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Whose Resilience? Resilience and Regime Strength in EU-Azerbaijan Relations

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1 Introduction

This edited volume refers to the importance of resilience in the Eastern Partnership (EaP) countries regarding fragilities, risks, and developmental potential. Indeed, having the right capacity to deal with these aspects seems highly beneficial for these states. However, this chapter argues that in states with an authoritarian regime, such as Azerbaijan, the interests and resilience of the government are not necessarily equal to the resilience and needs of society as a whole. In fact, strengthening the resilience of authoritarian states may lead to adverse effects and increase regime legitimacy, thereby undermining the potential of other parts of society to be resilient in terms of social, economic, and political well-being.

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The chapter therefore argues that ‘resilience’ as a policy concept can only meet its goal if the European Union (EU) cooperates with all the local actors that have a role in building up a country’s resilience. In partner states with restricted options for cooperation, such as authoritarian states, there is a risk that resilience is enhanced in a skewed way, in favour of governments. There are opposing interests in states with authoritarian regimes, reflected in regime resilience on the one hand, and social, political, and economic resilience on the other. The value of resilience as an overall concept in the EU’s external relations may thus be limited, as it cannot be applied universally without regard for regime type or other factors that distinguish the different partner states from one another. The chapter’s conclusion therefore echoes this volume’s call for a more differentiated approach towards the Eastern Partnership.

This chapter first assesses the intentions the EU has had with the concept of resilience and assesses the limits and contradictions of the notion in relations with authoritarian states. It then applies these ideas to the empirical case study of EU relations with Azerbaijan and, subsequently, shows why cooperation with civil society and other local actors would be crucial to foster society-wide resilience. Lastly, the concluding section reflects on the benefits and disadvantages of the EU’s approach towards authoritarian regimes in the Eastern neighbourhood in light of ‘resilience’ and addresses some considerations about the way forward.

2 Resilience in EU External Relations and in Regard to Authoritarian Regimes

The European Neighbourhood Review of 2015 states that the EU’s measures aim to “strengthen the resilience of the EU’s partners in the face of external pressures and their ability to make their own sovereign choices” (EC 2015, p. 4). This, of course, raises the question: whose choices? Who is ‘the state’? The different policy strategies do not seem to differentiate between regime types, nor take into account other aspects that make the countries in the neighbourhood fundamentally different from one another. This has important implications for the application of the concept because conflicting interests between different actors may hinder the strengthening of resilience as the EU envisaged it.

It would be useful to start with an inventory of the EU's general definition and objectives of resilience. The EU institutions have defined resilience as "the ability of an individual, a household, a community, a country or a region to withstand, to adapt, and to quickly recover from stresses and shocks" (EC 2013, p. 3). What is important is that this is not only aimed at the state level but particularly underlines the importance of resilience at "the individual level" too, which would be in line with the EU's "people-centred approaches" (EC 2013, p. 3). When looking at the objectives, then, the idea of resilience seems very much in line with older notions of capacity-building, stability in the neighbourhood, and poverty reduction. Indeed, in 2017, the EU held an open consultation to discuss the concept of resilience in its external relations (EC 2017b). There has been criticism that the concept is "essentially meaningless" and not innovative, and that it is therefore "necessary to put forward a common interpretation of the concept" (EC 2017b, p. 5). In response, the EU stressed that resilience is indeed not a new objective but that the concept does aim to lead to a review of cooperation methods and resources (EC 2017b, p. 5). One question that arises concerning the review of cooperation methods is whom the EU should cooperate with to enhance resilience—and indeed, whose resilience? The objectives mentioned in the different policy documents and strategies on resilience show that there can be various interests at play at a domestic level: some objectives need to be addressed at the state level and others clearly target the society at large, instead.

One of the key components of the EU's vision of resilience is economic growth and stability. Resilience in terms of the macroeconomy can be approached through cooperation at a state level. This is furthermore linked to the environment and energy security (DG NEAR 2018, p. 10; EC 2013, p. 3; 2015, p. 11). Certain aspects of the resilience strategy also target non-governmental societal actors, instead, such as the objectives of poverty reduction, a democratic society, and good governance, arguing that "local governments, communities and civil society stakeholders" should be more involved in the EU's efforts (EC 2017c, pp. 3–5). The 2017 consultation highlighted that "People should always be at the heart of all policies, even where the aim is to strengthen the resilience of states" (EC 2017b, p. 5). It should also be done in line with the United Nations'

development goals and be based on European standards on human rights and democracy (EC 2017b, p. 5). The EU acknowledges especially the role of civil society in building up states' resistance (e.g. EC 2013, p. 3). Additionally, the 2017 Consultation stressed that civil society organisations (CSOs) should even be involved in the design of policies (EC 2017b, p. 6). What is probably envisaged with this is that the individual level, emphasised in the EU's strategies, can be reached indirectly, through cooperation with local governments and CSOs. While this is, of course, a valid ambition, it is not necessarily realistic in a country like Azerbaijan, where these stakeholders are hindered to cooperate with the international community by the government. There is also a fundamental barrier to international cooperation in countries where the government has different interests than other groups in society, and where these local actors do not have access to policymaking or the implementation of international strategies.

