

EU Identity as a Factor of Resilience in the Face of Russia's Special Operation in Ukraine

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Abstract

The authors examine a close connection between the European Union's resilience and identity in academic and contemporary political discourse. In the latter case, the sources of the EU's resilience have not yet been identified, but the Russian factor has come as a variable that determines the connection between resilience and identity in the context of the Russia-Ukraine clash as a conflict of values. As a non-systemic challenge, Russia's special military operation (SMO) in Ukraine has shifted the focus in the EU's search for the sources of resilience and made it face the problems of self-identity in a changed environment. The article argues that the EU's collective identity may be a factor of its resilience. It concludes that, given the European Union's previous unsuccessful experience of appealing to collective identity in crisis situations, its use in the face of Russia's special military operation will be limited, although it has highlighted the need for strengthening the EU's identity.

Keywords: resilience, collective identity, Russia's special military operation (SMO), European Union, Russia.

The value-based worldview factor, which has been given a new interpretation in contemporary IR theory, has become one of the reasons for the current confrontation between Russia and the collective West (uniting the EU countries, the U.S., and other West-leaning states). The importance of this factor is highlighted by the fact that the European Union's self-identity has been gaining currency in the new conditions for ensuring its resilience.

This article aims to determine the potential of the EU's collective identity as a factor of its resilience amid the Ukraine crisis. The authors proceed from the assumption that Russia's special military operation in Ukraine has proved the failure of the European interpretation of resilience in maintaining stability within the EU and at its borders. This makes the EU look for a new meaning of resilience and raises the question of its self-identity.

The research methods include a discourse analysis of key EU documents pertaining to the subject: The Global Strategy for the

Foreign and Security Policy of the European Union (European Union Global Strategy) (2016); A Strategic Compass for Security and Defence (2022); the Conference on the Future of Europe—Report on the Final Outcome (2022); and others. The choice of documents was prompted by their strategic nature and chronological framework. Specifically, the concept of resilience has been systematically included in EU official documents only since 2016. Additionally, the authors analyze the results of social surveys as they have shown the increasing importance of EU decisions made in the context of the SMO for the citizens of the EU member-states. The people's greater loyalty to the European Union as identified by the surveys is regarded as a sign of the need to strengthen the European Union's collective identity.

The authors also examine the interpretations of resilience factors existing in the EU academic milieu and political discourse and outline the place of the EU's identity among them. The article attempts to assess the potential of the EU's collective identity as a resource of its resilience in the face of its past experience of dealing with crisis situations and changes in public opinion during the SMO.

THEORETICAL EXPLANATION OF THE SOURCES OF RESILIENCE

The concept of resilience is in use in many sciences. According to Crawford Holling, “resilience determines the persistence of relationships within a system and is a measure of the ability of these systems to absorb changes in state variables, driving variables, and parameters” (Holling, 1973, p. 17). Psychology was one of the first sciences to have theorized the concept of resilience (Bourbeau, 2018, p. 5). In social psychology identity resilience is understood as “...an identity structure that facilitates adaptive coping in the face of threat or uncertainty, can absorb change while retaining its subjective meaning and value.... Identity resilience is defined as a relatively stable self-schema based on self-esteem, self-efficacy, positive distinctiveness and continuity” (Breakwell, 2021, p. 573). Later the concept of resilience became actively used in relation to the characteristics of social systems (Ollson et al., 2015). Theoretical research in this field is aimed at identifying the capabilities that “allow the system to survive and

develop” (Romanova et al., 2019, p. 32), while some researchers began to view resilience as a property of a system that can be developed in it (Bourbeau, 2018, p. 7) but is difficult to measure uniformly (Stanickova and Melecký, 2018, p. 235).

According to the interpretation proposed by Brian Walker and his colleagues, resilience should be understood as “the capacity of a system to absorb disturbance and reorganize while undergoing change so as to still retain essentially the same function, structure, identity, and feedbacks” (Walker et al., 2004, p. 5). Also, resilience is defined not as a return to the previous state, but as the ability to adapt to and benefit from change (Ibid). Finally, the interpretation of resilience as the ability of societies, communities, and individuals to deal with opportunities and risks in a peaceful manner (Stollenwerk et al., 2021, p. 1223) looks relevant in the current situation.

Thus, today resilience in social sciences is most often understood as the quality or property of a system that allows it to adapt, resist and/or recover from crises and disruptions. However, due to the increasing use of the term ‘resilience’ in various disciplines, which makes it hard to define it clearly and unambiguously, researchers raise questions about the capabilities and limitations of an interdisciplinary approach to the study of this phenomenon (Thorén, 2014, p. 304).

