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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Conceptual politics and resilience-at-work in the European Union

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Abstract

International crises, most recently the Covid-19 pandemic and Russia's invasion of Ukraine, often radically change our view of the world and our place within it. The European Union (EU) has been particularly impacted by these developments because these crises have accentuated some of its ontological and epistemological uncertainties and insecurities. While the EU's resilience turn initiated by the EU Global Strategy of 2016 aimed at strengthening the EU's ability to prepare and recover from external shocks and crises, since then, the concept of resilience has undergone a transformation. In recent years, we have seen the EU turning back in on itself and abandoning the radical aspects of resilience. Hence a paradox has emerged – the more complex the problems faced by the EU, the more it turns away from the logics of complexity present in the idea of resilience. In this article, we examine this conceptual shift through the lenses of concepts in action and the way these have reflected changes in the external context, but also power coalitions and institutional path dependencies. This argument will be explored by examining the recently adopted Strategic Compass and the EU's Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF).

Keywords: concepts; Covid-19; European Union; foreign policy; governance; resilience

Introduction

International crises, most notably the Covid-19 pandemic and Russia's invasion of Ukraine, often radically change our view of the world and our place within it. The European Union (EU) has been particularly impacted by these developments because these crises have accentuated some of its ontological and epistemological uncertainties and insecurities.[1] The Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted both the dangers of living too close together *and* the need for common, collective solutions. The extent to which these crises have changed the global landscape will be seen in years to come; however, we can already start to see how they have had an impact on policy ideas such as resilience-building.[2] The publication of the EU Global Strategy (EUGS) in 2016 epitomised a 'resilience turn' at the EU level, mirroring similar developments at the international level.[3] However, rather than

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[1]Maria Mälksoo, 'From the ESS to the EU Global Strategy: External policy, internal purpose', *Contemporary Security Policy*, 37:3 (2016), pp. 374–88.

[2]Pol Bargués, 'Conclusion: European vulnerability and the policy dilemmas of resilience in times of coronavirus', in Elena Korosteleva and Trine Flockhart (eds), *Resilience in EU and International Institutions: Redefining Local Ownership in a New Global Governance Agenda* (London: Routledge, 2021), pp. 250–270.

[3]Jonathan Joseph and Ana E. Juncos, 'Resilience as an emergent European project: The EU's place in the resilience turn', *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 57:5 (2019), pp. 995–1011; Elena A. Korosteleva and Trine Flockhart, 'Resilience in EU and international institutions: Redefining local ownership in a new global governance agenda', *Contemporary Security Policy*, 41:2 (2020), pp. 153–75.

opening up a new phase of foreign policy as promised in the EUGS, the Covid-19 pandemic and the Ukraine war have resulted in the EU turning back in on itself and abandoning the radical aspects of resilience that emphasise its multilayered and non-linear dynamics, its transformative character, its responsibilising influence, the desire to turn adversity into an opportunity, and the encouragement of individual, community, and private-sector-based initiative.[4] Hence a paradox has emerged – the more complex the problems faced by the EU, the more it turns away from the logics of complexity present in the idea of resilience. We argue that this is in keeping with the wider context of international relations, and we draw on international relations (IR) theory to examine the conceptual side of these changes. Our arguments are mainly focused on conceptual dynamics; in particular, we drawn on recent arguments about concepts at work[5] and use this to ask questions about how concepts emerge, acquire meaning, and change over time in relation to particular challenges, practices, institutions, and actors. In addressing the question of how the EU's use and understanding of resilience have shifted in response to external events, we address the wider question of how crises in global politics often produce a conservative turn in how we understand things.

We focus on how the concept of resilience works, not just to make sense of the current context – inside and outside the EU – but also to shape social realities, especially in a context of deep uncertainty. Resilience represents what recent IR scholarship might call a 'concept at work'.[6] As constructivists and practice theorists argue, concepts do not just work as representations but also have social and political functions and are both embedded in and help to construct the sociopolitical world. Thus, in this article, we examine the political functions of resilience at the EU level and how these roles have evolved over time, changing the meaning of resilience with them.

Specifically, we argue that the effects of global politics and recent crises on the EU's concept of resilience has been to change it from an ambiguous but highly ambitious notion to a narrower one, mainly concerned with internal security. However, this narrowing has also worked to empty the concept of meaning, becoming a 'slogan and cliché for framing the commonsense'.[7] The pandemic, the Ukraine war, and the wider crisis of the liberal international order have had a significant impact on the confidence of collective international actors and, in particular, the EU. We argue that as a 'concept at work', resilience has come to reflect this feeling of ontological and epistemological insecurity in a more conservative and reactive way that prioritises internal security over external opportunity. What we see with parallel developments in the EU's response to recent crises and its global strategy is a move away from the critical, interrogative potential of the concept of resilience in relation to its emphasis on complexity, towards a duller, common-sense framing device or – worse still – buzzword. As a concept at work, resilience helps sustain the EU's current practices, particularly in relation to the general feeling of crisis and vulnerability, but it does so in a bland and uninspiring way.

To understand the conceptual politics surrounding resilience and how they have shaped its meaning over time, we also draw on the literature on the role of ideas in public policy,[8] and particularly on the notion of 'coalition magnets'.[9] In line with this idea, we argue that the emergence of resilience can be explained because it was used by individual policy entrepreneurs as a coalition

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[4]Daniel P. Aldrich and Michelle A. Meyer, 'Social capital and community resilience', *American Behavioral Scientist*, 59:2 (2015), pp. 254–69; Philippe Bourbeau, *On Resilience: Genealogy, Logics and World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018); Jonathan Joseph, *Varieties of Resilience: Studies in Governmentality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

[5]Piki Ish-Shalom, 'Introduction', in Piki Ish-Shalom (ed.), *Concepts at Work: On the Linguistic Infrastructure of World Politics* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2021), pp. 1–23.