2.1 Resilience in Authoritarian Regimes

What the earlier section has shown is that the EU's definition of resilience reaches beyond the state level and that cooperation with non-government actors will be necessary if countries are to be made resilient to a wider extent. If cooperation is limited or predominantly focused on the government, this will enhance the authorities' resilience but not that of the rest of society. Building on the literature on regime resilience, it can be understood that in authoritarian states this is problematic not only because of the lack of resilience of non-government segments. It is also problematic because enhancing a regime's resilience reinforces the ability of the government to suppress political opposition, to keep civil society in check, and to keep economic revenues in control of the close circle of elites. This goes against many of the objectives set out in the EU's resilience strategy. Especially if resilience in the Eastern Partnership would indeed be about increasing and speeding up the process of meeting European standards, as argued in the introduction to this volume, then facilitating the workings of authoritarian regimes cannot be the desired outcome. Indeed, there is a paradox between the aims of the resilience approach (as argued

in this book: to bring to light the weaknesses of these states' infrastructure and workings to allow to address these problems better) and—part of—the actual outcome that directly clashes with this objective. After all, making the government resilient makes it less likely to open up the power structures and to improve the governance system of a state.

This raises several questions: whom will the EU cooperate with to enhance resilience? How will the EU deal with hindrances to inclusive cooperation? And how will the EU solve the issue of conflicting interests within partner states?

The European Commission only explicitly referred to resilience in cooperation with authoritarian regimes once, in the joint communication from 2017:

The ENP works towards long-term social, economic, and political transformation which requires the building up of institutional capacities, working at different levels of civil society and with local and regional authorities as well as central government, tackling the entrenched interests of authoritarian elites and sectarian narratives and implementing security sector reform. (EC 2017c, p. 14)

This fragment subscribes the dichotomy between interests of elites and civilians. The EU's external resilience promotion strategy does emphasise the importance of democracy, good governance, and the combat against corruption, for resilience-building to be successful. Moreover, the EU fully understands how these aspects underlie any other dimensions of development (EC 2017c, p. 4). It also reiterates that all resilience-promotion efforts should be made taking into account democracy and human rights objectives. The intentions are thus certainly there—but, as with similar policies in the past, the real problem comes with the implementation of the policy. The case study on Azerbaijan later on in this chapter shows that implementing resilience-building linked to these values is very difficult in states with authoritarian regimes. The EU's efforts should be seen in light of its quest to promote a move towards 'good governance', with a clear purpose that is hard to criticise. However, it appears that the obstacles on the way, namely the governments of some partner states themselves, may have been overlooked. For instance, one

concrete way to implement the policy would be through cooperation with local governments and civil society (EC 2017c, p. 5). In Azerbaijan and other undemocratic states, cooperation with civil society is hindered, and local authorities are unlikely to support the proposed actions that include “strengthen[ing] the rule of law, broad-based inclusive growth (...), participatory decision-making and public access to information” (EC 2017c, p. 5).

Applying the idea of resilience-building to authoritarian states is thus highly problematic. The inherent paradox puts into question the relevance of the concept: it simultaneously aims to strengthen the state, but that very state might hinder resilience of the society and economy more broadly. To overcome this issue, and to assess to what extent resilience might be useful, we need to identify the clashes in interests between the different actors involved. There are clashing interests at two levels: first, between the regime and citizens, mostly in the areas of politics (democracy and human rights) and welfare provision; second, between citizens, the regime, and international actors, especially concerning economic reform and investments.

The clash of political interests between the regime and (many) citizens is evident: an increased resilience of society as a whole would imply a serious threat to non-democratic regimes. Democracy would mean that power would need to be shared and that the political system would become more inclusive. Respect for human rights would mean that the government could no longer oppress citizens who criticise the system. The EU’s objectives regarding democracy and human rights would therefore be undermined, rather than fostered, by increased regime resilience. Some of the policy documents do underline the importance of promoting these values and to work with society as a whole. However, this appears to be rather naive when looking at relations with Azerbaijan and other non-democratic states. The EU strategy has not clarified how such more inclusive approach could be materialised.

Regarding economic resilience, we also generally see a non-alignment of interests between authoritarian governments and many citizens, and between certain international actors and national interests as such. The authoritarian nature of regimes often results in a less equal distribution of wealth (Acemoğlu and Robinson 2006). The literature on the so-called

resource curse shows that particularly in states whose economy is largely based on natural resources, elites may end up enriching themselves, whereas large segments of society live in detrimental circumstances (Ross 2015; Petkov 2018, p. 38). As is shown in the following analysis, this indeed appears to be the case in Azerbaijan, too.

3 Applying Resilience to EU-Azerbaijan Relations

The earlier objectives for resilience promotion are coherent and aspirational on paper, but in practice, they are thus likely to face a number of challenges, in particular, in states with non-democratic governments. This section focuses on one case study, namely that of the EU's relations with Azerbaijan. Azerbaijan has been ruled by the regime of President Ilham Aliyev since 2003, and by his father, the late Heydar Aliyev, between 1993 and 2003. The Aliyev regime is generally classified as an authoritarian one (Bedford 2014; Hughes and Marriott 2015; Altstadt 2017), with the government relying largely on oil revenues and the narrative of stability and national independence, to maintain legitimacy (Bölükbaşı 2011; Guliyev 2013; see also Van Gils 2018). The EU has therefore engaged in democracy and human rights promotion ever since relations began in 1991—although many would argue that the values in promotion efforts have remained limited due to Brussels' own strategic interests in the country (Stewart 2009; Wetzel 2011).

