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Vinnykova N. A.

Dr. (Political Sciences), Professor,
Department of International Relations,
V.N. Karazin Kharkiv National University
Maidan Svobody, 4, Kharkiv, 61022, Ukraine
E-mail: vinnykova@karazin.ua
ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5941-7562>
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PRIORITIZING RESILIENCE WITHIN THE EASTERN PARTNERSHIP

This study examines the evolution of the Eastern Partnership (EaP) through the lens of resilience concept. The 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine dramatically exacerbated security challenges in the region, underscoring a significant mismatch between the EaP's initial objectives of building a peaceful and orderly neighborhood and the escalating security threats. Employing a tripartite resilience framework of *absorption, adaptation, and transformation*, this research assesses the evolution of Eastern Partnership. Following the given three-fold methodological frame the study examines the resilience of the Eastern Partnership policies through the regulatory framework, including recent bilateral developments between the EU and the Eastern European Partner countries. The EU's foreign policy regulatory resilience framework serves as the analytical lens.

Findings indicate that regardless of enduring severe stress, the EaP has exhibited limited policy adjustments. The regional coherent approach initially contradicted to eclectic nature of EaP participants, their priorities and needs. Ongoing and frozen conflicts, primarily instigated by Russia, have destabilized the region and compromised security. Despite acknowledging these security challenges, the Eastern Partnership's policy framework has consistently overlooked them in policy programming. The Eastern Partnership's potential for multilateral cooperation is hampered by the lack of a durable institutional foundation to support its objectives.

This paper concludes by advocating for a fundamental shift in the EaP to prioritize the region's pressing security challenges and foster enduring resilience. The EU's foreign policy, particularly its Eastern Neighborhood strategy, is increasingly driven by existential threats rather than geopolitical ambitions. Despite the region's formidable challenges, true resilience can be attained by transforming the Eastern Partnership into a robust institutional multilateral framework.

Key words: European Union, Eastern Partnership, resilience, Ukraine, war.

Introduction. In response to a global landscape marked by increasing uncertainty and complex challenges, the European Union has made sustainability a cornerstone of both domestic and foreign policies over the past decade. This strategic shift aims to bolster the EU's resilience against unforeseen crises and solidify its leadership role in promoting sustainable development at national, regional, and international levels.

Resilience as a conceptual and managerial approach has become one of nowadays megatrends under intensification of shock events. Resilience is “the ability not only to withstand and cope with challenges but also to undergo transitions, in a sustainable, fair, and democratic manner” (European Commission, n.d).

Amid the armed conflict in Europe due to the full-scale aggression of the Russian Federation against Ukraine, the concept of resilience has acquired remarkable

significance. It has become a test of endurance for the foreign policy of the European Union. Direct assistance to Ukraine in the confrontation with the aggressor country, formation of global support for solving the issue, and rejection of Russian energy supplies reveal the resilience of the European Union and the values, on which it is based. The conflict not only posed devastating calamities in the EU's eastern neighborhood, threatening the entire European Union, but also ultimately set default lines between the European-values-based space and autocratic aggressors' domain. Given that the region for decades experienced political, economic and military tensions, the European Union's policy towards the Eastern Partnership within the current multi-cascade geopolitical crises should be revised. Three countries participating in the Eastern Partnership – Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia – have experienced assault of the Russian Federation. Nagorno-Karabakh dispute has set the exertion between Azerbaijan and Armenia. Belarus opposes Ukraine, giving its territory to the Russian troops and has very strained relations with the European Union and stands off with the EU due to thousand migrants have become stranded at the border. The EU has to deal with this international conundrum, right near its frontiers.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 seen in academia as “an extraordinary resilience test for the EU” (Kaunert, Bosse & Vieira, 2023, p. 1049) and prompted to stress attention on security issues within Eastern Partnership.

The scholar assessment of the issue is primarily framed in the EU – Russia relations with the emphasis on normative oppositeness of the geopolitical powers and their rendering of the region (Mikalay & Neuman, 2023).

Another research focus is the EU's enlargement process, which employs potential membership as an incentive for countries to enhance stability and security without guaranteeing eventual accession (Anghel & Džankić, 2023).