[6]Ibid.

[7]Ibid., p. 15.

[8]Nicolas Jabko, *Playing the Market: A Political Strategy for Uniting Europe* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006); Vivienne Schmidt, 'Discursive institutionalism: The explanatory power of ideas and discourse', *Annual Review of Political Science*, 11 (2008), pp. 303–26.

[9]Daniel Béland and Robert Henry Cox, 'Ideas as coalition magnets: Coalition building, policy entrepreneurs, and power relations', *Journal of European Public Policy*, 23:3 (2016), pp. 428–45.

magnet due its capacity to draw support from diverse constituencies and groups at a time of epistemic uncertainty. In the case of the EU, it was Nathalie Tocci, an IR scholar and Special Advisor to the EU's High Representative, who emerged in this role. The appeal of resilience was linked to its polysemy and high valence which enabled the strategic deployment of constructive ambiguity to bring together groups with diverging views about the EU's role as an international actor.[10] This broader, but also more ambiguous notion of resilience was not just essentially contested in a linguistic way, but also in practice, revealing political struggles at the heart of EU foreign policy. However, over time, this constructive ambiguity has given way to a narrower definition which reflects changes in the external context, but also power coalitions and institutional path dependencies. In this way, this article contributes not only to uncovering the political functions of the concept of resilience 'at work', but also to shedding light on the life cycle of a coalition magnet.[11]

Our argument is that the current situation is mainly about the EU building its own resilience. Active and dynamic 'policy entrepreneurship' has given way to a more cautious and conservative use of resilience. As the EU's understanding of resilience as a foreign policy strategy diminishes, so it is increasingly used to describe the recovery task at home. This also suggests a move from external to internal resilience-building. In putting their case, the EU's 'policy entrepreneurs' have chosen a bland form of clarity over the more dynamic promise of ambiguity.[12] The current crises have paradoxically given the concept both greater prominence and lesser significance. After introducing our analytical framework and the essential contestedness of the concept of resilience, we proceed by examining resilience-at-work in the EU Global Strategy (EUGS) and the conceptual shift that has taken place with the Strategic Compass and the EU's Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF). We conclude that, following significant changes in its external environment, the EU has turned in on itself and is mainly interested in building its own resilience, not other people's.

Concepts at work

In outlining our argument about the meaning and use of resilience, we follow the position that concepts have two aspects – an expressive or representational aspect and a social or political significance and function.[13] Given the latter aspect, we agree with the position, outlined by Piki Ish-Shalom, that what mainstream constructivism misses is the importance of contestation in the construction of meanings and hence social reality. Thus, a focus on concepts is important because it is through them that contestation over meanings takes place.[14]

We therefore position ourselves in relation to some recent developments in IR theory, most notably the 'practice turn', which develops constructivism's already well-known emphasis on the relationships between ideas and actions. Admittedly, there are many different ways to go about showing this – speech acts, institutional analysis, agenda setting, linguistic analysis, and other analytical approaches to knowledge. We have decided here to test out one of the most recent approaches, named by Ish-Shalom, Berenskoetter, and others[15] as 'concepts at work', which, in our view, provides a useful umbrella for examining a range of these issues while allowing for a pluralist approach to methodology and social theory. In short, this seems the clearest and most straightforward way of going about showing how the EU has been putting the concept of resilience to work. This also allows us, for now, to sidestep more problematic theoretical disputes in the field, and, in keeping with this attitude, we place less emphasis on theoretical justification of this approach, instead looking at how it might work practically. In a sense, we put 'concepts at work' to work.

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[10]Maya Jegen and Frédéric Mérand, 'Constructive ambiguity: Comparing the EU's energy and defence policies', *West European Politics*, 37:1 (2014), pp. 182–203.

[11]Béland and Cox, 'Ideas as coalition magnets', p. 442.

[12]Jegen and Mérand, 'Constructive ambiguity', p. 185.

[13]Ish-Shalom, *Concepts at Work*, p. 1.

[14]Ibid., p. 2.

[15]Ibid.

Having said this, all such approaches make certain commitments about the nature of concepts that might be agreed or disagreed upon. As mentioned above, we favour concepts at work because its proponents favour a focus on contestation. As they make clear, there are possible linkages here to those who emphasise the disputed character of concepts and the relation between this contestation and social action, although this is a diverse list that includes Gallie, Bourdieu, Foucault, and Gramsci.[16] We might also refer back to Weber's claim that the 'analytical ordering of reality' occurs through conceptual construction, reformulation, and transformation.[17] As a general rule, we take a concept, as opposed to a word, idea, or description, to imply a certain abstraction that helps to generate knowledge of the world through giving meaning to some of its features.[18] A word might capture one particular thing, whereas a concept bundles together multiple elements, aspects, and experiences.[19] However, this leaves a concept more open to change and more likely to be disputed. For Berenskoetter, this means that concepts travel across space, get 'extended', widen and shift their boundaries to include more or fewer elements, or, with 'intension', zoom in or out to highlight general or specific elements.[20] In turn, concepts form part of a wider field of inquiry and are used to 'construct' theories. Guzzini calls this 'constitutive theorising'.[21] Both notions point to a wider theoretical and practical function. In Gerring's terms, what makes a good concept should be judged against its use in the field; in his view, there are eight criteria of adequacy for concepts – familiarity, resonance, parsimony, coherence, differentiation, depth, theoretical utility, and field utility.[22]

What are the advantages of this approach? First, it restates the well-known constructivist argument that concepts are central for both understanding and producing social reality.[23] Concepts work to shape and limit our understanding of the social world, they are enacted and performed, and they inscribe themselves onto reality through decisions, speech acts, and other representations.[24] Importantly, when considering how this plays out within the EU, these concepts are negotiated among different actors and act as vehicles of persuasion. Thus, understanding concepts 'at work' allows us to explore the 'link between concepts, contingency, and power',[25] indicating the power dynamics behind concepts. Drawing on this perspective, we examine the political functions of the concept of resilience at the EU level. We highlight how conceptual politics have resulted in particular notions of resilience being prioritised and how this has the potential to shape EU external action.