The factor analysis of the resilience of complex systems, carried out within the framework of social and political sciences, allows us to single out the following sources. Economists, who consider resilience in connection with competitiveness, see a system’s internal or structural characteristics as factors contributing to its resilience. In particular, the degree of diversification of the regional economy, the size of the market, and potential access to broad external markets serve as resilience factors (Stanickova and Melecký, 2018, p. 235). The availability of natural resources and capital, including financial, physical, intellectual, and human capital, is important for resilience (Huggins et al., 2008). Other authors add to this list such indicators as the level of innovation and institutional characteristics of a region (Martin, 2012), the ability to maintain coordination and cooperation in the face of crisis (Foster, 2007), and good governance in general (Briguglio et al., 2009).

The economic approach is generally used to construct resilience indices for regions or countries proposed by the European Union (EU Regional Competitiveness Index, RCI, 2022) (EU RCI, 2022), the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (Resilience Index Measurement and Analysis (RIMA, 2020)) or even individual corporations (FM Global Resilience Index, 2022).

Measuring the resilience of political systems is somewhat more difficult. The analysis of resilience factors by political science shows that resilience can be generated by public trust; the legitimacy of the ruling class and institutions; and the efficiency, integrity, and inclusiveness of governance institutions (Stollenwerk et al., 2021, p. 1224-1225). A great deal of research in this field is devoted to the role of democratization in ensuring the resilience of states and societies¹ and to the interpretation of resilience when defining threats to the community under study.²

The role of identity in building resilience is seldom in focus. Some authors suggest regarding the process of community identity development as a strategic opportunity for ensuring the necessary power and resilience of socio-ecological systems (Rampp, 2019, p. 59-76). Based on the study of community mobilization cases during pandemics, it was concluded that there is the potential for political leaders to mobilize collective identity in order to increase the resilience of society in extreme conditions. In particular, an appeal to collective identity allows for motivating human communities and effectively acting as a leader in a crisis situation (Vignoles et al., 2021).

According to the approach proposed by Irina Semenenko and her co-authors, identity can serve as a “resource for social development” (Semenenko, 2017, p. 12). “The positive collective identity of citizens is a key factor determining the vector of development” (Semenenko, 2008, p. 2) for a community or a state. The lack of solidarity impedes the emergence of consensus in society regarding its development guidelines. Also, as L.A. Fadeeva notes, “in recent years there has

¹ See, for example, a special issue of the journal *Democratization*, 2021, 28(7). Available at: <https://www.tandfonline.com/toc/fdem20/28/8?nav=toCList> [Accessed 10 July 2023].

² See, for example, a special issue of the journal *Resilience*, 2019, 7(3). Available at: <https://www.tandfonline.com/toc/resi20/3/3?nav=toCList> [Accessed 10 July 2023].

been a rapidly increasing trend to use the category of identity for denoting threats to a political (macropolitical) community and the corresponding legitimization of the political counter-course in order to protect ‘our’ identity and the system underlying it” (Fadeeva, 2021, p. 19). The concepts of resilience and identity are increasingly used today in the context of threats to a system/community, which actualizes the reference to them in the EU political discourse against the background of the SMO.

With this in mind, the authors agree with the understanding of resilience as “a systemic property related not so much to the regulatory characteristic of a system as to the definition of challenges and resources to ensure resilience” (Ivanov, 2019, p. 8-9). While agreeing with E. B. Pavlova in that “the concept of resilience ... is focused ... on the study of a system’s responses to challenges, namely those resources which allow the system to survive,” the authors suggest that the collective identity of the EU can be considered one of such resources in the current environment (Romanova et al., 2019, p. 12). It is also closely related to the concept of public trust (towards EU policies and structures) and legitimacy (of EU institutions).

The presented analysis of the EU identity’s potential to withstand tensions is intended to fill the following research gaps:

- to complement existing ideas concerning the sources and resources of the resilience of complex political systems by substantiating a similar role of collective identity;
- to determine the potential for referring to collective identity as a resource of the European Union’s identity amid the SMO as a relatively new external crisis.

