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Published online: 14 May 2023.

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Resilient states vs. resilient societies? The 'dark side' of resilience narratives in EU relations with authoritarian regimes: a case study of Belarus

Giselle Bosse[a] and Alena Vieira[b]

[a]Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Maastricht University, Maastricht, Netherlands; [b]Centro de Investigação Ciência Política, Departamento de Ciência Política, University of Minho, Braga, Portugal

ABSTRACT

The present article maps and analyses the different meanings of the EU's resilience narratives in its neighbourhood policy towards authoritarian regimes. While a large part of the existing literature has placed an emphasis on the role of resilience in EU foreign policy more generally, the specific use and representations of resilience in EU policy towards authoritarian regimes remains ill-explored. However, it is specifically in the context of the EU's relations with authoritarian regimes, that references to resilience, and especially 'state resilience', are highly problematic. Focusing on the EU's neighbourhood policy and the case of Belarus, we present a discourse analysis of the different uses of the term resilience in the official discourses of key EU institutions. In a first-order critique, we examine how the EU's narratives construct resilience, and in particular for whom, what, when, where, and why. We show that the EU's resilience discourses are inherently state-centric and present highly contradictory goals of resilience-building. In a second-order critique, we demonstrate the problematic political implications of the EU's usage of the term resilience, including the omission of 'everyday forms of resilience and resistance' from the EU's narratives.

1. Introduction

Resilience, and especially the support for the development of resilient societies and resilient states, has emerged as one of the most important goals of EU foreign policy over the past decade. Nowadays, resilience discourse and its assumptions, labels and categories, function as central narratives used by the EU to describe and explain its foreign policy goals. Resilience discourses feature most prominently in the EU's European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), where building state and societal resilience are regarded as one of the key strategic priorities of the EU (European Union Global Strategy 2016).

Given the rise of resilience discourse in EU foreign policy, a number of scholarly works have engaged with the topic over the past years, examining the EU's 'resilience turn' in foreign policy more generally (Juncos 2017; Joseph and Juncos 2019; Bendiek 2017; Wagner and Anholt 2016; Korosteleva and Flockhart 2020), with regard to its impact on the role of the EU in the world (Tocci 2020; Tonra 2020) or in the specific context of the EU's policies towards countries in the

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CONTACT Alena Vieira ✉ alena.vieira@eeg.uminho.pt 🖅 Centro de Investigação Ciência Política, Departamento de Ciência Política, University of Minho, Braga, Portugal

Mediterranean (Badarin and Schumacher 2020; Anholt and Sinatti 2020), the Eastern Partnership (Petrova and Delcour 2020; Rouet and Pascariu 2019), or sub-Saharan Africa (Joseph 2014).

While existing scholarship does already critically engage with the meaning of resilience in the EU's foreign policy discourse (e.g. Joseph and Juncos 2019), the deeply problematic meaning and usage of the notion of resilience in the EU policies towards authoritarian regimes is hardly addressed. Building state resilience in the context of authoritarian leadership is, however, highly counter-productive because of the inherent contradictions between societal and state resilience in author-itarian contexts and its potential effects on the resilience and consolidation of authoritarian rule. The EU, for its part, appears largely unaware of the problematic usage of its resilience discourse vis-à-vis authoritarian regimes, including the 'risks that the concept of resilience brings in terms of unin-tended consequences' including enhancing regime legitimacy and strengthening capacities to oppress domestic resistance' (Van Gils 2019, 453, 469).

The purpose of this article is to engage in a discourse critique of the EU's resilience narratives in its policies towards authoritarian regimes in its neighbourhood. We examine the case study of Belarus, often regarded as the last dictatorship in Europe, to explore and illustrate the various narratives of resilience in the EU's policy. We specifically aim at describing and dissecting the central terms, labels, assumptions and roots of the EU's resilience discourse. Our goal is further to reflect on the political consequences of the knowledge production of 'resilience' in the context of EU policy towards authoritarian regimes, and the Belarusian dictatorship in particular, *inter alia* by drawing on Chandler's work on resilience as the governance of complexity (Chandler 2014).

We argue that the EU's resilience discourse is profoundly unhelpful in its policies towards authoritarian regimes. The usage of the term resilience, especially with regard to state resilience, remains unreflective. Instead, a 'one size fits all' approach is used to address all of the EU's neighbourhood countries. In the context of authoritarian regimes, as illustrated in our case study on Belarus, the EU's resilience discourse has a potentially damaging effect on 'everyday forms of resilience and resistance' and is thus highly counterproductive with regard to EU democracy promotion efforts.

2. Discourse analysis: examining resilience for whom, what, when, where and why

The analytical approach employed in this study draws on Meerow and Newell's analytical framework (Meerow and Newell 2019) of the 'five W's' that allows critical 'thinking through resilience' for whom, what, when, where, and why'. It falls broadly under the label of discourse analysis, as a form of critical theorizing that aims at illustrating and describing relationships between textual and social processes. Discourse analysis focuses on the 'politics of representation', namely the political implications of adopting one mode of representation or narrative over another. Discourse analysis, which covers a large and diverse field of analytical approaches, draws on a shared set of theoretical under-standings including the assumption that language is constative or productive or meaning, the assumption that discourses can be regarded as structures of signification that construct social realities, the assumption that discourse is 'productive' of subjects, in the sense that it 'authorizes' subjects to speak and act, it stipulates what legitimate forms of knowledge, practices or policies are, and designates what is 'common sense' within social or historical settings (Dunn and Neumann 2016). Discourse analysis also draws on the assumption that discourse is exclusionary and can 'silence' other modes of representations, understandings or legitimate actors, while at the same time it is assumed that discourses require constant (re-)articulation, which in turn creates possibilities for change. Thus, adopting an interpretative rather than a causal logic, the present article aims to unearth and illustrate, through discourse analysis, the EU's different usages and representations of resilience in its neighbourhood policy, and towards the authoritarian regime in Belarus in particular, and to present a critique of unacknowledged assumptions, labels and silences in the EU's resilience discourse.