Concepts at work both express representations of phenomena and have meaning due to their social and political significance, effects, and functions.[26] The latter aspects may be contradictory – or may produce what we can call *contradictions-in-practice*. The notion of contradictions-in-practice reflects the adoption of the concept by different actors, agencies, and institutions, but also, notably for resilience, different forms of intervention in different fields of action. For example, intervention in the field of critical infrastructure protection tends to promote 'robustness', as we shall see with the EU's security strategy. In a different field such as disaster

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[16] Ibid., p. 2.

[17] Max Weber, *The Methodology of the Social Sciences* (New York: Free Press, 1949).

[18] Felix Berenskoetter, 'Approaches to concept analysis', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 45:2 (2017), pp. 151–73 (p. 154).

[19] Ibid., p. 158.

[20] Ibid., p. 165.

[21] Stefano Guzzini, 'The ends of international relations theory: Stages of reflexivity and modes of theorizing', *European Journal of International Relations*, 19:3 (2013), pp. 521–541 (p. 534).

[22] John Gerring, 'What makes a concept good? A critical framework for understanding concept formation in the social sciences', *Polity*, 31:1 (1999), pp. 357–93 (p. 384). See also Richard Swedberg, 'Theorizing in sociology and social science: Turning to the context of discovery', *Theory and Society*, 41:1 (2012), pp. 1–40.

[23] Felix Berenskoetter, 'Approaches to concept analysis', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 45:2 (2017), pp. 151–73; Ish-Shalom, *Concepts at Work*.

[24] Jan Wilkens and Oliver Kessler, 'Concluding chapter: Concepts at work in Global IR', in Piki Ish-Shalom (ed.), *Concepts at Work: On the Linguistic Infrastructure of World Politics* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2021), pp. 203–221 (p. 206).

[25] Ibid., p. 204.

[26] Ish-Shalom, *Concepts at Work*, p. 1.

risk reduction, resilience is more associated with adaptation and transformation. These contradictions might open up the space for contestation and change in the meaning of concepts. Below, we refer to some of these situations in terms such as tactical usage, epistemic uncertainty, policy entrepreneurship, and hegemonic struggle.

Ish-Shalom usefully suggests some tactics involved in deploying concepts: (1) to fix a meaning to contested ideas; (2) to increase the fuzziness and ambiguity of the concept in order to fend off challenges; or (3) to reduce the idea to a buzzword or common-sense framing.[27] We will see that this is somewhat similar to how Brand and Jax describe resilience as a two-faced concept that either fixes meaning through a more descriptive deployment or acts as a boundary object with a wide and vague meaning that deliberately blurs contested issues.[28] In the case of the EU, in a first phase (during the drafting and early stages of implementation of the EUGS), a strategy of ambiguity was more conducive to establishing a broad coalition and bridging differences among constituencies with disparate interests. In a second phase, with a changing global situation and the arrival of the new geopolitical Commission, the meaning of resilience has become more inward-looking and focused on protection but remains fuzzy enough that other alternative options have remained closed off. In the words of Ish-Shalom, the 'emptiness of discussion and a vacuous concept … stifles public deliberation and all possible dissent and criticism'.[29]

Conceptual politics: Uncertainty, agency, and institutions

In order to understand the particular evolution of resilience as a concept at work, we draw attention to three factors: epistemic uncertainty, the agency of policy entrepreneurs, and the institutional setting within which conceptual politics are embedded.

First, the emergence and particular evolution of the meaning of resilience need to be understood within a context of epistemic uncertainty linked to recent crises. In using this term, we draw attention not only to the (ontological) global security challenges facing states, but also to the way that crises are understood and are bound up with our processes of conceptualisation. Crises open up the space for agency and conceptual contestation. For instance, Jacobs, Gheyle, De Ville, and Orbie refer to crises as 'moments of dislocation' understood as a 'visible conflict through which the potential choices for alternative futures are articulated and recognized, resulting in a genuine struggle for hegemony that challenges (defenders of) the status quo'.[30] External shocks such as the Covid-19 pandemic or the Ukraine war highlight the relevance of the external context in shaping the EU's foreign and security policy. In this article, we argue that we need to locate the emergence of resilience in relation to a growing sense of epistemic uncertainty which requires novel solutions from policymakers. In other words, understanding the evolution of the concept of resilience requires an 'outside-in approach', an 'understanding how the EU has reacted to the battery of international challenges and constraints it has come to face'.[31] For Youngs, recent external challenges have led to a shift in the EU's external action towards what he terms 'protective security', prioritising the protection of the EU rather than its traditional role of 'transformative power' in the EU's neighbourhood.[32] Our analysis of the evolution of the resilience concept concurs with this argument. External crises are not just something the EU 'responds to' but have also transformed the nature of the EU itself and its foreign and security policies. Crises are therefore both external influences and narratives with a political function of constructing and reproducing the environment

[27] Ibid., p. 15.

[28] Fridolin Simon Brand and Kurt Jax, 'Focusing the meaning(s) of resilience: Resilience as a descriptive concept and a boundary object', *Ecology and Society*, 12:1 (2007), p. 31.

[29] Ish-Shalom, *Concepts at Work*, p. 17.

[30] Thomas Jacobs, Niels Gheyle, Ferdi De Ville, and Jan Orbie, 'The hegemonic politics of "strategic autonomy" and "resilience": COVID-19 and the dislocation of EU trade policy', *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 61:3 (2023), pp. 3–19 (p. 4).