THE INTERPRETATION OF RESILIENCE IN POLITICAL DISCOURSE

In the 2016 European Union Global Strategy, which proclaimed resilience as a key principle of EU foreign policy, the emphasis was placed on the need to ensure the resilience of the EU’s eastern and southern neighbors as well as its member-states in the interests of the latter’s population. At the same time, the interpretation of resilience in the EU had acquired a regulatory aspect: resilience became attributed only to those states

that matched the European understanding of a democratic state with a market economy (Gudalov and Treshchenkov, 2020, p. 167).

Democracy was proclaimed a key element of resilience, and the task of strengthening it was set out in the Strategy. Democracy is closely linked to the adoption of values, which the EU has come to interpret not only as European but universal. Among these are “respect for and promotion of human rights, fundamental freedoms and the rule of law. They encompass justice, solidarity, equality, non-discrimination, pluralism and respect for diversity,” while adherence to “values is a matter of law as well as of ethics and identity” (Shared Vision, 2016, p. 15).

In its initial logic, the concept of resilience, as interpreted by the EU, excluded Russia from the circle of EU interaction. The actual treatment of Russia as “an object of civilizational efforts rather than as a potential standard-setting agent” (Pavlova and Romanova, 2018, p. 88) has long annoyed Russian diplomacy and fueled a latent conflict. Russia has been consistently stigmatized as an unpredictable and authoritarian/expansionist counterpart with whom a constructive dialogue is impossible (European Parliament, 2021), which, however, does not relieve Russia of responsibility for the current situation either.

In the 2016 EU Global Strategy Russia is listed as a force destabilizing the European security system due to its actions in Ukraine, although the EU acknowledged that “the EU and Russia are interdependent” and expressed readiness to “engage Russia to discuss disagreements and cooperate if and when our interests overlap” (Shared Vision, 2016, p. 33).

In the resilience discourse, as Russian authors highlight, the EU is characterized by its emphasis on threats rather than resources. “At the same time, many threats are alleged to be coming from Russia (in the energy, news and digital areas). This allows the European Union to speculate about a unified system (incorporating both the EU and Russia) but simultaneously assert Moscow's second-rate status” (Ivanov, 2019, p. 5).

The EU's response to the SMO, apart from tough sanctions, was also expressed in the adoption, at the end of March 2022—for the first time in the Union's history—of a common defense strategy

entitled Strategic Compass, which had taken two years to agree on. The notion of resilience is mentioned in the strategy more than fifty times in different ways and contexts. The document postulates: “The more hostile security environment requires us to make a quantum leap forward and increase our capacity and willingness to act, strengthen our resilience and ensure solidarity and mutual assistance... We must act as a strong and coherent political actor to uphold the values and principles underpinning our democracies, take more responsibility for the security of Europe and its citizens and support international peace...” (Strategic Compass, 2022).

However, this document says nothing about possible resources for the EU’s resilience. The strategy merely states that resilience should be indirectly supported by solidarity within the EU, the development of planning and critical infrastructure, democracy, and electoral processes at the national level, as well as access to reliable information and independent media, the promotion of the economies’ energy efficiency and the maintenance of supply chains (Strategic Compass, 2022).

The evident emphasis made in the strategic documents on threats rather than resources for the EU’s resilience shows that the EU is still in search of new content for the concept of resilience and is unable to formulate a list of resources it needs for this purpose. However, opposing Russia as a “significant Other” and a source of threats to the European Union simultaneously allows the EU to “assert its own identity as a normative leader” (Pavlova and Romanova, 2019, p. 111).

Attempts to strengthen collective identity in the European Communities have long been obvious, including in its normative context. In particular, the appeal to collective identity for legitimizing the existence of the European Communities can be seen in a number of EU documents, including the Declaration on European Identity of 1973.

This is borne out, in particular, by the EU policy of introducing the notion of EU citizenship and related rights, including the right to freedom of movement, the right to elect and be elected to local authorities throughout the EU or to the European Parliament from one’s country of residence (Treaty..., 1992). The introduction of common European symbols (the flag, the emblem, the anthem, etc.)

was intended to serve a similar purpose. Cultural policy, which gained momentum after the conclusion of the Maastricht Treaty (Fadeeva, 2022, p. 82), began to play an important role in promoting collective identity for the European Union.

Starting from the 1973 Declaration, the European institutions placed common values such as democracy, market economy, the rule of law, and others at the core of collective identity (Declaration..., 1973). These elements of European identity are being propagated not only within the EU, but also beyond its borders (Manners, 2002). In the EU political discourse, the notion of identity is closely linked to solidarity and the EU's regulatory power. After making sure that some values and rules have been accepted within the European Union, its institutions moved on to transmit them outside (Jenichen, 2022) by forcing candidate countries to adopt them or by making its development assistance to them conditioned on their adoption (Pogorelskaya, 2021).

