

The European Union's Course Towards Resilience as a Response to Rising Global Turbulence

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Abstract: The EU has been facing numerous challenges in the 21st century. The eastern enlargement resulted in widening of socio-economic inequalities. The global financial crisis 2008+ forced the EU to introduce instruments aiming at improving financial stability. The first migrant/refugee crisis of 2015-2016 proved the need for reforms in the area of EU immigration and asylum policy. Brexit disrupted internal political dynamics of the EU and ended the period of the EU gravitation power. The COVID-19 pandemic coupled with the Russian invasion on Ukraine did show that crises become more and more complex. Moreover the EU has to face climate change, AI revolution, energy crisis, demographic changes. Thus the EU has to rethink its response to current and future threats and challenges. The main objective is to identify changes in the EU's priorities in the 21st century. The parallel goal is to study the EU's actions and mechanisms aiming at building resilience and to critically evaluate potential problems connected with practical implementation of the EU's course towards resilience.

Keywords: European Union, resilience, crisis

1 Introduction

The European Union (EU) has been facing numerous threats and challenges since the beginning of the 21st century. Some of them are internal, others result from external factors and are strongly connected with the growing turbulence of the global environment. Scientists and politicians point to a future world battered by intersecting crises, in which rising volatility and depleted resilience boost the odds of simultaneous shocks [27]. Rising instability creates the urgent need for actions directed towards resilience creation and strengthening. The paper objective is to identify main challenges and threats for the EU in the 21st century and to analyse the evolution of the EU's priorities as a result of the aforementioned problems. The parallel objective is to study the process of resilience promotion in the EU with focus on areas, mechanisms and actions, as well as problems connected with

practical implementation of the EU's course towards resilience. The following research questions were formulated:

- RQ1: What was the evolution of the EU's priorities in the 21st century?
- RQ2: What has been done so far to increase the EU's resilience?
- RQ3: What limits the EU's resilience?

The research tools used in the article include literature studies, descriptive analysis and critical analysis.

2 Challenges and threats for the European Union in the 21st century

The twenty-first century history of the European Union is full of problems and crises that require taking appropriate actions, changing integration accents and creating new solutions in order to face challenges [45].

In the very beginning of the 21st century terrorism became a global problem. Terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 had a profound and lasting impact not only on the USA, but also on many other economies, including the EU. They instigated the multi-decade global war on terror. The EU countries have also been impacted by terrorism. Numerous terrorist attacks occurred in many EU countries (e.g. Madrid train bombings in March 2004, Paris attacks in November 2015, Nice truck attack in July 2016, London bombings in July 2005¹⁰, Brussels attacks in March 2016) [40].

The eastern enlargement itself created a huge challenge for the EU. Accepting ten relatively low-developed economies in 2004, two more in 2007 and yet another one in 2013 resulted in considerable widening of socio-economic inequalities in the EU [42]. Additionally it also posed challenges for the EU budget, Common Agricultural Policy, EU Policy of Economic, Social and Territorial Cohesion, as well as the EU labour market. Moreover, the eastern enlargement forced a gradual reform of EU institutions [37].

Because of the interconnectedness of the economy and the financial sector the crisis which started in 2008 in the United States became a global one and was rapidly transferred to the EU. The EU faced the great recession in the years 2008-2009 and later, after a short recovery, several EU Member States experienced sovereign debt crisis. The combined crises had huge negative consequences for economic growth, investment, employment and the fiscal position of many EU Member States. Therefore, the EU was forced to introduce instruments aiming at improving financial and fiscal stability [41].

¹⁰ The UK was an EU Member State till January 31, 2020, therefore it is included here.

In 2015-2016 the EU experienced the 1st migrant / refugee crisis. In 2015 alone over 1.3 million people came to the EU mostly from Syria, but significant numbers also from Afghanistan, Nigeria, Pakistan, Eritrea, Iraq and the Balkans. Such an increased influx of refugees and illegal immigrants into the EU was another challenge for the EU, and in particular for the common asylum and immigration policy. The European Commission attempted to enact some measures to address the problem, however with poor results due to huge differences of attitude of individual EU Member States [30].

Brexit referendum in 2016 [26] and official notification of the UK's will to withdraw from the EU followed by "divorce deal" negotiations and the UK's final withdrawal from the EU institutional framework in February 2020 and from the Single European Market in January 2021 ended the period of strong gravitation of the EU and disrupted internal political dynamics of the EU [29]. As a result of Brexit the EU's demographic, economic, financial, political and military potentials were considerably reduced. Moreover, the EU had to undertake actions to prevent further exits. It also had to reform common policies. Restoring the EU's image and position in the globalised economy was another challenge [8].