[31] Richard Youngs, *The European Union and Global Politics* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2021), p. 2.

[32] Ibid., p. 5.

where they operate. They may encourage radical thinking about complex problems, but it is just as likely that crises will be articulated in a more conservative way to stabilise an institution or practice and head off any radical change.[33]

Secondly, while epistemic uncertainty might facilitate the emergence of particular concepts or change in the meaning of existing ones, it cannot, on its own, explain these outcomes. As noted in the literature, 'ideas without agency cannot be effective, but agency without ideas cannot provide any direction to change'.[34] Agency is thus central to processes of conceptual contestation.[35] Linking this to the work of different policy actors, we follow Béland and Cox in suggesting that we must look to the role played by individual and collective actors (policy entrepreneurs) in mobilising particular concepts and how they have been used to build successful coalitions.[36] A focus on agency also highlights the role of power struggles at the centre of conceptual politics in EU foreign policymaking. For example, in their analysis of EU trade policy, Jacobs et al. show how hegemonic power struggles explain the partial adoption of new buzzwords such as resilience as a way to (re)produce the existing neoliberal hegemony.[37] These hegemonic power struggles[38] reflect underlying interests and visions and fall under such descriptions as neoliberal, national-social, national-conservative, European-social-democratic, and populist[39] or alternatively as embedded neoliberal, neo-mercantilist, and socially oriented factions.[40] The notion of resilience is caught up in these hegemonic power struggles, most notably neoliberalism and its alternatives. However, these struggles also generate a degree of autonomy for various policy entrepreneurs to operate. As Bulmer and Joseph note, while integration is driven by elites, these cannot simply be reduced to different class or capital fractions since the 'European elite' is peculiarly 'disembedded'.[41]

Combining insights from the literature on ideas and on power, Béland and Cox argue that some ideas can become 'coalition magnets' used by policy entrepreneurs to advance their preferences through wide coalitions.[42] Not all ideas or concepts can be successfully mobilised. Thus, the success of coalition magnets depends on the interplay between agency (policy entrepreneurs) and the inherent qualities of concepts (in this case, resilience). Two intrinsic properties are important here: valence and ambiguity (polysemic character). In their study of sustainability, social inclusion, and solidarity, they find that 'ideas are more suitable to be coalition magnets when they are high in valence and/or polysemic'.[43] Valence refers to the emotional quality of an idea, which can be high/low or positive/negative. Those ideas that have high positive valence, i.e. which generate a strong positive emotional response among audiences, are more likely to be deployed as coalition magnets.

Similarly, those ideas that are polysemic or ambiguous will also be more likely to be mobilised by policy entrepreneurs to create wide coalitions. There is an extensive literature that has pointed at the role of ambiguity in EU policymaking as a way to create and maintain consensus among a

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[33] Joseph Masco, 'The crisis in crisis', *Current Anthropology*, 58:S15 (2017), pp. S65–76.

[34] B. Guy Peters, Jon Pierre, and Desmond S. King. 'The politics of path dependency: Political conflict in historical institutionalism', *The Journal of Politics*, 67:4 (2005), pp. 1275–1300 (p. 1296).

[35] Ish-Shalom, *Concepts at Work*, p. 14.

[36] Béland and Cox, 'Ideas as coalition magnets', p. 30.

[37] Jacobs, Gheyle, De Ville, and Orbie, 'Hegemonic projects'.

[38] See Simon Bulmer and Jonathan Joseph, 'European integration in crisis? Of supranational integration, hegemonic projects and domestic politics', *European Journal of International Relations*, 22:4 (2016), pp. 725–48; also Scott Lavery and Davide Schmid, 'European integration and the new global disorder', *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 59:5 (2021), pp. 1322–38; Luuk Schmitz and Timo Seidl, 'As open as possible, as autonomous as necessary: Understanding the rise of open strategic autonomy in EU trade policy', *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 61:3 (2022), pp. 834–52.

[39] Bulmer and Joseph, 'European integration in crisis?'.

[40] Schmitz and Seidl, 'As open as possible'.

[41] Bulmer and Joseph, 'European integration in crisis?', p. 737.

[42] Béland and Cox, 'Ideas as coalition magnets'.

[43] Ibid., p. 441.

wide range of actors.[44] Constructive ambiguity has been said to play a particularly important role in foreign and security policies due to their sensitive nature.[45] This is also the case when it comes to resilience and the EU's external action.[46] According to Jegen and Mérand,[47] constructive ambiguity as a policy strategy appears particularly relevant where national preferences are heterogeneous and the EU's legal basis is weak, as it is the case with EU foreign and security policies. As we will discuss below, resilience has both a high positive valence and is polysemic (both generally and within the EU context), and this facilitated its mobilisation by policy entrepreneurs during the drafting of the EU Global Strategy.

Thirdly, the role of agency is limited by extant institutional path dependencies and ambiguities therein. When discussing the role of constructive ambiguity in energy and defence policies, Jegen and Mérand[48] refer to the importance of the 'institutional opportunity structure' which might determine whether constructive ambiguity can be used successfully or not by policy entrepreneurs. Where it can be embedded into existing legal-formal structures, ambiguity will have a constructive impact, strengthening European integration. But where those institutions are weak (such as in the case of the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy), ambiguity will actually have a more damaging impact, sometimes stalling progress. While acknowledging the role that institutions play in enabling or constraining the emergence of particular concepts, here we are more interested in the way institutional legacies shape conceptual change. In line with the scholarship on ideas, we argue that the way concepts are understood will be determined by existing institutional legacies. As put by Carstensen, 'agency often takes the form of bricolage, where bits and pieces of the existing ideational and institutional legacy are put together in new forms leading to significant political transformation'.[49]