In relations with Azerbaijan (official) cooperation is restricted to the government level. The case study shows the risks that the concept of resilience brings in terms of unintended consequences. The 2013 Resilience Action Plan speaks of “multi-actor partnerships and engagement”, highlighting the role of civil society and local authorities (EC 2013, p. 2). But if the aim is to strengthen the resilience of society as a whole, then the EU's (necessarily) selective cooperation with the regime cannot be helpful. This section unpacks some of the contradictions that exist between the EU's comprehension of ‘resilience’ in external relations and the actual implication in states such as Azerbaijan. This case study assesses the areas of political, societal, and economic resilience.

The three areas of political, societal, and economic resilience have been chosen because they correspond to the areas where non-governmental actors can have a degree of actorness to defend their interests. Weiss clarifies that there can be an overlap between the civil society, political society, and economic society (2017, p. 377), which means it may be somewhat artificial to distinguish between these three areas so clearly in this analysis, but it seems to be the best attempt at identifying what interests other than those of the government exist in Azerbaijan, and how the EU can tailor its resilience-building policies accordingly. The EU also refers to civil society actors, the political opposition, and economic actors, in their own policy documents—which means that the recommendations following from the analysis below fit within the typology used by the EU itself.

Social, political, and economic resilience are, here, therefore, seen as contrasting with regime resilience—which is used here to refer to the ability of the incumbent authoritarian regime to stay in power and to defend its interests, which are not necessarily in line with the interests of citizens and society as a whole. Of course, this dichotomy is not absolute: there could well be alignment and overlap between regime resilience and resilience of the political, societal, and economic society. However, in terms of broad power dynamics in Azerbaijan and the contrast between EU objectives and the current political reality in Azerbaijan, the resilience of these three domains is distinguished from overall regime resilience in this analysis. Actors in Azerbaijan who could contribute to the country's resilience in these three areas include civil society organisations, the political opposition, and non-governmental economic actors.

This analysis builds on policy documents, interview data, and secondary literature, to see how resilience applies in the three areas, for EU-Azerbaijan relations. Policy documents were assessed in two stages: first, using the online archives of the different EU institutions, documents were selected on the basis of their initial relevance (referring to Azerbaijan, resilience, or both), and in the second stage, these documents were scrutinised for their discussion of resilience or related concepts such as capacity-building or the specific three fields unpacked here. Interviews were conducted in different rounds of fieldwork in both Baku and

Brussels between 2014 and 2018. For reasons of confidentiality, all references to interviews have been anonymised.¹

Based on the information collected through these various sources, an assessment was made about resilience and interests of the different actors inside Azerbaijan: can contradictions and parallels in interests be identified? In case of contradictions, the aim was to unpack what these differing interests were and what the implications are for resilience-building.²

3.1 Societal Resilience: A Genuine, Unrestrained Civil Society

The first aspect contrasting regime resilience is societal resilience. Societal resilience is considered so important because it is the foundation for citizens' well-being and is also linked to the economic and political dimensions. For the EU, the main actors in bringing about societal resilience is civil society. EU policy documents on the neighbourhood seem to suggest two different roles for civil society organisations in resilience-building: CSOs as a means and as an end for resilience-building. The first role, as a means to resilience, is indirect: providing support to CSOs who themselves work on the strengthening of societal resilience, for instance, organisations that focus on resilience of citizens regarding security and natural disasters (EC 2018b, p. 61). In Azerbaijan, such CSOs could be for instance the civil society organisations that try to foster people-to-people contacts in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, and that try to build up trust between the Azerbaijani and Armenian citizens. The question is, of course, how CSOs that are under pressure themselves could do this: these organisations are themselves very vulnerable due to government oppression. As an example, in 2014, well-known civil society representatives Leyla and Arif Yunus were arrested and imprisoned on charges of 'treason' because

¹ Interviewees are referred to as either being affiliated with European (EU or other) institutions; the Azerbaijani opposition; the Azerbaijani authorities; or as independent experts who are not affiliated with either the EU, the Azerbaijani authorities, or the Azerbaijani political opposition.

² The analysis as such is thus mostly based on the interpretation of the author. Triangulation of arguments has been attempted to the greatest extent possible, but there were restraints due to the fact that 'resilience' is a relatively novel concept in the EU's policy towards the Eastern Partnership states, and not much has been published to date in relation to Azerbaijan.

of cooperating with Armenian civil society (RFE/RL 2014; see also interview with Azerbaijani political opposition affiliate 2, 2018). Their case immediately shows how the country cannot be made more resilient if the actors, who could achieve such resilience, are not resilient themselves due to being undermined by the Azerbaijani government.

What therefore seems so crucial is that civil society itself becomes more resilient, in the face of government oppression. The second role of CSOs in resilience-building as seen by the EU is thus a direct one. The staff working document accompanying the 2017 resilience in external action strategy emphasises that “A vibrant civil society and public debate are essential to build up consent for socio-economic and political reform and to build up trust in governmental institutions and their ability to manage crises” (EC 2017d, p. 10). This reference concerns the EU’s partners in general—without specifying what this means for civil society in countries where active suppression by the government takes place. The 2014–2020 framework again prioritises working with CSOs (EC 2017a, p. 13). In Azerbaijan, there is not much the EU can do to directly promote resilience of civil society and the role of civil society as anticipated in the EU’s strategies since 2013 cannot be implemented due to the nature of the regime.