In February 2020 most experts considered Brexit the most important issue for the EU in 2020. On March 11, 2020, however, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the novel coronavirus COVID-19 outbreak a global pandemic [6]. The Covid-19 pandemic impacted the EU and its Member States in many areas and aspects, including healthcare and economic systems, public health threat, challenges for coordination of economic policy, structural challenges, as well as risk of increased economic divergence [9].

Russia's military aggression against Ukraine in February 2022 did show that crises become more and more complex. It resulted in increased geopolitical instability, energy crisis, new wave of immigration to the EU, changes in geographical pattern of international trade and international transfer of capital in the form of FDI [13].

Energy crisis of 2022 stressed the urgent need for significant reform of the EU energy policy [36].

Demographic changes experienced by most EU Member States, including population ageing, shrinking working-age population and labour shortages constitute yet another pressing challenge for the EU in the 21st century [12].

In addition to the above mentioned challenges and threats, the EU has to respond to numerous global challenges of the 21st century, in that:

- Climate change (develop new climate goals, introduce considerable changes in the EU environmental policy) [44];
- AI revolution and its revolutionary impact on economy, society, education accompanied by the emergence of new risks and the need to adapt to an AI driven economy of tomorrow [25].

3 Evolution of the European Union's priorities in the 21st century

The EU attempts to respond appropriately to the internal and external challenges. Hence, it introduces strategies which include new elements reflecting new goals. One can observe a process of evolution of the EU's priorities.

The Lisbon Strategy adopted in 2000 for the years 2000-2010 aimed at transforming the EU into the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world, capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion [24]. It seems to be the most optimistic of all the strategies adopted by the EU for the 21st century. Unfortunately the Lisbon Strategy's goals had not been achieved by 2010.

The next strategy was introduced in 2010. It was called *Europe 2020 Strategy* and covered the period 2010-2020. It did reflect new realities after the global financial crisis 2008+. Three priorities were formulated in the Europe 2020 Strategy, namely [11]:

- Smart growth, i.e. developing an economy based on research and innovation;
- Sustainable growth, i.e. promoting a more ecological, greener and resource efficient economy;
- Inclusive growth, i.e. supporting high employment, fostering social inclusion and territorial cohesion.

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic forced the EU to rethink its goals and priorities. *A Roadmap for recovery. Towards a more resilient, sustainable and fair Europe* was adopted in April 2020. It stressed the significance of [3]:

- Restored and deepened Single European Market in order to achieve resilience and prosperity;
- Strategic autonomy of the EU which should be obtained through dynamic industrial policy, support for small and medium enterprises, effective screening of foreign direct investment (FDI);
- Green transition and Digital transformation which should play a vital role in relaunching and modernising the EU economy.

The openscale military aggression of the Russian Federation against Ukraine in February 2022 resulted in the approval of *Strategic Compass for Security and Defence* by the Council of the EU. Strengthening the EU's security and defence policy, embracing four pillars [5]:

- Acting more quickly and decisively when facing crises;
- Securing citizens against fast changing threats;
- Investing in necessary technologies and capabilities;
- Partnering with others to achieve common goals.

In 2023 the Spanish Presidency of the Council of the EU introduced *Resilient EU 2030. A future-oriented approach to reinforce the EU's Open Strategic Autonomy and Global Leadership* [39]. *Resilient EU 2030* consists of nine lines of action within 3 priority areas, namely [38]:

- A. Bolstering and securing internal production capacities:
 - Fostering domestic production of key goods, services and raw materials,
 - Monitoring foreign ownership and control over strategic sectors,
 - Setting contingency plans to respond to future shortages,
- B. Enhancing circularity and smart consumption:
 - Increasing resource efficiency,
 - Fostering circularity in the economy and society,
 - Replacing raw materials and components by more accessible alternative,
- C. Reinvigorating global trade and the multilateral system:
 - Launching a new trade expansion,
 - Rebalancing economic relations with China,
 - Leading the renovation of the multilateral architecture.

4 Resilience promotion in the European Union

4.1 Resilience – a new motto of the European Union. Areas to consider while promoting resilience

Resilience is “*the ability not only to withstand and cope with challenges but also to undergo transitions in a sustainable, fair and democratic manner*” [17]. The EU has to be ready to face crises of various nature. Future crises can be more complex, multi-faceted and hybrid. Future crises can result in cascading effects. They can occur simultaneously.

Multidimensional approach to resilience promotion and resilience creation in the EU must be applied [4]. The following areas should be taken into consideration while promoting resilience in the EU and of the EU and its Member States:

- Health security and health care systems;
- Food security;
- Energy security and energy sector;
- Financial sector and financial institutions stability;
- IT systems;
- Military security;
- Critical infrastructure;
- Circularity and smart consumption;
- Bolstering and securing production capacities;
- Economy (in a broad sense);

- Society;
- Institutions (at the EU level and at the level of EU Member States – national, regional, local).