The pragmatic point of view underscores the need to harness infrastructural connectivity between the EU and EaP countries, as a resilience tool, in particular in the context of the ongoing Russia's war against Ukraine. This can help mitigate regional vulnerabilities and strengthen the European Union's security and geopolitical position (Raik, 2022).

Focusing on security issues within Eastern Partnership between two phases of Russian war against Ukraine (2014-2022) the admission of inconsistency of prior EU's policies on Russia and lacked a pre-emptive vision of incentives. Experts emphasize that the EU must quickly learn from the two Russian invasions of Ukraine to develop a more coherent strategy for supporting Eastern Partnership countries vulnerable to Russian aggression (Kaunert & de Deus Pereira, 2023, p. 1145).

Nevertheless, in light of the ongoing instability in the region, the resilience of the EU's policies toward its Eastern neighborhood will face scrutiny. As a result, all aspects of the EU's policy formulation and priorities within the Eastern Partnership should be a central focus of research efforts.

The purpose and tasks. The given research is aimed to evaluate the implementation of the Eastern Partnership (EaP) within the resilience concept. By identifying vulnerable aspects of the policy-making process, author hopes to contribute to a more effective approach that promotes regional stability.

This research distinguishes itself by focusing on the evolving dynamics of the EaP in the context of Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine. The paper is organized

around following objectives: (a) to highlight baseline of the EU's foreign policy's resilience approach; (b) to reveal trends in the dimension of Eastern Partnership; (c) examining the EU's policy adjustments towards the EaP in response to Russia's aggression. By analyzing the EU's response to this crisis, the study aims to provide actionable recommendations for enhancing the resilience of the Eastern Partnership.

Methods of research. Emphasizing on evolvement of the EU's relations towards Eastern Partnership the chosen methodological frame is based on three-stage evaluation of resilience, that are clearly defined in scholar literature: *absorption* – “the capacity to take intentional protective action and to cope with known shocks and stress” (Jeans, Castillo & Thomas, 2017, p. 3); *adaptation*, i.e. the ability to deliberately make gradual alterations, either in anticipation of change or in response to it, in a manner that enhances future flexibility, and *transformation* referring to profound changes in the foundational structures that amplify vulnerability and risk (Ibid, p. 5).

Hence, the methodological scheme of research includes analytical overview of legal tools and actions taken by the EU within resilience three-fold approach. The European Union's foreign policy regulatory resilience scheme serves as the foundational benchmark for assessing the policies within the Eastern Partnership.

The time-frame of research covers following periods of the Eastern Partnership development, i.e. acceleration tensions between Russia and Ukraine in the 2021-beginning 2022 year; decisions made by the EU in relations to the Eastern Partnership during the 2022 – are in the main focus of analysis; Eastern Partnership policies ushered in 2024 are examined from the angle of transformation.

Results. Over the past two decades, the EU promoted resilience as a core foreign policy tool, primarily focusing on humanitarian aid for conflict-affected regions. The concept of resilience, as outlined in the “Action Plan for Resilience in Crises Prone Countries 2013-2020”, emphasized country-led initiatives, equity, and a comprehensive approach (European Commission, 2013). The concept of resilience emerged as a cornerstone of EU foreign policy in response to the interconnected challenges of development, conflict, and security. The EU's resilience strategy encompasses a broad spectrum of threats, from slow-onset challenges like climate change to rapid-onset crises such as natural disasters and conflicts. Recognizing the diverse nature of these challenges, the EU employs tailored approaches to build resilience in fragile and conflict-affected states as well as in more stable environments.

The key developments of the implementing resilience concept in foreign policy legal framework mostly fostered due to dissemination of armed conflict zones with directly affected the European Union. Russia's occupation of two Eastern regions and Crimea of Ukraine in 2014 and large-scale migration crises in 2015 spread over the EU's countries due to the flux of refugees from Middle East and North and Sub-Saharan African countries forced to specify instruments in the EU's foreign policy resilience approach.

The EU's foreign policy resilience strategy is anchored in preparedness, response, recovery, and financing (Pawlak, 2016, p. 8-9).

– **Preparedness and prevention** involve robust risk assessment, development assistance, disaster risk reduction, and climate change adaptation to foster proactive measures.