Civil society is especially important in regard to good governance and the reduction of corruption (rather than democracy per se), which are crucial for a state’s resilience (Aliyev 2015b, pp. 2–13). At the same time, there needs to be some caution in relations with CSOs, due to the particular context of civil society in Azerbaijan and the post-Soviet region more broadly, which differs significantly from that of their West-European counterparts. There are three key critical notes to be made when assessing the potential of the EU’s cooperation with civil society to enhance societal resilience, related to restrictions and functioning of organisations, appeal to the wider society, and the values advocated by organisations.

First, independent and critical CSOs have been restricted in their workings by the government, and increasingly so in recent years (Aliyev 2015a, p. 320; Gahramanova 2009), including severe difficulties with the registration of organisations, and a near-ban on them receiving international financial support (Aliyev 2015a, p. 320). In 2018, the EU was the only international actor who still managed to direct some financial support to

CSOs in Azerbaijan (interview with European affiliate 2, 2018). There is, nevertheless, a large number of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in Azerbaijan, as in other former Soviet states, but not all of these are genuinely independent organisations. Aliyev describes how many of these “may only exist on paper” and others may be closer to the government than the name suggests—the so-called government-organised NGOs (GONGOs) (Aliyev 2015b, p. 86). In 2008, the government started its own funding of NGOs, essentially creating a large network of GONGOs (Aliyev 2015a, p. 230; see also Lutsevych 2013)—be it because they are directly related to the government or because due to financial needs they effectively become reliant on the regime (Aliyev 2015a, p. 325). This seriously reduces civil society’s resilience and the issue is difficult to counter since international funding is made near-impossible by the government. Additionally, for civil society as a whole, the system of corruption means that the majority of organisations has to engage with informal networks with the government (Aliyev 2015a, p. 322).

Second, there is a certain distrust of CSOs in the region, due to the socialist past (Paturyan and Gevorgyan 2014, p. 239), which implies that there is only limited participation of citizens in civil society organisations. As Aliyev argues, this is amplified through the continuous importance of ‘kinship institutions’, “making participation in civil society unattractive” (Aliyev 2014, p. 263). There are thus government restrictions but also self-restrictions when it comes to engagement in civil society. Lutsevych (2013) speaks of the formation of an “NGO-crazy” with a disconnect between NGOs and “the public at large”. Such a disconnect would prevent an expansion of “the democratic responsibility of citizens” (Lutsevych 2013). There would be a higher trust of CSOs among younger citizens (Paturyan and Gevorgyan 2014, p. 257), and indeed, engagement of international actors with youth movements and informal networks would increase the chances for a strengthened civil society (Lutsevych 2013). This is in line with the EU’s approach towards engaging with youngsters inside Azerbaijan (EC 2018a, p. 10).

Third, another issue with CSOs in Azerbaijan and other states in the Eastern Partnership is that not all organisations necessarily adhere to the same values as those which the EU is trying to promote and beliefs should be part of a resilient society. Scholars have described a rise in ‘uncivil

society’, referring to CSOs that promote an illiberal agenda with socially conservative values (Hug 2018, p. 1). Especially minorities and LGBTI citizens would be disadvantaged this way (Hug 2018, p. 1), which does not seem to benefit either an inclusive approach to cooperation or resilience of society as a whole. Since the EU is limited in its immediate promotion of values that could be seen as provocative or controversial by the Azerbaijani government (interview with European affiliate 2, 2018), it can only promote such values indirectly through, for example, cultural events. Naturally, its impact is less strong compared to a more direct approach.

Indeed, the issue with civil society in authoritarian regimes is that the state has the power to “set the contours of what is not the state”, in other words, to “define what is civil society” (Weiss 2017, p. 377). Civil society even risks to enhance regime resilience in authoritarian states, if these authoritarian regimes can apply several strategies to use civil society for its own legitimacy (Lorch and Bunk 2017). Maintaining a level of civil society can work in favour of the regime. First, civil society can be used as a façade for democracy (Lorch and Bunk 2017, p. 990)—which indeed may be partially the case in relations between Azerbaijan and the EU, for instance, in regard to the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum (CSF) that brings together selected CSOs from the Eastern Partnership states in Annual Conferences and through working groups. The CSF suggests that there can be input from non-governmental actors; but not all Azerbaijani CSOs can freely participate in this initiative, and generally there is an issue with GONGOs, while many genuinely independent NGOs and CSOs more broadly are hindered in their operation (interview with European affiliates 1, 2014). Moreover, those independent CSOs that are represented in the EaP CSF have complained that they are, in fact, not being heard by the EU (interview with independent expert 1, 2014).

Second, CSOs that do manage to go through the lengthy bureaucratic processes for registration are in a way forced to acknowledge the state structures by doing so; likewise, operating within the limits set by the state acknowledges the existence of these boundaries (Lorch and Bunk 2017, p. 990). CSOs are also a simple way for authoritarian regimes to channel and de-politicise “societal discontent” with the regime (Lorch and Bunk 2017, p. 990) and could potentially even be used to help

emphasise the regime's discourse (Lorch and Bunk 2017, p. 991). As shown by Bilgiç in the case study on Turkey (2018), the government can boost its resilience if it can 'produce consent' at the civil society level, especially if it can help to spread narratives about the 'national will' and can create the discourse that the government has the interests of society at heart (Bilgiç 2018, p. 264, 274). In the case of Azerbaijan, this is the discourse on national independence and national identity. This can explain the strategy of the Azerbaijani government to support GONGOS and to provide funding; to keep their support and to reduce influence of the EU by curbing the EU's funding for civil society organisations (interview with European affiliates 1, 2014).