The discourse analysis is based on two stages of critique (Jackson 2007). First, a critique of the EU's resilience discourse 'from within', based on the identification of key narratives, internal contradictions and silences. And second, a critique of the EU's resilience discourse 'from outside', focusing on how the EU's discourse on resilience compares to alternative usages of the term and a critique of its usage towards authoritarian regimes. The first-order critique involves a close examination of texts representative of the EU's resilience discourse in the context of the EU's neighbourhood policy and specifically vis-à-vis Belarus, with special attention to the internal contradictions, mistakes or misconceptions of the EU's resilience discourse allowing to highlight events, perspectives or representations that the discourse fails to acknowledge and to expose the contested nature of the resilience in the EU's policies towards Belarus. Each text is examined for the labels, categories, assumptions, narratives, metaphors, and arguments employed with regard to the concept of resilience. We adopt Meerow and Newell's analytical framework (Meerow and Newell 2019) of the 'five W's' that allows critical "thinking through resilience" for whom, what, when, where, and why'. The 'five Ws' of resilience 'shape how resilience is operationalized and mapped over time and space' (Meerow and Newell 2019, 310). While the term 'resilience' has been adopted by a wide array of disciplines including International Relations and EU studies scholarship, the general lack of clarity with respect to its meaning has been raising the issue of its use for academic analysis. Its extremely frequent use by policymakers, including in the EU, however, underscores the necessity for academic enquiry into the politics of resilience, including the intentional decisions and unintentional consequences of the usage of the term.

What do the 'five Ws' imply? Examining *resilience for whom* involves asking whose vision of resilience prevails, who is set to benefit and lose from a particular construction of resilience. Who is included and whose resilience prioritised, who excluded and who takes such decisions and draws the boundaries (Meerow and Newell 2019, 317). *Resilience of what to what* focuses on which 'disturbance' is prioritised for a policy intervention, such as climate change, terrorism or military attack, and which parts of infrastructure or policy areas are going to be made more resilient, and if the focus is on specific or general threats and responses (Meerow and Newell 2019, 318). *Resilience for when* relates to the temporal scale of resilience building, whether the goal is to build resilience to short-term disruptions or long-term stress, and if interventions focus on reacting to past events or anticipating future threats (Meerow and Newell 2019, 318). *Resilience for where* pertains to spatial extent and scale, which area or region is prioritised over others and where boundaries are being drawn (Meerow and Newell 2019, 318–19). Examining *why resilience* is promoted draws attention to the goal of an intervention and if it is to 'improve adaptive processes generally, achieve a certain outcome, or both', if the goal is 'system recovery' and reflecting on the desirability of a return to the status quo (Meerow and Newell 2019, 319).

The second-order critique (Jackson 2007, 397) aims at reflecting on the broader political and ethical consequences of the narratives and representations of resilience, which are enabled through the EU's discourse. An emphasis is placed on illustrating how the EU's resilience discourse structures accepted knowledge, common sense and 'legitimate' policy responses vis-à-vis authoritarian regimes and societies in the neighbourhood, which actors are stipulated authoritative and legitimate, and how the EU's discourses on resilience compare to core understandings and conceptualisations of resilience.

The analysis draws on official documents published by EU institutions, which are assumed to be actors holding authority or are authorised speakers of the dominant narratives on resilience by the EU. Primary units of analysis and data for this research are joint communications by the Commission (COM) and the High Representative (HR), European Council and Council of the European Union Conclusions, as well as European Parliament (EP) Resolutions. All official documents that partly or entirely target the EU's neighbourhood and Belarus were consulted between 2010 (first uses of the term resilience in EU official discourses) and October 2020. We focus on 20 texts, four from the Commission/HR, eight from the Council of the European Union, four from the European Council, and four from the European Parliament (EP). The early documents address the EU's neighbourhood

countries more generally, including Belarus, while later documents formulate specific policy towards the country. The reliance on official documents allows an in-depth analysis of the different types of EU resilience discourse articulated by different EU institutions across time, which is in line with the discourse analysis approach adopted for this study. In order to demonstrate the intrinsic connection between official discourse and policy practice, and to address the limitations of the analysis of official discourse, we also discuss examples of the implementation of the EU's resilience narratives in policy practice in EU relations with the Belarusian regime. We discuss the EU's resilience narratives of different EU institutions and chronologically for each institution, which allows us to trace relevant nuances in resilience discourses across institutions and also over time. The official communication from the Commission and the High Representative are grouped together in a first discussion, as the majority of documents issued represent joint communications. Both Council and European Council conclusions as well as EP resolutions are grouped in a second discussion, as the former represents the intergovernmental and the latter the supranational institutional dimension of EU official discourse in external relations.

