

SCEEUS GUEST PLATFORM FOR EASTERN EUROPE POLICY NO.31

# Learning From Crisis: Civil Society, Resilience and the EU's Eastern Neighbours

Daniela Mussnig

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*Recent crises and in particular experience in Eastern Europe have provided new insights on key elements of societal resilience and the role of civil society. The EU should take these into account, together with more general learning from the pandemic and the setbacks in the European integration process in south-eastern Europe. An inclusive civic dialogue is needed on the future of Europe. The strategic involvement of civil society in the EU's differentiated frameworks for integration and neighbourhood policy should be scaled-up, community-based civic engagement and solidarity action should be supported and civil society should be empowered as an interlocutor between different policy levels and frameworks.*

## Resilience in Times of Crisis

In times of multiple crises “resilience” has become a popular term for describing one of the preconditions for countering all possible challenges from the individual to the societal level. Following this logic, “reinforcing resilience” was made a guiding principle of the European Union's Eastern Partnership policy in March 2020.<sup>1</sup> This took place at the beginning of escalating crises in the EU's Eastern neighbourhood. Alongside the global COVID-19 pandemic, the region experienced large-scale political violence from the brutal crackdown on the Belarusian Revolution to renewed war between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh, as well as Russia's ongoing war of aggression against Ukraine, which has marked a turning point in European politics.

Before these events, the EU's focus on resilience might have seemed an easy, “soft power” way to address the “hard” security dilemmas of its eastern neighbours. For over a decade, every step towards deeper integration with NATO or the EU would trigger a hard Russian response, such as the 2008 Georgian-Russian war or the 2014 annexation of Crimea and support for separatist war in eastern Ukraine.

Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine has tragically shown that a soft power approach was insufficient to counter military aggression and an accelerated violation of basic international norms. It forced the EU to step up in the security field but – together with other events in the region – it may also have given a new dimension to the notion of resilience.

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1 See [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/1\\_en\\_act\\_part1\\_v6.pdf](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/1_en_act_part1_v6.pdf)

## The Concept of Resilience and the Role of Civil Society

If societal resilience is the ability of societies to resist pressure, adapt and manage related risks, there is certainly something to be learned from the recent experience of pandemic and war. These are only part of a wider range of threats that Europe is currently facing, from disinformation and hybrid threats to authoritarian assaults on democracy, not to mention the climate and ecological crisis as the major global challenge for years to come.

Recent experience has demonstrated how a sense of solidarity and trust as elements of social cohesion enhanced efficiency in addressing the Covid-19 pandemic – or reduced effectiveness where these were absent.<sup>2</sup> Highly functioning social and education systems were also crucial. At the institutional level, the latter are cornerstones of societal resilience.<sup>3</sup> On an individual level, I would emphasise the concrete experience of solidarity together with a sense of agency, which are often most efficiently realised in a community context.

Civil society plays a crucial role as a catalyst, interlocutor and bridge-builder between the individual and institutional levels. It helps to create trust and reduce complexity,<sup>4</sup> which can seem overwhelming in times of multiple crises. Otherwise, the inability to act can create feelings of individual powerlessness and vulnerability. Such feelings were successfully harnessed by anti-democratic forces which in many countries channelled frustration about Covid-19 countermeasures into a popular protest against “the system”, capturing a civic discourse and anti-solidarity agenda focused on individual demands rather than universal rights. There is a clear need for counter-narratives and action to preserve social solidarity and trust.

## Learning From Eastern Europe

Recent experience from Eastern Europe provides important insights on what these counter-narratives and actions could look like. The Belarusian revolution and Ukrainian society's reaction to the war (since 2014) have generated key elements of societal resistance that are relevant to Europe as a whole.

The Belarusian Revolution has shown how a formerly passive, atomised society can develop a network of collective activities whereby people take care of each other.<sup>5</sup> The disregard of the Covid-19 waves and inaction by the Lukashenka regime initiated civic engagement and solidarity action to address the health crisis. Together with other initiatives – such as on women's rights – this formed a basis for civic resistance against rigged elections and a wave of social solidarity expressed in particular through female mutual empowerment and neighbourhood support.<sup>6</sup> A strong counter-point to brutal repression and masculinist authoritarianism was set up that – even if crushed by violence for the time being – can serve as an example for the whole of Europe.

Ukraine has seen another exemplary wave of civic engagement since February 2022, showing the importance and power of social solidarity in countering military violence. A thriving civil society was able to adapt within days from peacetime engagement to addressing wartime needs. Moreover, in addition to providing a sense of agency, Ukrainian civil society has shown the potential to develop a future vision through its important contribution to wartime resilience.<sup>7</sup>

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2 See e.g. P. Negura et al. 2021: Trust in Institutions, Social Solidarity, and the Perception of Social Cohesion in the Republic of Moldova in the Early Phase of the COVID-19 Pandemic. Comparative Southeast European Studies No.4

3 [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2021/653632/EXPO\\_STU\(2021\)653632\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2021/653632/EXPO_STU(2021)653632_EN.pdf) :21f.