Our empirical analysis of the evolution of the concept of resilience draws on a content analysis of key documents (the EU Global Strategy, the Joint Communication on Resilience, the Strategic Compass, and the Resilience and Recovery Facility) as well as accompanying reports. It is worth noting that our focus is on the changing *meaning* of the concept of resilience, but we do not examine whether this has led (or not) to changes in terms of policy implementation. When examining whether resilience has acted as a coalition magnet at the EU level, we look for evidence that this idea has been manipulated by policy entrepreneurs and that the idea has become a key focal point in policy discussions (adopted in key documents and policy initiatives and supported by decision-makers). We also explore how resilience has brought together individuals and constituencies with divergent interests.[50] This article also contributes to this literature on coalition magnets by examining the evolution of the concept of resilience over time, and, in doing so, it considers the life cycle of a coalition magnet.[51] In this regard, we are concerned about how and to what extent the meaning of resilience has been redefined over time and how this has been impacted by coalition-building strategies. As the constructive ambiguity of resilience becomes less useful (due to changes in the global context and power coalitions), a narrowing and emptying of the concept becomes a

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[44]Amandine Crespy and Pierr Vanheuverzwijn, 'What "Brussels" means by structural reforms: Empty signifier or constructive ambiguity?', *Comparative European Politics*, 17:1 (2019), pp. 92–111; Jabko, *Playing the Market*; Jegen and Mérand, 'Constructive ambiguity'.

[45]See Jolyon Howorth, 'France, Britain and the Euro-Atlantic crisis', *Survival*, 45:4 (2004), pp. 173–92; Antoine Rayroux, 'Speaking EU defence at home: Contentious discourses and constructive ambiguity', *Cooperation and Conflict*, 49:3 (2014), pp. 386–405.

[46]Ana E. Juncos, 'Resilience as the new EU foreign policy paradigm: A pragmatist turn?', *European Security*, 26:1 (2017), pp. 1–18; Wolfgang Wagner and Rosanne Anholt, 'Resilience as the EU Global Strategy's new leitmotif: Pragmatic, problematic or promising?', *Contemporary Security Policy*, 37:3 (2016), pp. 414–30.

[47]Jegen and Mérand, 'Constructive ambiguity'.

[48]Ibid.

[49]Martin B. Carstensen, 'Paradigm Man vs. the Bricoleur: Bricolage as an alternative vision of agency in ideational change', *European Political Science Review*, 3:1 (2011), pp. 147–167 (p. 147).

[50]Béland and Cox, 'Ideas as coalition magnets', p. 429.

[51]Ibid., p. 442.

more successful strategy. But before we explore resilience-at-work within the EU, it is important to understand the broader conceptual politics surrounding the term resilience.

Resilience as an essentially contested concept

Several engagements with the concept of resilience have invoked W. B. Gallie's 1956 notion of essentially contested concept. While Gallie used the essentially contested notion to explain such ideas as freedom and democracy, this could equally apply to resilience insofar as it is 'lack[ing] a single, operationalized definition, and whose competing definitions carry implicit assumptions about social and political order'.[52] Essentially contested concepts such as resilience[53] are particularly apt when it comes to studying conceptual politics. What such studies as Grove,[54] Brand and Jax,[55] and Rega and Bonifazi[56] seem to agree on is that resilience, as an essentially contested concept, is infested with normative implications insofar as the concept has not only multiple meanings, but also contested normative implications. According to Rega and Bonifazi, resilience entails value judgements about achievements which are 'internally complex, constitutively ambiguous and inherently open (and hence, persistently vague)'.[57] Advocates of the concept know and will even welcome the fact that other parties will present competing claims about what resilience is and what it entails. As Grove summarises:

> The meaning of resilience is thus neither transparent nor objectively determined. Rather, it is essentially contested ... it is bound up in ongoing debates and struggles over how to live in a world without the guarantees of modern security.[58]

As we move towards the notion of concepts at work, we can therefore suggest that resilience is not only a contested concept, but, as Grove puts it, a *site of contestation* where the term mobilises in response to specific problems in specific situations in order to produce specific effects.[59] As noted earlier, the contradictions-in-practice that we observe in the case of resilience are illustrative of the different meanings attached to this concept by different actors, agencies, and institutions and in different fields of action. Grove, for example, talks of resilience as an 'infinitely elastic concept' that can be twisted and shaped into all kinds of different forms, but which, as noted, may produce contradictions when applied.[60] The best-known argument on this is that of Brand and Jax, who talk of resilience as a 'boundary object'.[61] We will summarise below the argument for how this provides opportunities, while also raising significant issues.

As noted, resilience has multiple meanings (see Table 1 for a typology of resilience). Brand and Jax identify 3 categories, 10 classes, and 10 corresponding definitions of resilience. The three categories identify whether resilience is primarily a descriptive concept, a normative one, or some form of hybrid.[62] In studying the evolution of the concept, we may start with the more descriptive ecological concept, considered by Rega and Bonifazi[63] as a neutral, technical term, representing an emergent property of ecosystems. This is closer to engineering understandings of resilience as the equilibrium of a system, and resilience might therefore be labelled as a *system property* as

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[52]Kevin Grove, *Resilience* (London: Routledge, 2018), p. 31.

[53]W. B. Gallie, 'Essentially contested concepts', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 56 (1956), pp. 167–98; Grove, *Resilience*.

[54]Grove, *Resilience*.

[55]Brand and Jax, 'Focusing'.

[56]Carlo Rega and Alessandro Bonifazi, 'The rise of resilience in spatial planning: A journey through disciplinary boundaries and contested practices', *Sustainability*, 12:18 (2020), p. 7277.

[57]Ibid., p. 7.

[58]Grove, *Resilience*, p. 49.

[59]Ibid., p. 32.

[60]Ibid., p. 36.