3. Resilience narratives in EU policy towards its neighbourhood and Belarus

3.1. The discourses by the European commission and the high representative

During the first years following the launch of the ENP, resilience did not feature prominently in the EU's official policy discourse. The Commission's first Communication on the EU's approach to resilience dates back to 2012, mainly focusing on building resilience in sub-Saharan Africa, while also mapping, for the first time, the EU's broader approach to support populations at risk to 'withstand, cope with and adapt to repeated adverse events and long-term stress' (European Commission 2012, 2), especially to natural disasters. While the goal is to increase the resilience of vulnerable individuals, households and communities (European Commission 2012, 5), the EU places a clear emphasis on 'national policies and planning' in resilience-building (European Commission 2012, 2). Community-based, bottom-up projects are also recognised, but local community or actors feature as 'feeding into national and regional governmental policies' (European Commission 2012, 9) rather than representing an agency in resilience-building. The overall script/programme of resilience-building, including its goals, is assumed to be fully determined at EU level with the EU Agenda for Change, together with EU member states and humanitarian and development actors (European Commission 2012, 6).

In the 2015 Review of the ENP, resilience features more prominently, but still not as a priority. The Communication still identifies stabilisation of EU neighbourhood countries as its main political priority, concomitantly fostering the EU's own stability (European Commission and HR 2015, 2, 3–6). The measures set out in the 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'. Despite the centrality of 'external pressures' to which resilience should be developed, the Communication predominantly focuses on addressing domestic 'sources of instability across sectors', including security, poverty, inequality, corruption, weak economic and social development as 'roots of instability, increasing vulnerability' (European Commission and HR 2015, 3–4). Among sectors prioritised for building resilience are effective justice systems and the rule of law, economic governance and modernising economies, energy policy as well as security-sector reform, border protection, tackling terrorism and crisis management and migration. Resilience features specifically in the context of energy security and security threats (European Commission and HR 2015, 11–14). Resilience is thus closely associated with stabilising and reforming state institutions and policy, with 'resilience-building' and 'stabilisation' being used almost interchangeably, and a strong linkage being created between 'hard' security such as conflict, crime or terrorism and resilience. The Communication emphasises 'stronger partnerships' and 'allowing a greater sense of ownership' (European Commission and High Representative HR 2015, 4). The focus here is almost exclusively on

governments of partner states and EU member states as co-owners of EU policy and 'relevant national policies, strategies and institutions in third countries' (European Commission and High Representative HR 2015, 14). Civil society is only mentioned twice in the document, with whom 'deeper engagement' is envisaged (European Commission and High Representative HR 2015, 4) and who 'should be supported further', inter alia by developing the capacities of civil society professionals and leadership in the neighbourhood' (European Commission and High Representative HR 2015, 6), thus emphasising the role of civil society elites as beneficiaries rather than active co-owners. Authoritarian regimes are not addressed explicitly in the Communication, which recognizes that 'not all partners aspire to EU rules and standards' and stresses the need for 'more differentiated partnerships' to 'reflect different ambitions, abilities and interests' and 'wishes of each country concerning the nature and focus of its partnership with the EU' ((2015), 2, 4).

In their 2017 Joint Communication on a Strategic Approach to Resilience in the EU's external action, the Commission and HR no longer emphasise stability but instead place all focus on fostering resilience, especially in the EU's neighbourhood. Strengthening 'state and societal resilience' is regarded as a response to a 'more connected, contested and complex global environment'. The goal of strengthening resilience in partner countries is to 'sustain progress in the transformational agenda the EU has set itself' and to 'increase the impact of EU external action', thereby strengthening 'resilience within the Union itself' in response to a 'changing global environment' (European Commission and High Representative HR 2017, 2). Resilience is viewed not as an end but a means to 'progress towards democracy, peace and security' (European Commission and High Representative HR 2017, 23). The Communication underlines that the EU's definition of resilience has evolved over time, from 'the ability of an individual, a household, a community, a country or a region to withstand, adapt and quickly recover from stresses and shocks' to a broader conceptualisation of resilience as 'encompassing all individuals and the whole of society' that features 'democracy, trust in institutions and sustainable development, and the capacity to reform' (European Commission and High Representative HR 2017, 3). Despite this broader definition, the Communication still highlights the adaptability of states and societies 'in order to sustain progress towards national development goals' and the need to strengthen the 'capacity of a state' in the face of 'significant pressures to build, maintain or restore its core functions' (European Commission and High Representative HR 2017, 3). Implementation is to focus on sectoral policy dialogue and the quality of governance and administration in all public policy domains, including reform of the security sector, strengthening the rule of law, inclusive growth and employment or sound macroeconomic policies (European Commission and High Representative HR 2017, 5–6). The EU's focus on the state level and the prescriptive reforms of particular policy sectors stands in some contradiction to the recognition that 'resilience is context-specific' and that EU support should be tailored to empower societies to 'identify and solver their own problems' (European Commission and High Representative HR 2017, 23). Local governments, communities, and civil society stakeholders will be 'involved' in building resilient societies (European Commission and High Representative HR 2017, 5). Authoritarian regimes are only mentioned once when the EU's approach in practice is outlined, including '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' (European Commission and High Representative HR 2017, 14).