The 2022 Report of the Conference on the Future of Europe says: "In order to be recognized outside of its borders, the European Union must first of all be internally cohesive, not only economically and financially, but also in terms of identity and values" (Conference..., 2022, p. 172). The analysis of public opinion polls presented in this report shows that the population is also interested in deepening the integration processes that will hopefully increase resilience and strengthen the EU's identity. The latter is thought of as a superstructure over the national level of identity, and the European Union itself as "based on solidarity, social justice and equality" (Ibid, p. 39).

During the past few years, the concept of EU identity has been frequently mentioned in the EU in the context of its value-based opposition to Russian policy and, therefore, the existence of a threat to the EU's identity. In the context of the SMO Russia has finally emerged as an antagonist, in opposition to which the EU is asserting its identity. In this scheme, any ties become unnecessary because the dominant factor is delimitation along the 'friend-of-foe' lines" (Romanova, 2022, p. 48).

The president of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, commented that the SMO: "is a war on our energy, a war on our

economy, a war on our values and a war on our future” (von der Leyen, 2022). The start of the SMO has contributed to the consolidation of the EU and the strengthening of its identity on the basis of its opposition to the Russian one.

Therefore, the appeal to collective identity and resilience in the EU discourse in recent years has been closely linked to the definition of threats to the European Union. Although collective identity is not officially declared a resource of the EU’s resilience, it is assumed that its strengthening will promote solidarity in the EU, which legitimizes the actions of common institutions and of the EU as a whole. The cohesion and approval of the EU’s actions by its population and member-states are intended to increase its resilience as the ability to maintain its inherent characteristics in the face of external threats.

COLLECTIVE IDENTITY AS THE BASIS OF THE EUROPEAN UNION’S RESILIENCE?

In the early 2000s, the EU enlargement seemed to herald the final victory of EU values and rules in Central and Eastern Europe, whose countries relatively quickly and unconditionally adapted to the European requirements and standards. The then unconditional support for collective identity, at least at the political level, in the new member-states made the EU think it would be possible to project its values and norms outwards. However, subsequent crises proved the fragility of this commitment to the EU in the face of difficulties.

For example, European solidarity was put to a severe test during the EU migration crisis of 2015-2016, when the appeal to shared values and destiny turned out to be of no help to the EU. Although the European Commission’s President Jean-Claude Juncker vowed that “it is Europe today that represents a beacon of hope, a haven of stability in the eyes of women and men in the Middle East and in Africa” (Juncker, 2015), and quota-based accommodation of refugees in the EU was “a matter of humanity” (Ibid.), some member-states refused to follow Brussels’ instructions, while others had to reinstate border controls.

Brexit was, in part, the result of a lack of the British citizens’ commitment to the EU identity. By 2016, EU membership was already

seen as a source of problems for the country rather than a solution, just like in the 1970s, after the United Kingdom had joined the European Communities. Brussels failed not only to secure the loyalty of London, which had traditionally taken a special position on many issues, but also to prevent the erosion of the EU image as a model of integration and a set of universal values (Khakhalkina and Pogorelskaya, 2022).

Disagreements both between the EU member-states and between the EU and Russia hindered the use of existing and alternative gas supply routes to Europe, causing several rounds of gas wars since the 2000s. Solidarity over energy supplies was not achieved quickly even after the start of the SMO (RBC, 2022).

In addition to the upheavals of recent years—the migration crisis (Potemkina, 2016, p. 54-55) and Brexit (Oliver, 2017, p. 129-140)—the COVID-19 pandemic shattered solidarity in the EU and faith in the legitimacy of its institutions and in the chosen integration path as the gold standard to follow, especially in the beginning (Cicchi et al., 2020). Due to these events and growing internal contradictions, the EU identity also found itself in crisis.

However, the loyalty of EU citizens to the Union, which is considered one of the manifestations of collective identity, has significantly strengthened since the start of the SMO.

According to the 2012 Eurobarometer, only 31% of EU citizens trusted EU institutions on average. A positive image of the EU had by then formed among 31% of citizens, while 39% stayed neutral, and 28% were relatively negative. In addition, 46% of the respondents associated themselves with the European Union, while an average of 91% felt attached to the EU (Standard Eurobarometer 77, 2012).