[61]Brand and Jax, 'Focusing'.

[62]Ibid., p. 24.

[63]Rega and Bonifazi, 'Rise of resilience', p. 5.

Table 1. A typology of resilience.

Which function does resilience play? (degree of normativity)	How resilient? (degree of change)	Whose resilience? (who should promote resilience?)
Resilience as a descriptive concept (fixed meaning, emergent property of social systems)	Resilience as a system property of stability, status quo (e.g. engineering resilience)	External resilience-building: focused on facilitating the resilience of others
Resilience as a boundary object (malleable and ambiguous concept)	Resilience as a process of adaptation and transformation (ecological resilience)	Internal resilience-building: stronger focus on the resilience of the self or relevant community

opposed to later social science applications that consider resilience as a *process or outcome*.[64] Moser, Meerow, Arnott, and Jack's typology seems to match with that of Rega and Bonifazi, who suggest that 'under the first conceptualization, resilience is a synonym of a stability property of systems, also called elasticity. In particular, engineering resilience applied to ecological systems focuses on the persistence of population levels or communities.'[65] Brand and Jax argue that this approach to resilience refers to a state of steady equilibrium, understood in terms of the amount of disturbance the system can absorb before changing to another stable regime.[66] This follows Holling's seminal paper where he defines resilience as a 'measure of the persistence of systems and of their ability to absorb change and disturbance and still maintain the same relationships between populations or state variables'.[67]

However, Holling's position developed away from the idea of the ability of robust systems to withstand shocks and incorporates thinking on complex adaptive systems which introduces such elements as disturbance, reorganisation, innovation, and transformation. This development now becomes known as social-ecological resilience.[68] Holling's development is important in adding complexity to resilience. However, the consequence is a move away from resilience as a descriptive interpretation or what Brand and Jax call a clearly specified and delimited stability concept.[69] In contrast to this use of resilience as a descriptive concept, Brand and Jax note how resilience has become a boundary object with a more malleable but also vaguer meaning. This is important when viewing resilience as a concept at work, since:

> Boundary objects are able to coordinate different groups without a consensus about their aims and interests. If they are both open to interpretation and valuable for various scientific disciplines or social groups, boundary objects can be highly useful as a communication tool in order to bridge scientific disciplines and the gap between science and policy.[70]

For Brand and Jax, a boundary object can provide common ground and reconcile differing interests, thus playing the role of a coalition magnet, allowing each party to maintain their own interpretation and understanding.[71] This sounds like a positive thing and exactly what the EU might want given its many actors with their different interests. However, this usually comes at a price – and this concerns both conceptual clarity and practical relevance. The original descriptive understanding of resilience as ecological can be criticised as conservative in seeking to return to a

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[64]Susanne Moser, Sarah Meerow, James Arnott, and Emily Jack, 'The turbulent world of resilience: Interpretations and themes for transdisciplinary dialogue', *Climatic Change*, 153 (2019), pp. 21–40 (p. 26).

[65]Rega and Bonifazi, 'Rise of resilience', p. 5.

[66]Brand and Jax, 'Focusing', p. 24.

[67]C. S. Holling, 'Resilience and stability of ecological systems', *Annual Review of Ecology and Systematics*, 4 (1973), pp. 1–23 (p. 14).

[68]Brand and Jax, 'Focusing', p. 27.

[69]Ibid., p. 30.

[70]Ibid., p. 31.

[71]Ibid.

prior state.[72] But equally problematic are attempts to move away from the descriptive usage, either in blending descriptive aspects with normative and prescriptive approaches or extending the concept so much as to apply the concept too widely, dilute its meaning, or use it ambiguously.[73] It is worth noting at this point that we view the EU's conception of resilience as moving in the direction from a more transformative notion towards a descriptive concept.

To repeat the earlier point raised by Ish-Shalom,[74] we see how these two understandings of resilience relate to two aspects of concepts at work. When applied to the way that the concept has entered into the discourse and practices of institutions like the EU, we find a tactical choice to be made between either attaching a single, clearer, but more descriptive account of what is in fact an essentially contested concept and encouraging its unreflexive adoption in practice, or drawing on the increasingly fuzzy and ambiguous understanding of resilience (and related concepts such as sustainability) to ward of potential challenge and opposition – or else, perhaps worst of all, combining the two tactics of 'ambiguity' and 'fixity'[75] to empty the concept of meaning and render it a slogan, cliché, or buzzword.

We now move to look in more detail at the EU's use of the concept of resilience: the emergence of a 'resilience turn', the role of coalition magnets, and current shifts in meaning as a result of changes in the external environment which have increased uncertainty. We do this by comparing two areas where it is prominent. The first looks at the shift from the EU's Global Strategy (EUGS) of 2016 to the current development of the Strategic Compass (2023). The second area looks at how the EU has responded to the Covid-19 pandemic in its Recovery and Resilience Facility (2021). In both cases, the EU has chosen the above-mentioned third option of blending ambiguity and fixity in the meaning of resilience in order to shift from an externally facing foreign policy strategy to an inward-looking one that is mainly concerned with safeguarding its own institutional resilience.

The EU Global Strategy: Resilience as a coalition magnet (2015–19)

While governing risks has been a long-standing concern among both scholars and practitioners of the EU,[76] resilience constitutes a more recent phenomenon in EU policy. Shifting from a focus on risk regulation within the EU, resilience suggests a vision of the world as complex and interconnected, where risks are understood as systemic risks (rather than simple risks).[77] Since predicting and calculating risks has become increasingly difficult, focusing on prevention and building resilience appears to be the answer. Moreover, a shift to resilience also implies a focus on the governance of others, in particular populations in the Global South. As argued by Ana Juncos, 'resilience has now become the risk management strategy *par excellence* in peacebuilding and humanitarian interventions'.[78] The resilience approach has thus become a major feature of recent European foreign policy as well as other areas of EU policymaking such as civil protection, environmental planning, and infrastructure protection. Building state and societal resilience in the EU's

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[72]Moser, Meerow, Arnott, and Jack, 'Turbulent world', p. 33.