Some of these narratives on resilience return in the 2020 joint communication by the Commission and the HR in early 2020. The EaP goals are defined as 'increasing the stability, prosperity, and resilience of the EU's neighbours', and to 'build an area of democracy, prosperity, stability and increased cooperation on common values' whereby the respect for human rights is 'an essential element of resilient, inclusive and democratic societies' (European Commission and High Representative HR 2020, 1). This new approach will 'contribute to building a stronger Europe in the world' (European Commission and High Representative HR 2020, 17). Key instruments to achieve these goals are differentiation and ownership. Sectoral dialogues with Belarus are mentioned as

examples of EaP achievements, alongside concluding visa facilitation and readmission agreements with the country (European Commission and High Representative HR 2020, 2). In a similar vein, an emphasis is placed on 'joint programming' together with national authorities and to 'further tailor the partnership to the interests, ambitions and process of each partner country' (European Commission and High Representative HR 2020, 3–4). The first priority is building resilient economies by supporting modernisation of EaP economies, followed by fostering good governance and democratic institutions, which are seen as the 'backbone of strong and resilient states and societies' (European Commission and High Representative HR 2020, 8–9). Judicial and security sector reforms, and tackling corruption 'should be based on alignment with European standards' (European Commission and High Representative HR 2020, 9–10). The Communication also mentions fostering 'civic engagement' for 'resilient, fair and inclusive societies', though professionalising civil services and public administration reform, as well as supporting the capacity of civil society organisations to 'meaningfully engage in policy-making processes and policy dialogue' and 'built up the leadership skills of civil society activists' (European Commission and High Representative HR 2020, 14).

3.2. The discourse by the council and the European parliament

Primarily associated with the EU capacity to deal with the eurozone crisis, 'resilience' started to be related to EU's external action in early 2010s. Thus, the 2013 Council Conclusions on Resilience highlighted the latter's role for humanitarian assistance and development aid, especially in disaster-prone and conflict-affected countries (Council 2013). The Council recognized that 'it is primarily the national government's responsibility to build resilience and to define political, economic, environmental and social priorities accordingly' even though 'stressing the importance' of 'working closely with local communities, civil society, local authorities'. The initial discourse of the EP similarly referred to development cooperation, humanitarian assistance, disaster management in conflict- and crisis-prone countries, with stressing the need to invest into 'local institutions' and to take climate change into account (EP 2013).

The subsequent ENP Review and also the EP Resolution on the 2015 Review of the ENP calling for 'a stronger, more political and more effective policy' (European Parliament 2015) produced a stronger emphasis on the security and defence dimensions of resilience, with the Council underpinning the resilience of partners in EU's immediate and wider neighbourhood and their capacity of countering the terrorist and hybrid threats, preventing radicalisation, as well as the Security Sector Reform and border management (Council of the European Union 2015b, 2015a). This was reinforced in the 2016 Council Conclusions on Implementing the EU Global Strategy in the Area of Security and Defence, a document that refers to resilience six times, including the resilience 'of our partners to the East and South' (Council of the European Union 2016b). Strategic importance of resilience was reiterated by the 2016 Council (Council of the European Union 2016c) adopting five guiding principles on the EU's policy towards Russia, one of them corresponding to the strengthening of the EU resilience in the areas of energy security, hybrid threats, and strategic communication.

The 2017 (November) Conclusions on the Strategic Approach to Resilience in the EU's External Action elevated the resilience to 'one of the major pillars of the implementation of the Global Strategy' (Council of the European Union 2017) and recognised the EU's role 'in contributing to resilience within the Union as well as in its immediate neighbourhood and beyond' (Council of the European Union 2017). The Council reiterated that 'integrating resilience into national and local policies is primarily a responsibility of each country' (Council of the European Union 2017) and endorsed 10 guiding principles of the 2017 Joint Communication with resilience now covering areas ranging from development and environment, to foreign and security policy. Subsequently, disinformation, cybersecurity and hybrid threats came to be especially highlighted in the EU resilience discourse (European Council 2018a, 2018b; European Parliament 2016), an emphasis present since 2013, as were chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear-related risks in the aftermath of the Salisbury poisoning.

The EP, similarly, in its Resolution on the Review of the ENP, 'called for a strong security component in the ENP', emphasising the latter's strategic importance and calling to 'support partner countries in building proper state structures to deal with security issues' (European Parliament 2015), while reiterating that the 'reforms in the neighbouring countries, carried out under their own responsibility and agreed with them' (European Parliament 2015). While calling for 'human rights and stronger conditionality', the EP stated that 'local ownership, transparency, mutual accountability and inclusiveness should be key aspects of the new approach so as to ensure that the benefits of the ENP reach all levels of community and society in the countries concerned, rather than being concentrated within particular groups' (European Parliament 2015). These references, however, did not amount to raising attention to the problematic position of authoritarian government as the EP reaffirmed the 'partnership with the authorities' and the 'consultation with CSOs' as a basis for the establishment of the action plans, and restated the principle of differentiation, according to which 'the ENP should deploy its own methodology and tools, which should correspond to the level of ambition and the needs and objectives that the ENP countries and the EU seek to achieve' (European Parliament 2015). In its 2017 Resolution on Resilience as a Strategic Priority of the External Action of the EU, the EP once again came to shift the emphasis of resilience to LDCs, fragile states and countries subject to recurring and seasonal crises, while recognising 'state resilience as an important dimension of resilience', even though calling to work 'wherever possible', 'with bodies and building capacities to support this focus at national, regional and local levels and by recognising and supporting the central role of civil society organisations and local communities' (European Parliament 2017). The Resolution furthermore agreed that 'the current EU approach to resilience, including commitments to address the underlying causes of crises and vulnerability, as set out in the 2012 Commission communication and the 2013 Council conclusions, remains fundamentally valid' (European Parliament 2017).