Perhaps the most important consideration for the EU to make when designing its resilience strategy in relations with authoritarian regimes is that CSOs can help contribute to state outputs, particularly in the areas of welfare (Lorch and Bunk 2017, p. 991). This clearly links back to the first role that the EU has identified for CSOs, namely the instrumental one, whereby the EU wants to support CSOs that themselves aim to increase countries' resilience. If these CSOs indeed help achieve the government's outputs, it will enhance the regime's legitimacy based on performance.³ This suggests that the EU needs to be careful with 'indirect' resilience-building. Instead, it should consider to only support the strengthening of resilience of CSOs themselves—especially those organisations that belong to the genuine, non-government affiliated civil society.

So, for any of the eventual objectives regarding resilience to be achieved, it seems that a necessary condition is lacking at the moment, namely the resilience of actors who can bring about change and transformation inside states. Inclusivity implies incorporation of diverse views, across the manifold cleavages that exist inside Azerbaijan. Civil society could form the key to this but cooperation and support, in general, remain a delicate issue, with many civil society activists imprisoned. This will jeopardise any further steps and addressing some other dimensions of resilience,

³ Regime performance is one of the elements that can enhance regimes' legitimacy (Von Soest and Grauvogel 2017, p. 291).

including the political and economic ones, seems ineffective if the actors who could carry this change are left vulnerable and exposed themselves.

The EU should, therefore, re-assess its support to civil society. It should make sure that all of the CSOs participating in the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum are genuine and not GONGOs, and it should consider upping the competition with the government over funding, and ensure that the funding from Brussels is more appealing. Tolerating elements of disingenuous civil society could actually enhance the regime's resilience but without necessarily fostering societal resilience in a sustainable way—in the worst case, it could even undermine it.

All this suggests that the EU would need to have a wider scope to reach out to society. Cooperation with political movements, including youth movements and the political opposition, could be one way to achieve this.

3.2 Political Resilience: Values and Good Governance

The second aspect of resilience addressed in this analysis is political resilience. The political dimension in terms of resilience will be viewed here as the non-governmental part of the political domain (i.e. the political opposition) as well as the currently non-existent political aspects that the EU aspires to in light of its resilience strategy: democracy, good governance, and respect for human rights. Since the latter would imply that the current regime would be overthrown, this aspect of political resilience again refers to interests of the opposition rather than the government.

According to Weiss, the “political space” includes the political society and the civil society (Weiss 2017, p. 384). Civil society and the political opposition can both be seen as non-governmental actors, and in Azerbaijan, there is a significant overlap between the interests of much of the political opposition and the genuine civil society. However, Weiss argues for a “de-coupling” of activism from civil society (Weiss 2017, p. 378) which brings to light the different roles that these two groups can play in building up the country's resilience. Indeed, civil society organisations appear to be the link to society more broadly and are not part of the state, whereas the political movements and parties opposing the Aliyev

regime are the main contesters of the current power structures and want to become part of the state after a potential transition of power. Moreover, CSOs in Azerbaijan largely deal with non-controversial topics due to the government oppression (Aliyev 2015a, p. 320; Paturyan and Gevorgyan 2014, p. 258), which means this is a task left for the political opposition.

The EU's Single Support Framework for Azerbaijan mentions that the "overall objective" of the programme dimension looking at good governance and the strengthening of institutions is to "promote good governance, democracy, the rule of law, human rights, to enhance resilience to security threats, and to decrease the level of corruption" (EC 2018a, p. 10). Of course, many of these objectives will not be achieved with the current regime in place. There are therefore serious problems with the achievability of the EU's broader interpretation of resilience, with its references to democracy and good governance, in states like Azerbaijan. Cooperation with the political opposition could theoretically make society more resilient against the power of the Aliyev regime, but this is difficult in practice: the problem in Azerbaijan is that the political opposition has no representation in Parliament at all, which means that officially they are not opposition parties as such (interview with Azerbaijani opposition affiliate 1, 2018). This also rules out official cooperation with the European Union: naturally, for the EU to work with the opposition would directly clash with the interests of the government. The EU does consult the opposition but can only do so on an informal basis. As a result, while there can be informal input into the EU decision-making process, there are no mechanisms in place to ensure that the views of the political opposition are reflected in the EU's policies towards Azerbaijan (interview with Azerbaijani opposition affiliate 1, 2018). International cooperation also seems important to make the Azerbaijani political opposition a full-fledged actor. No financial support is possible because of the restrictions imposed by the government (interview with European affiliate 2, 2018). One aspect that EU cooperation could bring though is experience. Members of the opposition cannot obtain any formal experience in office because they are excluded from the political process. This also adds further issues in terms of forming a coherent, stable opposition that could form a genuine alternative to the current regime (interview with European affiliate 3, 2018; interview with Azerbaijani opposition affiliate 1, 2018).

This exclusion from the decision-making process highlights the problem that the government has a considerable degree of control over both civil and political society. Civil society activities are restrained by the administrative limits on CSOs; political society is restricted through arrests and harassment of political activists and journalists who are critical of the regime. Indeed, in Azerbaijan, the political opposition has been marginalised by the government over the past decades, and the high level of oppression means that there is very little space for action left (interview with Azerbaijani political opposition affiliate 2, 2018). Since civil society has a broad reach, whereas the political opposition has a narrower scope, the mobilisation of civil society can be much more effective in toppling authoritarian regimes (Weiss 2017, p. 391). This simultaneously explains why the control of civil society is so important: for authoritarian regimes, it is beneficial to reduce civil society's threat for political change; while at the same time securing regime legitimacy if CSOs can be instrumentalised to advocate in favour of the government. This makes it a worthwhile investment to tolerate a degree of civil society presence, and to even financially support government-friendly organisations. The political opposition, however, is nearly completely suppressed in Azerbaijan. One could conclude from this reasoning that perhaps the EU should indeed try to not over-rely on civil society and instead reconsider the political opposition as a serious partner if it wants Azerbaijan to become more resilient in the way it envisaged it.