4.2 Examples of mechanisms and actions aiming at strengthening the European Union’s resilience

The significance of resilience has been reflected in the EU’s activity. The following steps should be mentioned here:

- Crisis Coordination Arrangements (CCA) adopted by the Council in 2006 [28];
- Integrated Political Crisis Response (IPCR) creation in 2013 – the 1st step towards cohesive decision-making at the EU level in response to cross-sectoral crisis events [7];
- Codifying the IPCR into a legal act in 2018 [22];
- Council conclusions on enhancing preparedness, response capability and resilience to future crises, adopted at the General Affairs Council on November 23, 2021 (taking into consideration the first lessons from the pandemic crisis) [23].

The EU adopted numerous mechanisms and actions aiming at building resilience. Crisis response mechanisms in the EU include the following:

- The EU Civil Protection Mechanism (embracing: The Emergency Response Coordination Center and The European Civil Protection Pool);
- Crisis coordination in the Council (which can be triggered by the Presidency and can result from the invocation of the solidarity clause by a Member State) [15];
- European Union Solidarity Fund (financial instrument that helps to respond to major natural disaster) [18];
- Resilience and Values target within MFF 2021-2027 (amounting to around EUR 47 billion at 2020 prices) [32];
- Recovery and Resilience Facility within NGEU (i.e. temporary instrument planned for 2021-2026) [21];
- Preparedness for future health emergencies (new regulation on serious cross-border threats to health, revised mandates for the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) and for the European Medicines Agency (EMA), emergency framework regarding medical countermeasures, as well as The Health Emergency Preparedness and Response Authority - HERA) [19];
- European Food Security Crisis Preparedness and Response Mechanism (EFSCM) [14];
- Single Market Emergency Mechanism - SMEM planned in 2024 (SMEM is supposed to bolster the internal market in times of crisis by facilitating

the movement of goods, services and persons, monitoring supply chains, ensuring access to critical goods) [20];

- Protection of Network and Information Systems (The directive on the security of network and information systems (NIS) of 2016 and a revised NIS directive of 2022 aiming at ensuring stronger risk and incident management and cooperation, as well as widening the scope of rules) [10];
- Protection of Critical Infrastructure (New directive introduced in 2022 aiming at reduction of vulnerabilities and strengthening the physical resilience of critical entities; the Directive covers critical entities in a number of sectors, such as energy, transport, health, drinking water, waste water and space) [16];
- IT Security of Financial Sector (Digital Operational Resilience Act – DORA, introducing uniform requirements for the security of network and information systems of companies and organisations operating in the financial sector, as well as critical third parties which provide ICT related services to them; DORA can be seen as a framework that boosts the IT security of the financial sector, preventing and mitigating cyber threats) [43].

4.3 Problems connected with practical implementation of the EU's course towards resilience

Practical implementation of the EU's course towards resilience is not easy. A number of problems can be listed. Some of them have national character, others result from international and global factors. The following obstacles for quick achievement of true resilience of the EU can be listed:

- Overlapping crises and threats [35],
- Differences in perception of threats,
- Differences in perception of integration processes [33],
- Infrastructure shortages and poor quality of infrastructure,
- Limited financial means,
- Limited skills and innovation [34],
- Brain drain and talents exodus [2],
- Dependence on imported technology and goods [1],
- Spy technology [31],
- Limited flexibility of the EU institutions, EU programmes, EU mechanisms and actions.

The final result will not depend on the decisions taken by the EU institutions alone and mechanisms implemented on the EU level only. It is of vital importance to develop real involvement of all EU Member States at national, regional and local levels.

Conclusion

When Poland and other Central European countries applied for European Union membership in the 1990s, the EU was perceived as a rich club. Since the beginning of the 21st century, however, the EU has had to face numerous threats, crises and challenges. Threats become more and more complex. Cascading crises pose direct and indirect short-term and long-term consequences. Challenges get multidimensional. The EU has to stay vigilant. It must respond appropriately to emerging current and future threats, crises and challenges.

The EU should:

- increase internal production in order to achieve autonomy;
- increase innovativeness (through talents, skills and infrastructure);
- promote further integration (e.g. in the areas of digital services, AI, energy union, health care);
- promote and lead reform of the multilateral system as an effective means of mitigating its weaknesses abroad and defending its interests globally.

Resilience seems to be a precondition for preventing the decline of the EU's position in the World. Only a more resilient EU will be capable of keeping and increasing its participation and leadership in a turbulent and changing world.

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