In May 2020, Council Conclusions on Eastern Partnership policy beyond 2020 stated the aspiration of 'strengthening resilience as an overriding policy framework' as 'one of the key goals for the Eastern Partnership during the next years' (Council of the European Union 2020). The EP also reaffirmed resilience as a principle of EU engagement with EaP states, and referred to the priority enshrined in the 2016 EU Global Strategy regarding 'fostering resilient, well-governed, prosperous and aligned states in the neighbourhood' (European Parliament 2020). Resilience became associated with an increasingly wide range of threats, from health threats and economic recovery in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic to disinformation and foreign interference (European Council 2020), with the EP keen to emphasise the resilient democratic institutions as quintessential to the reform process in the EaP states (European Parliament 2020).

4. Critical reflections on the EU's resilience narratives in the context of authoritarian regimes

4.1. First-order critique

Resilience for whom? Neither the Communications by the Commission and the HR, nor the (European) Council Conclusions clearly distinguish between regime types in EU's neighbourhood, other than recognising that not all partners aspire to EU rules and standards. States are essentially viewed as key partners in fostering resilience, regardless of regime type. The possibility that states or governments can jeopardise the resilience of their own (national) population, for example through repression and human rights violations, is not explicitly acknowledged in any of the examined Commission's communications. The ambiguous role of the state as a source of political authority and as a source of violence and coercion is only mentioned in the context of intra-state violent conflict and conflict management. No additional references can be found to repression in authoritarian regimes in the Commission, HR or Council discourses. As for EP discourse, they certainly do identify, uncover, and call to act against authoritarian tendencies in EaP states, as for instance in 2020 when emphasising

the need to 'raise awareness about attacks on civil activists in EaP countries by extremist forces and also by state authorities' and calling on the EU to 'create conditions to be in a position to divert assistance in a given EaP country from the central authorities, if they do not adhere to commitments, to local authorities or civil society actors'. (European Parliament 2020). However, the EP discourse, which aims at preventing backsliding towards authoritarian tendencies, does not acknowledge a significant room of maneuvre for authoritarian regimes resulting from the resilience discourse.

The 2017 Communication by the Commission and the HR illustrates a fundamental oxymoron produced by the silence on repressive regimes, as the EU pledges to work 'at different levels of {. . .} central government, tackling the entrenched interests of authoritarian elites {. . .} and implementing security sector reform' (European Commission and High Representative HR 2017, 14). In effect, this appears to translate into the obscure suggestion to work with authoritarian regimes to counter authoritarian elites. The EU's resilience agenda is thus firmly based on the assumption that states are central to resilience building, as central actors in the process of resilience building and key targets to become resilient. The principal focus on the partner states and governments as key *actors in resilience-building* is evident in all Communications by the Commission and the HR throughout the past decade. Already the 2012 Communication stresses the leading role of partner countries' national and regional governmental policies, and the emphasis on reforming state sectors by adapting national policies, strategies and institutions or strengthening state capacities and core functions of the state is restated in each communication that followed. The role of other actors, such as society at large or local actors, in the process of resilience building is occasionally acknowledged but that role is mostly reduced to being a recipient of EU funds or party to be consulted in national policy-making, rather than constituting agency in resilience building in their own right. In the 2012 Communication, societal resilience is to be fostered through national policies and planning, which should in turn empower vulnerable groups, civil society and women in bottom-up resilience building. Civil society or society at large is not prominently present in the EU's resilience narratives. Civil society professionals and civil society organisations are mentioned as targets for EU support, with the goal to better engage in policy-making processes and policy dialogue. A similar use of resilience, often associated with the idea of its integration into national policies as a 'responsibility of each country', dominates the Council's discourse. Even in the EP discourse, state centrality remains strong, especially after 2014, in the context of aggressive actions of Russia and other third states associated with 'disinformation, propaganda, manipulation and hostile influencing carried out by external forces aiming at dividing and destabilising the EaP countries, as well as undermining the integrity of their political processes and their relations with the EU' (European Parliament 2020).

The EU thus defines the state as a key authority in resilience building, with civil society as a 'supporting act' rather than an actor or agency in building resilience. Prioritising the role of the state over the role of societal actors in the process of resilience building may of course make a plausible strategy in democratic countries, but in the context of authoritarian regimes, the EU's resilience narrative effectively lends authority and legitimacy to authoritarian rulership: Firstly, by omitting distinctions between regimes types and the silence on state repression as a source of societal vulnerability. And secondly, by placing state governments at the heart of the resilience-building effort. The distinct silence on the role of society and societal actors as active agency in resilience building stands in stark contrast to the prominent position that society is given as a *target of resilience-building* in the neighbourhood. Successive communications by the Commission and HR underline the goal of strengthening state *and* societal resilience, that states *and* societies, communities and individuals are faced with a variety of pressures or that resilience encompasses all individuals and the whole of society. This produces another contradiction in the EU's resilience discourse in the context of relations with authoritarian regimes, where strengthening state resilience very likely implies a simultaneous reduction of societal resilience, especially if the latter is defined – as the EU does – in terms of human rights and democracy. The Commission and HR have therefore drawn rather clear political boundaries between the primary actors in and targets of resilience-building, which are highly problematic and contradictory in the

