This civilian mission is tasked with monitoring the parties' compliance with the ceasefire agreement and its implementing measures and to contribute to stability, normalisation, and confidence-building through facilitating communication between parties on the ground. The EU has contributed through civilian and military operations to the monitoring of peace agreements and assistance in their implementation beyond *EUMM Georgia* (Handbook, 2015).

On 22 May 2013, the EU decided to launch *EUBAM Libya* to support the Libyan authorities improve and develop their border-management capacities, and hence, the security of the country's borders. In Syria, according to the EU's strategy for that country, the Union developed humanitarian aid to Syrians inside the country and in the neighbouring countries, including for hosting communities through pledges totalling $4.4 billion (€ 3.5 billion) for 2018, as well as multi-year pledges totalling $3.4 billion (€2.7 billion) for 2019-2020 (European Commission, 2017). The Turks see its presence in Libya and Syria as a means to pressure the EU member states as well as Russia a chance to participate in the political settlement of those conflicts. Libya for Turkey is a key to strengthening Turkey's position in the eastern Mediterranean. The Syrian province Idlib was made a Turkish de-escalation zone, and Turkey launched several military *operations*, intensively bombing the Bashar al-Assad regime's forces (Wasilewski, 2020).

These examples show that the EU held an institution-building approach, which gained importance when Russia annexed Ukrainian Crimea in 2014 and launched an offensive into Donbas. The EU as a whole did not take the peace initiative and its duties were taken over by France and Germany as part of the Normandy Format (with Ukraine and Russia), which is focused only on Donbas, not on Crimea. After the events of 2014, the Union focused on internal reforms and humanitarian aid. The EU has spent more than €1 billion in aid for eastern Ukraine since 2014 (European Commission, 2020). The EU set up a European Advisory Mission (*EUAM*) in Ukraine, which has a strategic brief, advising on long-term policy reform (de Waal and Twickel, 2020).

4. RECOMMENDATIONS: RESILIENCE VS. PROTRACTED CONFLICT

The revision of EU foreign policy in 2015-2016 resulted in a major narrative turn from institution-building towards resilience (Tocci, 2020). The Global Strategy refers to building state and societal resilience in the EU's neighbourhood as one of the Union's key strategic priorities. That is why it has elevated the resilience toolbox in protracted-conflict peacebuilding, which is coherent with the previous approach of external governance characterised by the extension of EU legislation and institutions beyond its borders without granting access to the decision-making process (Lavenex, 2004). Will the existing toolbox of resilience-building in the EU's neighbourhood, which consists of economic, mobility and normative (rule of law, democracy) instruments, be enough to resolve these conflicts?

The EU should develop a strategy for improving the security and resilience of parent states and supporting civil society while enhancing engagement with the populations of breakaway territories, as well as *de facto* states. The example of Transnistria, towards which the EU and Moldova decided to compromise and extend the application of the DCFTA to this separatist republic, underlines the importance the EU attaches to stabilising its neighbourhood. However, cooperation with the authorities of separatist republics, even in the economic sphere alone, is an exceptional case in Transnistria. In Nagorno-Karabakh, Abkhazia, South Ossetia, or Donbas, there is no such link. Economic reforms do not lead to a change in the political conditions (changes in the approach of local partners), as they remain under Russia's control. The existence of separatist republics and their authorities depends on Russia, so economic cooperation with the EU will not change that. Economic reforms can only be used as an additional source of financial income and advantage, not a direction of changed policy.

The EU could seek to strengthen societal resilience by supporting democratic reforms, for example, by supporting local civil-society initiatives concerning building trust between the people from separatist territories and the parent state. Such a process needs to be based on an upgraded information environment with more diversified sources of information for locals and limiting of disinformation introduced by external actors interested in prolonging conflicts (like Russia). Such support should be guided by local priorities, especially those that address economic as well as the political and educational aspects. In the eastern neighbourhood, "working on the ground" and strengthening social resilience will not be as provocative to Russia as the promise of EU enlargement.

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EU-LISTCO investigates the challenges posed to European foreign policy by identifying risks connected to areas of limited statehood and contested orders. Through the analysis of the EU Global Strategy and Europe's foreign policy instruments, the project assesses how the preparedness of the EU and its member states can be strengthened to better anticipate, prevent and respond to threats of governance breakdown and to foster resilience in Europe's neighbourhoods. Continuous knowledge exchange between researchers and foreign policy practitioners is at the cornerstone of EU-LISTCO. Since the project's inception, a consortium of fourteen leading universities and think tanks have been working together to develop policy recommendations for the EU's external action toolbox, in close coordination with European decision-makers. The EU-LISTCO Policy Papers are peer-reviewed research papers based on findings from the project.

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