Terrorism and radicalisation form another political aspect of the resilience approach (EC 2015, p. 12). Indeed, the government says it tries to tackle religious extremism, in line with broader European aims. Azerbaijan has both a Shi'a and Sunni population, with influence coming from Iran, Turkey, and the North Caucasus. The country is secular and Azerbaijan's Soviet past means that Islam is predominantly perceived a cultural, rather than an actual religious, dimension (Bedford 2009, p. 196). However, there are several movements operating within a religious context, challenging the Aliyev regime, such as the Muslim Unity Movement led by Taleh Bagirzade (RFE/RL 2017). The secular government says it maintains stability despite the presence of these different religious communities, by being tolerant towards all religions—the Shi'a and Sunni communities, as well as other religions practised in Azerbaijan. The EU and the

international community more broadly appear to be very supportive of the government's discourse on religious tolerance (see e.g. EU 2017e, p. 3).

Yet there are questions about the sincerity of this 'tolerance' as there are restrictions to religious practicing (Norwegian Helsinki Committee 2015), and it is accompanied with the persecution of religious activists (Working Group on Unified List of Political Prisoners in Azerbaijan 2019). Some have argued that the suppression of religious threats has also been politicised and that the government's narratives may also partially serve to legitimise its own power and to justify the arrest of religious opposition figures (interview with independent expert 2; see also Working Group on Unified List of Political Prisoners in Azerbaijan 2019). This again implies that the interests of the authorities do not necessarily align with the interests of society or even the resilience of the state as a whole and that it is a delicate balancing act to ensure that the strengthening of state resilience does not backfire. At the same time, it is possible that the role of religion in the state's resilience may change in nearby future, if religious movements come to play a more active part. The EU would need to consider which aspects of resilience-building to prioritise when there is competition between different dimensions of resilience: freedom and human rights, thus condemning the persecution of religious activists, or stability, thereby leaving more space for the government to intervene and curb actors that may pose a challenge to the regime.

As is the case with civil society, some have argued that the political opposition could also unintentionally contribute to regime resilience, when they are co-opted to facilitate easier control by the government (Albrecht 2005). The mechanisms through which the government could instrumentalise the political opposition are similar as for civil society. Tolerating a degree of opposition can present a democratic façade to the outside world, thereby securing international cooperation and funding. Domestically, it also allows to spread a democratic discourse, and allowing opponents to mobilise themselves through oppositional movements creates a form of channelling, which makes it easier to control social dissent and potential dissent among the elites (Albrecht 2005, pp. 391–392).

In Azerbaijan, this is so far not yet the case; however, the political opposition has no representation in Parliament whatsoever, and it does not have any formal role either within the domestic political system or in rela-

tions with international actors. This argument does have implications for the EU's future actions; however, the political opposition has requested the EU to facilitate such limited cooperation, through a formal dialogue with the government (interviews with Azerbaijani political opposition affiliates 1 and 2, 2018). Albrecht's analysis suggests that this could backfire, so as with the other aspects of the EU's resilience strategy, there would need to be careful consideration for the consequences and potential unintended outcomes of establishing any formal contacts between the political opposition and the government. Again, this suggests that the way to strengthen the political resilience best is not through facilitating any option but by strengthening the political opposition in its own right.

Lastly, despite the problems with democracy and human rights in Azerbaijan, the EU has chosen to be pragmatic and to engage with the government. It says to prefer engagement over non-engagement, even when this means a form of legitimisation of the government and a weakening of the political opposition. Regarding the aspect of good governance, a distinction should be made between three forms of state capacity that could be enhanced through the EU's resilience approach: administrative, extractive (resources for public goods), and coercive (the security apparatus) (Hanson 2018, pp. 20, 24). It seems beneficial for political and societal resilience if the state capacity could indeed be increased, among others with EU support—but the EU should be cautious about which elements of the state capacity are increased through cooperation, because regime capacity may be translated into regime stability (Hanson 2018, p. 30). Likewise, elections can paradoxically contribute to the strengthening of regime resilience (Croissant and Hellmann 2018, p. 9), which implies that the EU should reconsider some elements of its election observation activities that have been criticised, including installing longer-term observation missions and expressing more outspoken criticism on election flaws.

3.3 Economic Resilience: Stability, Sustainability, and a Fair Redistribution of Wealth

The third dimension covered here is economic resilience. The European Neighbourhood Review sets out that economic resilience can be strengthened through the enhancement of 'economic governance' and 'fiscal sta-

bility', support to "structural reforms for improved competitiveness and inclusive growth and social development" (EC 2015, p. 7). This logic may work out well in states with an inclusive political system but may be problematic in a country where the governing actors have different priorities. For instance, the EU's 2013 Action Plan for resilience in crisis-prone countries views resilience mostly in terms of security and natural disaster, as do most documents until 2016, but it acknowledges that resilience to these aspects is related to "the multiple, interlinked causes of poverty, fragility and vulnerability" (EC 2013, p. 1). Poverty in Azerbaijan, however, cannot be seen separately from the self-enriching Aliyev regime.