context of relations with authoritarian regimes. Overall, the Commission and HR elaborate a state-centric and pragmatic vision on resilience, which prioritises state resilience over considerations of whether the state in question is democratic or authoritarian. The Council documents and especially the increasing focus on the security and defence dimensions of resilience only reinforce this idea, while the EP resolutions do not address the problematic connection between the resilience and state centrality in the EU discourse towards authoritarian regimes. The specific case of Belarus and the EU's focus on sectoral dialogue and bilateral agreements with the regime up until 2020 illustrates and underlines this approach.

Resilience of what to what? The picture of what will be made resilient to what is a very mixed one in the Communications of the Commission and the HR, Council Conclusions and EP Resolutions, and also changes over time. As for the Commission and the HR, they are consistent in their focus on adapting national policies and planning to enhance resilience, while the scope of the sectors involved has gradually expanded. In 2012, the targets were humanitarian/development policy, the agricultural sector and crisis management capacities to cope and adapt to natural disasters. Later, the discourse broadens to include domestic sources of instability across sectors (e.g. security, corruption, weak economic and social development) to be addressed by fostering the rule of law, economic governance, security sector reform, public administration reform, border protection, tackling terrorism and migration, etc. Resilience to external pressures is also mentioned on occasions, but it is not stated explicitly how that vulnerability would concretely be addressed. Until 2014, this overall understanding of resilience is shared by EU institutions.

The predominant focus is on the EU's conventional toolbox of supporting economic and governance reforms, a focus reinforced by the introduction of the broadened definition of resilience as 'capacity to reform' by the Commission and the HR in 2017. Notably, while it is often stated that a resilient state should be a democratic state (an idea reiterated in the EP discourse), most measures proposed to foster resilience relate to strengthening the economy, climate resilience, energy security. In the 2020 Communication by the Commission and the HR, the passages on the rule of law and the protection of human rights are remarkably short. Free and fair elections are mentioned only once in the 18-page document. The resilience discourse by the Commission and the HR is therefore partly consistent in the focus on domestic reforms to tackle domestic sources of instability, but there is a mismatch between measures and goals with regard to democracy support, which sends rather mixed signals in EU relations with authoritarian regimes. This particular mismatch correlates to the aforementioned post-2014 increasing emphasis on security in the Council's and EP's discourse on resilience of critical infrastructure protection, energy security, cybersecurity and hybrid threats as well as resilience to chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear-related risks. And there is a distinct silence in the Communications as well as Council Conclusions and EP Resolutions on resilience of what and to what in the context of non-democratic states, for example on how sectoral dialogues with the Belarusian regime in the area of border management relate to the ambition to foster resilient, inclusive and democratic societies. Along with this, the fact that the Council highlighted Belarus' 'constructive role in the region' in facilitating agreement on the cease-fire in Ukraine in 2014–15 (Council of the European Union 2016a) has effectively elevated Belarusian authorities as a priority counterpart in the dialogue with the EU (Vieira 2018). Civil society, human rights defenders and NGOs never became fully fledged participants in the EU-Belarus political dialogue (including Human Rights dialogue). However, Belarusian authorities felt legitimised in their approach and even claimed that 'dictatorship' was not necessarily a negative term, as it was also associated with order, discipline and stability, and that dictatorship represented a Belarusian 'brand' (Reform.by. 2019).

Resilience for when: The resilience narrative of the Commission gradually broadened the temporal scope, from the narrow definition of resilience to 'withstand, cope with and adapt to repeated adverse events and long-term stress' (European Commission 2012, 2) to resilience as the 'ability to adapt and reform'. The long-term transformation thus replaced the focus on more short-term adaption. This suggests a departure from the emphasis on returning to a status quo after 'crisis',

which an authoritarian regime such as in Belarus tends to interpret as 'regaining control' through repression to contain political protest. Yet, it remains unclear what should be adapted to and reformed in relations with authoritarian regimes. The example in the 2020 Communication, of facilitating travel for people in Belarus through the conclusion of visa facilitation agreements does not immediately suggest a path towards long-term transformation or transition.

Resilience for where: The discourse by the Commission and the HR is mostly focused on the spatial unit of the state in the (eastern) neighbourhood, and society within states. And a focus is placed on domestic sources of instability. Broader regional and global processes that may affect resilience-building are occasionally mentioned or indirectly alluded to, for example as 'acts of external powers to destabilise perceived adversaries' (European Commission and High Representative HR 2017, 3) or 'external pressures' impacting the ability of partner countries to make their own sovereign choices (European Commission and High Representative HR 2015, 3–6). The underlying assumption appears to be that achieving state resilience through domestic reform and transition (to a democratic state and market economy) can effectively address external pressures. This assumption is problematic in relations with authoritarian regimes. Combined with the emphasis on 'stability' and policy 'co-ownership', resilience to external powers may justify supporting the stability of an authoritarian regime; an interpretation that is frequently used by the Belarusian regime, for example, to brutally repress any domestic protest and the opposition (Bosse, Höpner, and Vieira 2021, 313). In a similar vein, the communications by the Commission and the HR are generally silent on structural factors that significantly impact resilience in states and societies in eastern Europe, such as the wider structure and dynamics of international relations, the role of Russia, the threat (and reality) of military aggression or asymmetric economic and trade relations. If the global environment is mentioned, the formulations are kept vague, referring to a 'more connected, contested and complex global environment' (European Commission and High Representative HR 2017, 2). The Council, however, acknowledges the importance of third states and especially Russia (e.g. 2017), particularly after 2014, leading to calls for a stronger security and defence dimension of resilience. And while the EP discourse on Belarus acknowledges the role of structural factors of Belarus' multifaceted (e.g. economic and energy) dependence on Russia (in this sense reflecting the discourse of the Commissions' and HR's), the fact that this dependence along with the EU discourse provides an excellent opportunity for the authoritarian regime to increase its room of manoeuvre and continue with their repressive tendencies appears problematic.