A similar survey in 2018 found that 93% of respondents in the EU on average felt attached to their own country in the first place, and 56%, to the European Union.

In the Eurobarometer report of January-February 2023, the level of national identity remained the strongest (91% felt attached to their country), but a relatively bigger share of citizens (61%) were now associating themselves with the European Union (Standard Eurobarometer 77, 2012).

In addition, the Eurobarometer survey of May 2022 showed that 81% of respondents supported the EU's Common Security and Defense Policy. The survey also confirmed substantial support for EU policies in response to the events in Ukraine (59%) at the time, including economic sanctions against Russia (80%) (Special Eurobarometer 526, 2022). The Eurobarometer report of January-February 2023 showed that 91% of the respondents in the EU agreed with the provision of humanitarian support to Ukraine and 88% were in favor of welcoming into the EU the people fleeing the war, 77% were in favor of a common defense and security policy, and 69% believed that the EU needed to reinforce its potential to produce military equipment (Standard Eurobarometer 98, 2023).

Thus, after the start of the SMO collective forms of identity underwent certain transformation under the influence of current events, and Ukraine was included in the circle of “friends” as a European and civilized state in contrast to barbaric and patriarchal (“other”) Russia. As early as February 27, 2022, the president of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, said that Ukraine was “one of us and we want them in the European Union” (Euronews, 2022).

The political reaction followed immediately: in mid-April 2022, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz announced a sharp increase (by 2 billion euros) in German defense spending (Lenta.ru, 2022). In May 2022, the European Commission presented its REPowerEU plan aimed at overcoming dependence on Russia in the energy sector (REPowerEU, 2022). In early July 2022, Finland and Sweden signed NATO accession protocols.

According to the Eurobarometer survey of December 2022, an overwhelming majority of EU citizens were positive about the EU's measures to overcome the energy crisis. The survey also showed that EU actions in the face of the SMO continued to enjoy massive public support, although the degree of that support varied significantly from country to country: from 33% of those surveyed in Greece to 67% in Denmark supported the EU on this issue (Eurobarometer, 2022). At the same time, a survey conducted under the auspices of the European Parliament showed that three-quarters of respondents approved of EU

support for Ukraine as well as specific measures, including sanctions against Russia (Eurobarometer, 2023).

As EU citizens' loyalty to the European Union's actions grew on the wave of SMO condemnation, the European institutions managed to quickly legitimize their actions in support of Ukraine. The rapid strengthening of solidarity on an anti-Russian basis enabled Brussels to enforce nine sanctions packages against Russia over a very short period of time from February 2022 to May 2023.

Contrasting EU values and actions to a "significant Other" (Russia) became the most affordable and logical way of strengthening the EU's identity in the SMO context and thus contribute to the EU's resilience.

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Theoretical conclusions made in political science suggest that public trust, the legitimacy of governing institutions, and their efficiency and inclusiveness can be factors contributing to the resilience of a political community. In times of crises, an appeal to collective identity may also enhance a community's resilience by motivating and explaining its leaders' actions.

In the EU discourse, the sources of resilience have not yet been identified, but democracy, the rule of law, the market economy, solidarity, pluralism, etc. are believed to serve as contributing factors, albeit indirect ones. Collective identity can also play such a role to some extent, but its potential is limited in this regard due to the EU's previous negative experience of appealing to collective identity in attempts to resolve crises.

The emphasis in defining the EU's resilience is not on its resources, but on threats, including those emanating from Russia. This imbalance urges the EU to look for such external threats, which puts it in contrast to the surrounding world and thereby strengthens its identity. A vicious circle is formed: solidarity, trust and loyalty to the EU among its citizens and member-states are needed to ensure resilience, but so far only unprecedented crises such as the SMO have proved to be an effective way to inspire these feelings.

The current situation created by the SMO shows that common identity is in demand and that society's loyalty to the EU's actions enables it to consider collective identity one of the factors ensuring its resilience, which the EU institutions hurried to use to legitimize their decisions. Therefore, collective identity, however faulty, will continue to be used by the EU as a means of increasing its resilience, but to a limited extent due to its previous negative experience.

Russia should take this into account, viewing the SMO not just as a value conflict with the EU, but as a potential factor in the EU's resilience, which Brussels has so far used quite successfully.

The SMO has become a trigger for increasing the importance of common identity in ensuring the EU's resilience. In reality, however, there has been no clarification or reinterpretation of these concepts and their content. On the contrary, they have become a convenient category for political discourse, which may further lead to their oversimplification.

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