[73]Brand and Jax, 'Focusing', p. 23.

[74]Ish-Shalom, *Concepts at Work*, p. 15.

[75]Brent Steele and Luke Campbell, 'The concept of success in (and of) war', in Piki Ish-Shalom (ed.), *Concepts at Work: On the Linguistic Infrastructure of World Politics* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2021), pp. 43–64 (p. 44).

[76]Marjolein B. A. van Asselt and Ellen Vos, 'Wrestling with uncertain risks: EU regulation of GMOs and the uncertainty paradox', *Journal of Risk Research*, 11:1–2 (2008), pp. 281–300; Jale Tosun, 'How the EU handles uncertain risks: Understanding the role of the precautionary principle', *Journal of European Public Policy*, 20:10 (2013), pp. 1517–28; Esther Versluis, Marjolein B. A. van Asselt, Tessa Fox, and Anike Hommels, 'The EU Seveso regime in practice: From uncertainty blindness to uncertainty tolerance', *Journal of Hazardous Materials*, 184 (2010), pp. 627–31.

[77]Ortwin Renn, Andreas Klinke, and Marjolein B. A. van Asselt, 'Coping with complexity, uncertainty and ambiguity in risk governance: A synthesis', *Ambio*, 40 (2011), pp. 231–46.

[78]Ana E. Juncos, 'Resilience in peacebuilding: Contesting uncertainty, ambiguity, and complexity', *Contemporary Security Policy*, 39:4 (2018), pp. 559–574 (p. 559).

neighbourhood has been identified as one of the key priorities in the EU Global Strategy (EUGS).[79] Resilience is promoted as the answer to a number of concerns regarding long-term development and short-term emergency intervention, disaster risk reduction, and political instabilities in the neighbourhood.

The first thing to note is that, originally, resilience had a narrower and clearer meaning in the EU context. In line with Ish-Shalom's first strategy, the European Commission initially opted for a clearer definition, limiting its application to food security during humanitarian emergencies.[80] However, in the years that followed, this meaning was stretched so that resilience became a boundary object trying to generate support from a wide range of policy actors and fields (among others, the security, development, crisis response, environmental, and humanitarian fields). The evolution of this concept can be explained in relation to contextual, agential, and institutional factors.

Context

The EU's resilience turn needs to be located in a context of increasing epistemic uncertainty. As the EUGS penholder, Nathalie Tocci, notes, the world of the European Security Strategy of 2003, where 'the liberal international order seemed unchallenged' and where the EU was able to act as a normative power, was gone by 2015.[81] Instead, the 2015 strategic assessment that preceded the drafting of the EUGS described the world as more connected, contested, and complex.[82] As the EU was faced with increasing epistemic and ontological uncertainty and insecurity, this opened up the possibility for a new concept such as resilience to be adopted at the EU level. Resilience was also in line with the 'principled pragmatism' espoused by the EUGS, a more pragmatic and realistic way of understanding and responding to geopolitical challenges.[83] Resilience was thus seen as a 'middle way'[84] or a 'middle ground'[85] between a more realist foreign policy and the EU's ambitions as a normative power. But resilience is not just another strategy to respond to new geopolitical realities; it also embodies a new understanding of the world as one of complexity and radical uncertainty. As acknowledged by Tocci, 'Through the concept of resilience, the EU made a first conceptual step toward recognizing it more as such. In other words, the EU acknowledged the need to build risk and uncertainty into its policies.'[86]

Agency and contestation

Policy entrepreneurs such as Nathalie Tocci, then Special Advisor to the High Representative Federica Moguerini, and Stefano Conte, Head of the Strategic Planning Unit in the European External Action Service (EEAS), were crucial in promoting resilience as a coalition magnet. Tocci herself explains that one of the reasons why resilience was selected as one of the key priorities in the EUGS was because it fitted with 'the imperative of a joined-up EU role in the world between member states and across EU institutions and polices'.[87] She goes on to argue that 'the concept of

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[79]High Representative and Vice-President of the European Commission, 'Shared vision, common action: A stronger Europe. A global strategy for the European Union's foreign and security policy' (2016), available at: {https://eeas.europa.eu/archives/docs/top_stories/pdf/eugs_review_web.pdf}.

[80]Council of the EU, 'Council conclusions on the EU approach to resilience' (28 May 2013), available at: {https://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/en/foraff/137319.pdf}.

[81]Nathalie Tocci, 'The making of the EU Global Strategy', *Contemporary Security Policy*, 37:3 (2016), pp. 461–472 (p. 464).

[82]European External Action Service (EEAS), 'The European Union in a changing global environment: A more connected, contested and complex world' (Brussels: European Union, 2015).

[83]Juncos, 'Resilience as the new EU foreign policy paradigm'.

[84]Nathalie Tocci, 'Resilience and the role of the European Union in the world', *Contemporary Security Policy*, 41:2 (2020), pp. 176–194 (p. 180).

[85]Wagner and Anholt, 'Resilience as the EU Global Strategy's new leitmotif', p. 415.

[86]Tocci, 'Resilience and the role of the European Union', p. 181.