Why resilience: The early communications by the Commission and the HR on resilience predominantly focus on addressing political instability, poverty and conflict as goals of humanitarian and development resilience-building. Over the years, the discourse changed towards resilience-building as a means to stabilising the neighbourhood (European Commission and High Representative HR 2015, 2) and as a means to achieve resilience and security of the EU ((2017), 2, 15) and building a stronger Europe in the world (European Commission and High Representative HR 2020, 17). Alongside the narrative on resilience-building for EU stability and security, the communications emphasise the transformational agenda the EU has set itself (European Commission and High Representative HR 2017, 2) and building an area of democracy, prosperity, stability and increased cooperation on common values (European Commission and High Representative HR 2020, 1) and alignment with European standards (European Commission and High Representative HR 2020, 9–10). The communications thus produce a contradictory approach to resilience-building, highlighting fostering (hard) security and stability on the one hand, and a transformative values-based approach of moderniation and democratisation on the other hand, whilst simultaneously maintaining that EU support should be tailored to empower societies to 'identify and solve their own problems' (European Commission and High Representative HR 2017, 23). These contradictions, which are present not only in the Commission's but also all EU institutions' discourse, reveal tensions between pragmatic and principled foreign policy goals (Juncos 2017, 1; Biscop 2016), particularly problematic as the communications do not distinguish between regime types. In the context of the EU's relations with Belarus, the oxymoron of 'principled pragmatism' has in practice translated into policies

strengthening the regime because sector-based cooperation such as on border management and the re-admission agreement has progressed much quicker than attempts to engage the regime in human rights dialogues or any form of democratisation (Bosse 2012; Bosse and Vieira 2018; Bosse 2021). The goal of empowering societies, central to the resilience approach, is not further specified or operationalised in the communications of the Commission and the HR. So far, little evidence exists that the EU has implemented resilience-building through 'decentring of external democracy support to the level of the local communities and their self-governing initiatives' in Belarus in practice (Korosteleva and Petrova 2021, 1).

4.2. Second-order critique

The first-order critique has shown that key narratives, definitions and assumptions pertaining to the whom, what, when, where, and why of resilience in the EU's discourses are highly problematic in the context of authoritarian regimes. The second-order critique adopts a critical standpoint outside the discourse and 'exposes the ways in which the discourse functions politically to naturalize and legitimatize particular forms of knowledge and political practices' (Jackson 2007, 412).

The first key function of the EU's resilience discourse includes the attempt to project its liberal international identity as a soft power that differs from the approaches used, for example, by the US or Russia, and at the same time disguising the EU's own internal tensions and contradictions as a global actor (Joseph and Juncos 2019, 1002–3). The discourse also legitimises moving away from the goal of democratisation, which is replaced by an emphasis on building resilience of states and societies (Biscop 2016).

Yet, and secondly, as the first-order critique as shown, the EU's narratives prioritise and legitimise as status quo the role of the state and state governments in the process of building resilience. This enables policies towards authoritarian regimes that consolidate and expand state power, *inter alia* by justifying support to the national security sector, security sector reforms or investments in the policing of borders *to achieve resilience*. Placing the state at the centre of resilience-building, however, promotes a highly political and inherently conservative vision on international relations. A vision that very significantly diverges from key aspects of resilience thinking, such as the recognition and empowering of local agency and 'rejection of the state as a mechanism for wielding collective political power' (Chandler 2014, 80, 57).

Third, the distinct silence in the communications by the Commission and the HR on different regime types in the EU's neighbourhood also sends the unambiguous signal that it is not immediately relevant for resilience-building whether a partner country is a democracy or an autocracy. The oxymoron of 'principled pragmatism', which is linked closely to the discourse of resilience, then serves as rhetoric device to unite two fundamentally contradictory approaches (values-based vs. pragmatic). As a result, any approach of the EU, principled or pragmatic, is legitimised, regardless of regime type, under the common banner of resilience-building.

And fourth, the discourses by the Commission and the HR not only contradict but also omit key aspects of resilience-thinking. Their focus on the formal political sphere and governmental elites represents a top-down understanding of progress rooted in liberal approaches to peace and democracy (Chandler 2014, 83–84). This understanding neglects the notion of politics operating in the social space, in the form of self-reproducing societal processes and the 'agency that emerges from forms of hidden, everyday forms of resistance' (Richmond 2011, 423). The latter processes are, however, of significant relevance in the context of authoritarian regimes, where open political contestation is impossible and where resistance is practised in the hidden 'spaces, practices and relationships of "everyday life"' (Chandler 2014, 86). The large-scale protests that erupted across Belarus in 2020 are a key example of the presence of social informal spaces and networks of resistance (Robertson 2022). Even though everyday forms of resistance are less receptive to external

influence, their omission from the EU's resilience discourses indirectly denies them presence, agency, relevance and legitimacy.