According to the EU, economic resilience in Azerbaijan could also be achieved through economic diversification (EC 2017c, pp. 5–6), and in recent years, the EU has emphasised that this is a priority for Azerbaijan (EC 2016, p. 8). Diversification allows for a reduced reliance on energy revenues, which is particularly important in light of fluctuating oil prices. It could simultaneously enhance the country's competitiveness in other areas such as agriculture and transport—in line with the EU's objectives of liberal economic reform in the Eastern Partnership states. The government in Baku has been slow to adjust to this advice from international financial institutions, however. Only after the economic downturn of 2015 did the government start substantial efforts to diversify the economy (interview with independent expert 3, 2018). While according to the neoliberal economic logic it is obvious that Azerbaijan's economic resilience can be increased through such reforms, there are several contradictions in place between economic diversification and regime interests. First, there has been very little investment in education (Guliyev 2018), while both the domestic political opposition and international actors point out that this would be a necessary element to strengthen the economy (interview with independent expert 3, 2018; Bölükbaşı 2011, p. 219). The EU recognises that economic development is being held back by a "mismatch between the skills supplied by the education system and those demanded by the economy" (EC 2018a, p. 6). But with little investments in this sector, there is no coherent and sustainable strategy of the government that could facilitate such resilience.

Second, investments in health care and general welfare have remained low too, resulting in social insecurity and making citizens vulnerable,

while inequality has stayed high in the past decade and the elites close to the government have enriched themselves (Hughes and Marriott 2015, p. 33; EC 2014, p. 12; UNDP 2018).

Third, arguably, there are clashing interests between some international economic actors and the state as a whole. Azerbaijan has been under substantial international pressure to reform the economy to a liberal market economy and to enter the World Trade Organization. There has been some resistance to this by the government itself, arguing that the country should be protected from international competition until its economy has grown stronger. Comparisons with other post-Soviet states that did open up their markets have been made, to show how rapid integration in the global market could be detrimental to Azerbaijan's economy. Opportunities for investment might mostly benefit international investors rather than national economic actors that could carry long-term sustainable economic development. But even at a domestic level, the only national actors who may have sufficient resources for investments and to benefit from an opening up of the economy would be the regime and the close circle of elites around it, rather than society as a whole. The EU stresses the role of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in the build-up of the economy, but key infrastructure in Azerbaijan is owned and controlled by either the state (public) (World Bank 2017) or individuals in and close to the regime (private) or otherwise by international companies, particularly the oil sector. This is a very different economic reality than the EU knows back at home. Again, this means that economic resilience through a liberalisation of the economy and through the workings of SMEs could only be achieved if the main political structures and related structures of ownership are changed, first.

Economic diversification will also necessitate a reform of the tax system. Authoritarian regimes tend to have lower taxes, operating like 'rentier states', because the provision of welfare and other goods are often not seen as a priority (Gilley 2017, p. 453)—certainly not in Azerbaijan. In a country that has seen considerable income from oil revenues in the past decade, tax income is only 12% of the GDP (EC 2013, p. 15) and economic inequality is to a great extent the result of political decisions. Moreover, in countries where energy resource extraction is largely in the hands of the state, taxation tends to be of lesser importance since the

energy revenues can provide the funds for public goods (Gilley 2017). The drop in oil prices leading to the economic downturn after 2015 affected the Azerbaijani government's ability to provide public goods—which can pose a threat to the regime since regime performance is an important source for regime legitimacy (Chang and Wu 2016). This implies that along with supporting a diversification of the economy as such, the EU and other international actors should prioritise a revision of the Azerbaijani tax system. This way the strengthening of the economy overall does not lead to a reduced economic resilience of citizens through the further diminishing of public goods. Indeed, several EU documents emphasise the need for a tax system reform and increased transparency (e.g. EC 2013, 2016, 2017e), but without specifying how this could be concretely implemented and how it could be ensured that the reforms would benefit society as a whole.

The problem with the redistribution of wealth in energy-based economies becomes particularly apparent when looking at recent economic investment, and the large infrastructure projects that the Azerbaijani government has undertaken with the aim of becoming a regional transport hub. The developments of these 'links' in the Belt and Road Initiative are supported by the EU (e.g. EC 2017b, p. 15; 2018a, p. 5) and could potentially make a significant contribution to Azerbaijan's economy through the creation of jobs in the construction sector and the collection of transit taxes once completed. However, in Azerbaijan, the jobs in large infrastructure projects are as a rule insecure and are not coupled to any form of social protection (interview with Azerbaijani political opposition affiliate 1, 2018). Furthermore, subcontracting to companies owned by people close to the Aliyev regime and money laundering mean that there is another missed opportunity for sustainable economic development that would benefit the society as a whole. Overall, this suggests that the elites will receive economic benefits from these projects; but that the trickle-down effect will be minimal and that this will only reinforce the economic disparities that exist in Azerbaijan, rather than building up the country's economic resilience.

Particularly economic resilience is thus a very complex concept that could benefit citizens but that could simultaneously enhance the regime's legitimacy, which in turn, could be argued, is not necessarily in

the citizens' interest. Economic diversification could potentially lead to two different types of resilience: societal resilience, if a larger share of the population can obtain an income with a more secure character, less reliant on energy revenues; and also regime resilience, since more sustainable jobs would reduce the threat of social unrest. The EU supports economic diversification in Azerbaijan as well as the country's ambitions for becoming a regional transport hub but if any additional tax revenues from these initiatives would not be redistributed fairly, and would be controlled by the government circles, it is doubtful that there will be benefits for the broader society.