– **Response and recovery** focus on coordinated humanitarian aid to address the immediate needs of crisis-affected populations, providing essential services such as healthcare, education, and shelter.

– **Financing resilience-building** entails leveraging a mix of traditional and innovative financial instruments, including EU trust funds, to support both short-term crisis response and long-term development. The upcoming fund for investment in developing countries is a prime example of this approach.

– **The Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace** offers a comprehensive approach, addressing both short-term stabilization and long-term capacity building to mitigate emerging global threats.

This needs to be stressed, that a fundamental principle of the EU's resilience approach is recognizing national ownership (Council of the European Union, 2013, p. 2). This means that primary responsibility for building resilience and setting priorities lies with individual countries. At the same time, it is emphasized on need of “enabling a shared definition of strategic priorities and coordinated multi-sectoral development programming” (Ibid, p. 3).

The above all, the EU promotes conflict-sensitive approaches in its humanitarian, development, and political engagement. This is particularly crucial in fragile and conflict-affected states, where addressing the root causes of insecurity and understanding their impact on vulnerable populations is essential for building resilience. Nonetheless, integrating a conflict-sensitive approach into the EU's foreign policy resilience framework highlights a significant deficiency: a lack of robust defense programming within implementation tools. This impacts the security dimension of the EU's foreign policy, particularly in its neighboring regions.

Evaluating Resilience in Eastern Partnership. Eastern Partnership in its launching was aimed “to support political and socio-economic reforms of the partner countries, facilitating approximation towards the European Union” (European Commission, 2009, p. 6). The mutual benefits were supposed to be “stability, security and prosperity of the European Union” (Ibid, p. 6). Notwithstanding the region's inherent instability, marked by unresolved conflicts in Transnistria, Nagorno-Karabakh, South Ossetia and Abkhazia the Eastern Partnership initially excluded defense and security domain. Russia's 2014 aggression against Ukraine, occupation of country's Eastern regions and annexation of Crimea necessitated a re-evaluation of the partnership's scope. The EU responded with diplomatic and economic measures, defense and security remained outside its framework.

The EU subsequently introduced resilience as a core concept, linking it to disaster preparedness and response. While the possibility of partner countries participating in EU security structures was mentioned, concrete defense initiatives remained scarce. According to “Top Ten Targets for 2025” for resilience development in EaP, accepted in 2021 (European Commission, 2021c, p. 17), the stage of absorption of building resilience in EaP can be stated to following major priorities: bolstering competitive economic; tackling climate change; energy sustainability; cyber security; digitalization and connectivity; diverse society and gender equality; fostering knowledge societies through support of academic mobility; rule of law. The defined goals received prospects of heavy investments. Meantime defence sector has been on primer stage of recognition. Still, neither relevant program, no concrete actions have been launched in defence area under EaP umbrella. Even with increasing recognition of the security challenges, the EaP primarily focused on addressing their consequences rather than root causes.

The issue of protracted conflicts in EaP region has been mentioned within the “Action Document for Eastern Partnership Civil Society Facility for Resilient and

Inclusive Societies”, including the hostilities in the Nagorno Karabakh and tensions between Armenia and Azerbaijan (European Commission, 2021a, p. 5) as well as “escalation of the conflict in Ukraine and mobilization of Russian troops in Crimea in the spring of 2021” (European Commission, 2021b, p. 7). Although the risk evaluation assessed the scenario of “political situation in the region deteriorating and escalation of conflicts” as “medium” (European Commission, 2021a, p.15). The outbreak of the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 underscored the EaP’s limitations in the security domain.

Absorption phase. The EU’s initial response to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in early 2022 primarily focused on adapting existing EaP programs to address the conflict’s challenges. While the overall EaP budget remained largely unchanged, specific actions were targeted toward civil society, democratic participation, and sustainable development (European Commission, 2022a)

The EU adopted a tailored approach to its Eastern Partnership countries. In particular the EU provided significant financial aid to Ukraine over €1.5 billion (Council of the European Union, 2022). Concurrently, the EU imposed sanctions on Russia and Belarus (European Council, 2022-2024). The most significant challenge for the EU itself was refusal of Russian energy supplies. As a particularly acute challenge arose from Russia’s decision to curtail energy supplies to the EU. However, these measures did not fundamentally alter the EaP’s trajectory.