4.3. Implications of the EU's discourses in practice: key examples

The EU's discourses on resilience and especially the priority given to the state and to stability in resilience-building processes have clearly been reflected in the specific context of EU-Belarus relations in practice. Based on the premise of fostering state resilience, EU institutions and member states have clearly changed their policy towards Belarus since 2014, for example by lifting almost all sanctions against the country in 2016, while there were no signs of change to the Belarusian regime's authoritarian rule (Bosse 2021, 202). EU bilateral political dialogues with the regime increased between 2016 and 2020, including the conclusion of Visa Facilitation and Readmission Agreements. The latter type of agreement and its implementation in autocratic regimes has sparked much controversy, especially in view of the human rights violations committed by state border guards and the police (Amnesty International 2017). While civil society was being allowed to engage in some bilateral talks such as the EU-Belarus Coordination Group, the dialogues were often intentionally decoupled from discussions on human rights. Civil society was not permitted to participate in the substantive negotiations of the sectoral dialogues, and human rights were always discussed behind closed doors, with access to the sessions refused to several well-known human rights organisations (Bosse and Vieira 2018, 7). And while support for civil society in Belarus has featured in the EU's discourse, in practice, a large portion of the EU's bilateral funding went to ministries or institutions linked to the Belarusian regime as direct budgetary support (Bosse 2021, 205). Following the unprecedented brutal crackdown on protesters in August 2020, the EU imposed sanctions with some delay but deliberately limited their impact on Belarus's economy for geopolitical considerations; to ensure the regime's resilience vis-a-vis Russia.

5. Conclusion

The purpose of this article was to engage in a discourse critique of the EU's resilience narratives in its policies towards authoritarian regimes in its neighbourhood, with an illustrative case study of EU-Belarus relations.

In a first-order critique, we aimed at describing and dissecting the central terms, labels, assumptions and roots of the EU's resilience discourse by asking for whom, what, when, where, and why resilience is constructed in the EU's narratives. Having examined the most authoritative communications by different EU institutions pertaining to the EU's external relations with its neighbourhood and Belarus in particular, it has become clear that authoritarian regimes are not explicitly addressed in the EU's narratives on resilience and are not seen as a source of societal vulnerability. Overall, the EU elaborates a state-centric and pragmatic vision on resilience, which prioritises state resilience over considerations of whether the state in question is democratic or authoritarian. The specific case of Belarus, and the EU's focus on sectoral dialogue and bilateral agreements with the regime up until 2020 illustrates and underlines this approach. Other actors, such as society at large or local actors, in the process of resilience building is occasionally acknowledged in the Commission/HR communications and Council Conclusions, and addressed by the EP Resolutions, but that role is mostly reduced to being a recipient of EU funds or party to be consulted in national policy-making, rather than constituting 'agency' in resilience building in their own right. The communications by the Commission and the HR as well as the Council Conclusions are also generally silent on structural factors that significantly impact resilience in states and societies in eastern Europe, such as the wider structure and dynamics of international relations, the role of Russia, the threat (and reality) of military aggression or asymmetric economic and trade relations. The EU eventually produces a contradictory approach to resilience-building, highlighting fostering (hard) security and stability on the one hand,

and a transformative values-based approach of modernisation and democratisation on the other hand, whilst simultaneously maintaining that EU support should be tailored to empower societies to identify and solve their own problems.

With the second-order critique, we show that these definitions of resilience, the accompanying silences and underlying assumptions of the EU's resilience narratives are profoundly unhelpful in the context of authoritarian regimes. First, the resilience turn legitimises moving away from the goal of democratisation, placing an emphasis instead of building resilience with and for states. Second, by prioritising and legitimising the state, EU narratives justify strengthening the state, *inter alia* through security sector reforms or investments in the policing of borders. Third, the oxymoron of 'principled pragmatism', which is linked closely to the discourse of resilience, then serves as a rhetorical device to unite two fundamentally contradictory approaches (values-based vs. pragmatic). As a result, any approach of the EU, principled or pragmatic, is legitimised, regardless of regime type, under the common banner of resilience-building. And fourth, EU narratives omit the notion of politics operating in the social space and the agency that emerges from forms of hidden, everyday forms of resistance, which, for example, played a vital role in the 2020 large scale political protests in Belarus. This 'silence' in the EU's discourses is highly counter-productive, as it denies such vital forms of resistance presence, agency, relevance and legitimacy vis-a-vis authoritarian rule. Societal resilience and resistance are, however, still present in Belarus, even though it is viewed as a threat to the Belarusian regime that has criminalized any social and political activity.

In these respects, our findings resonate with studies on EU relations with authoritarian regimes elsewhere in the world, especially when EU resilience discourses become intertwined with EU geopolitical or economic priorities (e.g. Van Gils 2019; Stollenwerk, Börzel, and Risse 2021). The ambivalent EU resilience discourse leaves room for the actors both within and outside the EU, especially the authoritarian leaders, to exploit their relations with EU in their own interests and goals, to the detriment of their societies.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

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