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#1: Introducing our new blog *Across the Caucasus*

By Jena-Cauc Team¹; JENA-CAUC: Resilience in the South Caucasus: prospects and challenges of a new EU foreign policy concept

10/10/2021

What is resilience?

Consolidated authoritarianism and [women's protests against governmental violence in Azerbaijan](#), the post-war crisis and [persistent civic initiatives in Armenia](#), the Georgian government's failure to contain the Covid-19 pandemic and [rights groups' lasting efforts for judicial reforms](#) – these seemingly unrelated developments all represent different manifestations of divergent state and societal resilience in the South Caucasus countries. Resilience, a highly contested buzzword for scholars and practitioners alike, is both an analytical and a normative concept. [Increasingly embedded in complexity thinking](#), some scholars have referred to resilience as the “[typical postmodern heroine](#).” Conventionally, resilience encompasses the capacities of states, societies, and communities to withstand current and future crises, mitigate risks, and accumulate experience in order to transform political and social challenges into opportunities. Thus, resilience is on the one hand about the reorganization of functions by retaining structures and identities, and on the other hand [about adaptation, transformation, and emergence of new trajectories](#).

Resilience, the European Union and the South Caucasus region

In the aftermath of the UK's Brexit referendum, on-going territorial conflicts, and humanitarian crises in the European neighborhood, the European Union (EU) integrated resilience [as a core theme](#) into its foreign policy goals, [beginning with its 2016 Global Strategy](#). Resilience is seen as “the ability of states and societies to reform, thus withstanding and recovering from internal and external crises.” The EU defines a resilient state as a “secure state,” and simultaneously underlines that resilience encompasses “all individuals and the whole of society.” According to the EU's 2016 Global Strategy, a resilient society features democracy, trust in institutions, and sustainable development. The Global Strategy emphasizes the importance of societal resilience and its strategic priority in its neighbourhood policy. This was also reiterated in the

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summer of 2021 when the Eastern Partnership initiative outlined [its post-2020 strategy that focused on recovery, resilience, and reform](#).

Resilience-building has slowly replaced a more ambitious but less effective agenda of neoliberal governmentability. It is highly politically relevant both for the EU's external governance and for the South Caucasus societies and region. According to the EU's approach to linear development, improving societal and state resilience is a precondition for building sustainable and competitive socio-political and economic structures. The EU's resilience-focused approach has the task to improve its tarnished image of an ineffective conflict and crisis manager in its neighbourhood. In theory, the new approach has a stronger focus on countries' domestic agencies, and is meant to be more supply-driven, tailor-made, and pragmatic.

Why study resilience?

Resilience has frequently faced criticism for its ["constructive ambiguity"](#) and vague conceptualization. Key questions that have often been omitted are 'whose resilience', 'resilience for whom' and 'against what'? Thus, aspects of operationalization and measurement have so far been under-reflected and under-studied, and further pioneer research is required. Consequently, our research team approaches these, [along with other more empirically oriented research questions](#), and opens up space for different research perspectives by drawing from various ontological and epistemological positions. Being aware of [the necessity for ontological learning](#), we look at resilience as a collective concept with multiple genealogies. While some analysts have declared it an ["impoverished notion of resistance compliant with the dictates of the neoliberal order"](#), others have underlined resilience's [potential of self-organization](#) that can lead to local realisation of social well-being and the fulfillment of a "good life." For the EU, resilience has become a new central concept of its regional governance in the neighbourhood regions as well as in its global framework. The practical implications of EU policy change in the South Caucasus and elsewhere still need to be explored and analysed.

How to study resilience?

To understand if and to what extent the EU's resilience agenda is viable and effective and in which regards the concept could be further re-thought, Jena-Cauc moves beyond an EU centred approach and underlines the necessity to understand both sides of interaction: an outside-in angle to examine changes in EU's policy agenda and an inside-out angle to examine domestic receptiveness of the new concept by the South Caucasus countries and societies. When doing so, we combine South Caucasus area studies with EU foreign policy analysis. Furthermore, we approach resilience through a multidisciplinary angle encompassing linguistics, political science, international relations and political sociology. Consequently, we



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study the EU's resilience agenda in various policy dimensions including societal resilience, governance resilience, security resilience as well as language resilience.

Our case studies

Minority languages and resilience

The role of language and more generally culture in helping members of minority communities to respond to disturbing events has rarely been investigated. In particular, in linguistics the concept of resilience has found little application so far. Within the Jena-Cauc project we propose an innovative approach to the concept of resilience to the field of linguistics with a case study on minority language speakers in Georgia. For our study, representatives of three large minority groups in Georgia will be interviewed using semi-structured questionnaires: Armenians, Azerbaijani and Chechens. All three speech communities tend to maintain their strong cultural identity, and relatively rarely engage in ethnically mixed relationships. The minority communities use their native language for everyday communication, and sometimes do not even acquire a basic knowledge of Georgian, which de facto excludes them from full participation in social and political activities. The goal of our case study is to give insights into the current language situation seen from the native speakers' viewpoint, and to testify whether language competence, attitude, and actual language use can benefit the resilience of minorities in the majority community. We also aim at developing the questionnaire into a research tool that can also be used for examining other minority communities in the South Caucasus.

Youth and 'epistemic resistance'

Another topic that also has so far not been related to resilience, yet provides a reference point for a critical analysis, is youth and youth groups, particularly those representing left ideologies (encompassing liberal-left as well as anti-liberal left ideas). The examined ideologies encompass a large spectrum including feminism, socialism, anarchism, and green ideology. While youth is not understood as a biological category that needs to be taught resilience, one of our projects focuses on how politically active young people in the South Caucasus have themselves built resilience since the early 2000s until today. Resilience is then approached as a tool to form epistemic resistance that helps challenge oppressive structures. Relating left youth's political and social marginalization to their own resilience potential, enables to understand resilience through a [post-neoliberal](#) and [decolonial lens](#), and focuses in particular on the aspects of new trajectories and societal transformation. Based on a combination of discourse theory and reflections on new materialisms, the project examines relevant political acts such as protests, strikes, public readings, among others; moments of dislocation; and critical ruptures, which have enabled ideology formation and production. The project aims to contribute to the scholarship of critical resilience study that recognizes the challenge to re-interpret resilience as a people's concept, and disconnects it from its neoliberal flavour, which frequently has negated the possibility for structural change.



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How to contribute to the *Across the Caucasus* Blog

The blog is open to anyone who is interested and informed in writing about contemporary developments in the Caucasus and the wider Black Sea and Caspian Sea region including but not limited to scholars, researchers, freelance writers, activists, artists, civil society members, and politicians. Young female researchers and researchers from the Caucasus countries are particularly encouraged to submit their articles. You will find a detailed list of possible topics and the blog guidelines on the website. Before you send your work to us, please make sure to familiarize yourself with our guidelines. If you are not sure whether your topic fits our thematic scope or have another question related to the blog, feel free to contact us at jenacauc@uni-jena.de and indicate “Across the Caucasus Blog” in the subject line.