Adaptation Phase. Amid escalation of conflict in the region the major priorities on the Eastern Partnership remained unchanged. In August 2023 European Commission adopted action plan in favour of the Neighbourhood East Region for 2023 – 2024, that comprised twelve dimensions align with the previous priorities and defined budget lines (European Commission, 2023b). The policies refer to defence sector and short assessment of security status the region have been presented in component of Action Plan related to complex of actions related to Cyber Resilience in Eastern Partnership (European Commission, 2023a). Still, no one the particular institutional platform between the EU and EaP partner-countries have been proposed, while focusing on urgent necessity for enhancing cyber security domain in EaP. Despite allocating substantial financial resources, the EU’s efforts were fragmented and lacked a coherent security strategy. The focus remained on economic and social development rather than addressing the root causes of instability.

Transformation Phase (?) Since launching the Eastern Partnership format of interactions between the European Union and 6 EaP partner-countries has undergone substantive changes. The application of a holistic resilience approach to the Eastern Partnership is complicated by the rapidly evolving nature of relations between the EU and partner-countries. While Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine have achieved visa-free travel within the Schengen Area during 2014-2017, Belarus’s participation in the Eastern Partnership has been suspended due to fundamental disagreements between the EU’s value-based foreign policy and Belarus’s authoritarian government (European Council, 2021).

In a significant development, Ukraine and Moldova were granted candidate country status in June 2022 (European Council, 2022, p. 4) and accession negotiations commenced for both countries two years later (European Commission, 2024b).

Building upon the progress made under the EU-Armenia Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement, Armenia has expressed its ambition to become

an EU candidate country and is progressing towards a visa-free regime (European Council, 2024a).

The dynamic nature of EU-partner country relations is exemplified by Georgia. In December 2023, the European Council granted Georgia candidate country status, a significant step forward (European Council, 2023). However, the trajectory of EU-Georgia relations experienced a setback in June 2024 when the European Council expressed deep concern over Georgia's law on the transparency of foreign influence. The Council deemed the legislation as a step backward and announced a halt to the accession process, citing its inconsistency with the Commission's recommendations (European Council, 2024b, p. 10).

EU-Azerbaijan relations are primarily shaped by pragmatic geoeconomic interests, particularly in energy trade. While other Eastern Partnership countries have expressed aspirations for EU membership, Azerbaijan has maintained a partnership-based approach, leveraging its strategic location and energy resources. In spite of concerns over Azerbaijan's tense relationship with Armenia regarding Nagorno-Karabakh, the EU has prioritized a pragmatic approach. This strategy was amplified in 2022 as the EU sought to reduce its reliance on Russian gas. Consequently, energy cooperation with Azerbaijan significantly expanded, culminating in a bilateral agreement to increase gas exports via the Southern Gas Corridor to 20 billion cubic meters annually by 2027 (European Commission, 2022b).

Despite recent defense support for Armenia, Moldova, Georgia, and Ukraine through the European Peace Facility, the region's ongoing conflicts hinder the Eastern Partnership's ability to establish a secure and stable neighbourhood for the European Union. In the recent Action Plan in 2024 in favour of the Neighbourhood East Region for 2024 the European Commission focuses its efforts on "strengthening resilience through conflict prevention, civil protection and support to democracy in Eastern Partnership", which "aims at promoting the peaceful settlement of conflicts in the region while enforcing the role of women, children and young people in peacebuilding" (European Commission, 2024a, p. 6). While bolstering diplomatic programming within the EaP (see European Commission, 2024a, p. 10), the framework lacks programs to foster multilateral defense and security cooperation among EaP countries.

Consequently, the incremental changes observed thus far cannot be considered truly transformative. In spite of acknowledging the region's persistent conflicts, the EaP has undergone minimal shifts in priorities. Even the devastating impact of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine did not fundamentally alter the EU's approach to the Eastern Partnership. This raises critical questions about the efficacy of the EU's resilience concept in shaping its foreign policy in this context.