4 S. Fischer/ J. Siegert 2021: Überleben in der Autokratie. Russlands Zivilgesellschaft unter Druck. Osteuropa Nr.8:206

5 O. Shparaga: <https://www.forum.lu/article/der-fall-belarus/?fbclid=IwAR0Q2YKU7db53eYlfagGzDroqD2S1NSrC5ajdOhhmIMjpP4esTsx5i1gTbQ>

6 Ibid. & I. Petz 2020: „Die Stimmung ist nicht dieselbe”. Protest und Protestkultur in Belarus. Osteuropa Nr.10-11

7 See Civil Society Manifesto 2022 (Lugano declaration) <https://manifesto.org.ua/eng>

On the negative side, we can also learn from Eastern Europe how civic space can be systematically closed, as is the case in Russia.<sup>8</sup> However, the phenomenon of shrinking civic space is not limited to Eastern Europe. If the European model of democracy, rights and peace is to prevail, the EU must ensure that civic space remains open and thriving inside the EU as much as in its neighbourhood.

### **Strengthening Resilience Within the EU Policy Framework**

With regard to its eastern neighbourhood, recent events have initiated a significant change in the EU's policy framework. While the future of the Eastern Partnership seems unclear, Moldova, Ukraine, and potentially also Georgia, have received a concrete perspective for EU membership. At the same time, Belarus has drifted away into Moscow-backed oppression, Azerbaijan is striving for an independent policy with little interest in enhanced partnership, while Armenia keeps up its struggle for democracy and stable statehood following the renewed war over Nagorno-Karabakh. Diminished civic capacities essential to starting a process of peacebuilding and recovery in Armenia and Azerbaijan – and crippling restrictions on civil society in place since 2015 in the latter – as well as continued mobilisation for conflict are all reasons for concern. As the war in Ukraine rages on, the political situation in the Eastern Partnership region is even more volatile and the need to strengthen societal resilience more obvious.

As part of the accession paradigm, three of the eastern neighbours together with Bosnia and Herzegovina have joined a number of states in south-eastern Europe where accession processes have been stalled for many years, as the EU suffered from enlargement fatigue and was distracted by Brexit. The enlargement paradigm as a whole therefore needs revision. To create a new dynamic, lessons need to be learned from previous enlargements, from the stalling of the process in south-east Europe, and from experience with the Eastern Partnership which has already enabled new integration pathways. A further stalled process and fragmented framework would risk a backlash and create opportunities for spoilers.

The Eastern Partnership as a regional framework for cooperation has faced challenges from recent conflicts and diverging political developments but cannot easily be discarded. To avoid further ruptures, it should ensure connectivity in its people-to-people dimension, put national political developments into perspective, and prioritise conflict transformation, peacebuilding and renewed regional cooperation. Civil society should play a key role here.

Inclusive thinking is essential as major threats – from climate change to disinformation, hybrid wars and authoritarianism – do not stop at EU borders and are not specific to candidate countries. While institutional frameworks differ, civil society can play a role in bridging gaps between EU and non-EU countries, old and new accession candidates, and the other eastern partners. It should be strengthened to play this role at a pan-European level. Eastern European civil societies (even in exile) play an important role and need to be kept engaged. For this to happen, space must be provided for regional civil society cooperation and support mechanisms must be extended. The strategic involvement of civil society will be crucial to the creation of renewed and revived enlargement and partnership processes in which the mechanisms of conditionality and compliance are supported by strengthened civil society monitoring and consultation.

When it comes to civil society's role in fostering societal resilience, particular attention should be paid to strengthening community-based, grassroots engagement and concrete experiences of solidarity. There is no need to start from scratch as instruments are already available and these could be expanded. Preference should be given to those which enable EU and non-EU cooperation within a joint framework and common objectives.

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8 S. Fischer/ J. Siegert 2021: 203

## Recommendations

- Provide space for an extended, Europe-wide civil society dialogue on the future of Europe as a values-based community, and support cooperation formats that encompass EU member states, the accession countries and neighbourhood countries, as well as exiled civil society actors from Eastern Europe. Consider the regional – and especially the peacebuilding – dimension of this dialogue for Eastern Europe.
- Widen the scope of existing EU programmes and initiatives that support civic engagement, such as the Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values (CERV) programme, strategic partnerships for capacity development of civil society organisations in the Eastern Partnership, the European Solidarity Corps, Erasmus+ Youth, Young EU ambassadors and the Dialogue on the Future of Europe, to increase cooperation with partner and accession countries, as well as regional cooperation in Eastern Europe and the Caucasus, and to take this to the local and community levels. These levels are decisive for strengthening a sense of civic agency and solidarity.
- Gender dimensions must be taken into account. Thus, new forms of community level engagement through solidarity projects, and support for community foundations, active educators and women's empowerment should also be enabled.
- To ensure continued feedback, monitoring and follow-up for dynamic and sustainable development, the strategic involvement of civil society actors should be enhanced in all thematic enlargement and cooperation policy processes.



**Daniela Mussnig**

Political scientist and director of the Vienna-based NGO IZ – Diversity, Dialogue, Education.

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