4 Conclusion

Based on this brief analysis of EU-Azerbaijan relations, it could be argued that resilience has potential to help the EU achieve certain objectives in the Eastern Partnership states. The case study underlined the importance ascribed by the EU to good governance, as it showed how a lack of good governance can hinder the development of different dimensions of resilience. However, there are several potential pitfalls that Brussels needs to be cautious of, one of them being the danger of unintentionally strengthening authoritarian regimes in the neighbourhood. The main question that this chapter has tried to address is, therefore, whose resilience will be built up with the EU's current approach?

If resilience is seen as a way to enhance stability in the neighbourhood, with the objective of also guaranteeing the EU's own security (EC 2017c, p. 2), then the current application of the concept seems sufficient. It allows for the EU to cooperate with governments to continue the objectives of previous policy concepts, such as capacity-building, stability, and poverty reduction. If the aim of resilience reaches beyond the state level, however, and genuinely wants to reach society as a whole (EC 2017b, p. 6), then a problem occurs in some of the neighbouring states: this approach necessarily requires inclusive cooperation, but in a non-inclusive governance system such as that of Azerbaijan, this is not attainable. This chapter has, indeed, shown that when cooperation is necessarily restricted to working with governmental actors, as is often the case in states with

authoritarian regimes, that resilience-building can become skewed in favour of these governments, thereby overlooking and possibly even undermining other actors in society. If anything, increased resilience of authoritarian regimes may lead to enhanced regime legitimacy and strengthened capacities to oppress domestic resistance against the authorities.

The complexity of the implementation and consequences of resilience-building are caused by the inevitable clash of interests between authoritarian regimes and other actors within such states; as well as possible contrasting interests between international and domestic actors. The EU's response to the 2017 Consultation, stating that resilience is indeed not a new notion but that it would allow for a review of modes of cooperation (EC 2017b), is promising, if it results in an actual review of how to make cooperation more inclusive of all societal actors, including those that may have opposing views to partner governments.

The inherent contradictions of resilience-building in authoritarian regimes fit within the broader context that was mentioned in the introduction to this volume: the differentiated approach to the Eastern Partnership needs to be revised, based on "specific challenges for each country". There cannot be one resilience strategy for the EU's external action; or even for the Eastern Partnership, because regime type must be taken into account in order to avoid any adverse effects of the concept. A critical assessment of the 'audience' of such review and policy framework is needed: democratic and non-democratic regimes in the Eastern Partnership cannot be viewed in the same way and cannot be subjected to the same policies, if the objectives really are to transform these states in line with European standards. The aim of good governance is certainly applicable to all external relations; however, the implementation phase requires much more adjustments. The EU has acknowledged this need for "tailor-made approaches" in its own policy strategy and stresses that it is up to "practitioners and local actors to develop context-specific working definitions" (EC 2017c, p. 23). It also suggests that different EU institutions and Member States can address the issue "as an integral part of its political dialogue" (EC 2017c, p. 23). Again, however, while this recognition seems very reasonable on paper, there is no specification about how concretely this could be brought into practice if there is resis-

tance from local authorities against the workings of local actors and little constructive engagement in political dialogues with the EU.

A few concrete recommendations that could perhaps be made on the basis of this case study of EU-Azerbaijan relations are the following. First, in regard to societal resilience, the EU should mainly focus on direct resilience-building of civil society, less so on indirect support to CSOs who in turn aim to enhance other aspects of resilience. In countries with authoritarian regimes, the latter could undermine civil society's efforts and may even provide an opportunity for authoritarian governments to instrumentalise CSOs for their own gain, especially if those governments create a network of GONGOs.

Concerning the dimension of political resilience, careful attention should be paid to the role of political opposition movements and the EU should try to find a way to work more intensively with the political opposition including youth movements. If the EU cannot provide financial support to the opposition, because of government restrictions, then at least it can try to formalise the mechanisms for their input in the policy-making process, and by facilitating opposition members to gain political experience. The EU's external resilience promotion strategy explicitly states that multiple levels should be involved, including civil society (EC 2017c, p. 23). It would be beneficial if political opposition movements could be involved in similar ways, for example through a mechanism mirroring the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum. This would allow some form of formalised input into the decision-making process.

Lastly, for the aspect of economic resilience, the EU should continue to try working with SMEs and adopt a more critical stance regarding corruption and money laundering. The European Parliament already does this (see e.g. EP 2018) but the message could be more influential if it would come from the European Commission and the European External Action Service (EEAS) as well. Of course, the EU's space for manoeuvre is limited since this is a mostly internal affair of Azerbaijan, and taking a more critical stance may affect the EU's economic and other strategic interests. The plea for a differentiated approach to resilience therefore also leads back to a much broader dilemma of the EU: principles or pragmatism? The introduction of new concepts does not seem to overcome this dilemma but only creates yet another situation in which the dilemma is

manifested. In the states with authoritarian or semi-authoritarian regimes, the actors who are supposed to carry the resilience-building, notably civil society, the political opposition, and non-governmental economic actors, need to be made more resilient themselves, first. Although the EU says it wants to be pragmatic and choose engagement over disengagement with regimes, more options also need to be identified to enable parallel cooperation with both the government and civil society and the political opposition. If not, only the objectives targeting the state level can be implemented, not those aimed at citizens and society as a whole.

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