Conclusions. The EaP has demonstrated potential in various sectors, yet its aspirations are hindered by the ongoing security crisis. To realize its full potential, the partnership must transition from a primarily economic and political association to a security community. This necessitates a unified defense strategy, shared intelligence, and coordinated military exercises among member states. By prioritizing security and defense, the EaP can create a stable environment conducive to economic growth, human rights advancement, and democratic consolidation.

It should be stressed here on "dialogues", i.e. bilateral formats, while a multilateral defense approach for the Eastern Partnership countries that have experienced destructive Russian influence and aggression has not been launched.

Resilience, as a key component in the relations of the European Union with the Eastern Partnership countries, should be stipulated not only by global trends, but also by taking into account the regional political and security situation. One of the prospects here can be the formation of multilateral security and defense platforms jointly by the participating countries. This might include the exchange of experience, joint training, building a security network based on cooperation with the European Union Agencies, for example, the European Defence Agency (EDA), the European Union Agency for Cybersecurity (ENISA), the European Union Agency for Criminal Justice Cooperation (Eurojust), European Agency for the operational management of large-scale IT systems in the area of freedom, security and justice (eu-LISA).

Reformatting of the institutional foundations of the Eastern Partnership to build network structures can ensure closer interaction between participating countries and increase the efficiency of the European Union's tools in the region, providing a circle of reliable and resilient partnership. This, in turn, can help not only the participating countries to solve their internal problems and jointly resist challenges and threats in the region, but also contribute to strengthening the resilience of many dimensions of the European Union's external relations.

Multilateral cooperation, including the establishment of a regional security platform, is vital for enhancing resilience against future shocks. By leveraging EU agencies' expertise and fostering deeper institutional integration, the EaP can create a more secure, prosperous, and democratic region. While this transformation presents significant challenges, the potential benefits for both the EaP countries and the EU warrant decisive action.

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Вінникова Н. А.

кафедра міжнародних відносин
ННІ «Каразінський інститут міжнародних відносин та
туристичного бізнесу»
Харківський національний університет імені В. Н. Каразіна
майдан Свободи, 4, м. Харків, 61022, Україна

ВИЗНАЧЕННЯ ПРІОРИТЕТІВ СТІЙКОСТІ В МЕЖАХ СХІДНОГО ПАРТНЕРСТВА

Резюме

У дослідженні розглядається еволюція Східного Партнерства крізь призму концепції стійкості. Вторгнення РФ в Україну в 2022 р. різко загостило безпекову ситуацію у регіоні, виявивши невідповідність між початковими цілями Східного Партнерства побудови зони безпеки та процвітання в найближчому оточенні та наявною ескалацією загроз безпеці. Використовуючи тристоронню методологічну основу дослідження стійкості: поглинання, адаптації і трансформації, це дослідження оцінює розвиток Східного Партнерства.

Джерельною базою дослідження є нормативно-правове забезпечення політики Східного Партнерства включно з динамікою двосторонніх форматів між ЄС та країнами-партнерами. Регуляторне забезпечення концепції стійкості в межах зовнішньої політики Європейського Союзу послугувало методологічною основою для оцінювання політики Східного Партнерства.

Результати дослідження виявили, що попри значний тиск зовнішніх чинників Східне Партнерство продемонструвало обмежені можливості на стадії «адаптації» для забезпечення стійкості. Регіональний узгоджений підхід спочатку суперечив різноманітності інтересів і потреб учасників Східного Партнерства. Конфлікти, спровоковані Росією (заморожені й ті, що тривають), продовжують дестабілізувати регіон і спричиняти загрози безпеці. Хоча в межах Східного Партнерства ці виклики визнаються, у формуванні та реалізації програмної політики вони ігноруються. Окрім того, без створення міцної інституційної основи Східному Партнерству бракує потенціалу багатосторонніх засобів для підтримки своїх цілей. У статті наголошено на нагальній необхідності фундаментальних змін у Східному Партнерстві з фокусом на безпекових викликах регіону та сприянні довготривалій стійкості. Зовнішня політика Європейського Союзу дедалі більше визначається екзистенційними загрозами, а не геополітичними амбіціями. На тлі наявних безпекових загроз регіону, справжньої стійкості можна досягти шляхом трансформації Східного Партнерства на міцну інституційну багатосторонню структуру.

Ключові слова: Європейський Союз, Східне Партнерство, стійкість, Україна, війна.