[87]Ibid., p.178; also Tocci, 'The making of EU Global Strategy'.

resilience and its broadly shared definition provided a common lexicon across policy communities'. All these different policy communities could support resilience as a priority because they all agreed with a broad definition of the concept as 'the capacity to adapt, respond, react, and bounce back in the aftermath of shocks and crises'.[88]

The concept of resilience thus became a focal point for a wide coalition of actors during the drafting of the EU Global Strategy because of its high positive valence and its polysemic character. First, resilience was seen as a positive concept, favoured not only by EU policymakers but also by the EU's partners. In the past, EU partners had complained about labels such as 'failed' or 'fragile states';[89] resilience-building and the language of partnership and local ownership associated with it were seen as less hierarchical. As with the comparable concept of sustainability, resilience is 'almost always invoked as a favourable term … has a positive association, as something desirable to pursue'.[90]

Secondly, at its point of emergence during the discussions on the EUGS, ambiguity was seen as a positive advantage, given the heterogeneous interests of member states and EU institutions. As the EU's use of resilience first developed, Wagner and Anholt referred to the 'constructive ambiguity' of resilience as a positive element that was used to bridge different approaches in the EU's external action.[91] The ambiguity of resilience provided space for political entrepreneurs such as Tocci to operate and attempt to bring the most powerful actors together.[92] Specifically, the contestedness of resilience facilitated cooperation between traditionally separated fields such as humanitarian, development, and foreign policy communities.

Institutions

Institutional legacies also explain the adoption of resilience as a coalition magnet. The multilevel character of the EU and its complex institutional structure necessitated a broad definition of resilience that could be endorsed by different institutions and policy communities.[93] This made it difficult to bring about a radical paradigm shift in EU foreign policy or the adoption of a fixed (or clearer) definition of resilience. Instead, the EU chose to link resilience to the promotion of a joint and comprehensive approach. As explained by Tocci:

> back in 2015–2016 when the EUGS was being developed, resilience appeared to be a concept that different policy communities, normally compartmentalized and locked into their specific institutional logics, loyalties and lines of action, could co-own and mirror themselves in. This facilitated the task of bringing these policy worlds together, offering the scope for common ground, based upon a (seemingly) shared language.[94]

Yet even during the drafting of the EUGS and later on the Joint Communication on Resilience,[95] it became apparent that the function of resilience as a coalition magnet was going to be limited by disagreements regarding the specific application of resilience among actors in different fields. The adoption of resilience as a coalition magnet resulted in significant problems, as contradictions-in-practice emerged in the implementation of resilience. Milliano and Jurriens, for example, note

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[88]Tocci, 'Resilience and the role of the European Union', p. 178.

[89]Sonja Grimm, 'The European Union's ambiguous concept of "state fragility"', *Third World Quarterly*, 35:2 (2014), pp. 252–67.

[90]Béland and Cox, 'Ideas as coalition magnets', p. 434.

[91]Wagner and Anholt, 'Resilience as the EU Global Strategy's new leitmotif', p. 417.

[92]Jegen and Mérand, 'Constructive ambiguity', p. 183.

[93]Tocci 'Resilience and the role of the European Union'.

[94]Ibid., p. 179.

[95]European Commission and HR/VP, 'Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council: A strategic approach to resilience in the EU's external action', JOIN(2017) 21 final. Brussels (2017).

that the multiple meanings associated with resilience have led to it becoming an 'empty concept'.[96] This is not just a semantic issue but points to deeper divisions between different EU institutions and actors. This is acknowledged by Tocci, who writes that 'resilience often means different things' to the security and development communities, with the development community emphasising 'the developmental, including psychological, dimensions of resilience',[97] while presumably others have a conception of resilience more grounded in the idea of 'robustness', prioritising continuity over transformation. Among the member states, resilience also meant different things, with countries such as France translating resilience as 'resistance' (*résistance*) and others such as Eastern European countries focusing on the internal aspects of resilience (cybersecurity, critical infrastructures), while the UK adopted a more individualistic and neoliberal understanding of resilience.[98]

The ambiguity associated with resilience thus triggered contestation within what was already a very fragmented policy community, with some actors trying to set some boundaries to avoid discursive or practical slippages. Conceptual ambiguity was exploited to achieve particular aims, with some actors promoting/prioritising particular understandings of resilience that would strengthen their relative position. For example, development actors resisted the use of resilience by foreign and security actors where this might lead to the securitisation of development; for their part, humanitarian actors contested the use of the vocabulary of resilience where this put at risk the principles of neutrality and impartiality of humanitarian aid.[99] In sum, resilience was caught up in the machinations of the EU's internal politics. Its character as a concept at work was largely determined by differences in understanding and interpretation produced by the multilevel and complex structure of the EU's institutions and the different individual and collective policy actors who operate within them, resulting in contradictions-in-practice.

A geopolitical Union: The EU's Recovery and Resilience Facility and the Strategic Compass (2019–22)

The previous section has shown that, despite attempts to build a wide coalition exploiting its constructive ambiguity, resilience is clearly revealed to be an essentially contested concept. As a concept at work, it was mainly trying to hide differences between member states and different EU interests. When it became clear that this ambiguity could no longer be maintained, the concept was effectively reduced to a buzzword combining its descriptive and ambivalent characteristics. To a great extent, resilience has thus become 'a hollow concept: an empty signifier to which different policy communities [give] totally different interpretations'.[100] The shift in the meaning of resilience is evident in relation to both the EU's external policy and the Strategic Compass and the EU's response to the Covid-19 pandemic with the adoption of the Recovery and Resilience Facility. So, while the concept of resilience has been extended to new policy areas, this is at the cost of the concept losing much of its initial (albeit contested) meaning.

Context

The shift in narrative was already obvious in the programme of the new von der Leyen Commission that took over at the end of 2019. Tocci had already warned of the increasing securitisation of resilience; she also argued that by 2019, 'EU actors still discussed resilience to the east and south, but they increasingly focused also on the resilience of the European Union and its member states as such'.[101] In its first Strategic Foresight Report of 2020, the Commission singled out resilience

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[96]Cecile W. J. de Milliano and Jeroen Jurriens, 'Realities of resilience in practice: Lessons learnt through a pilot EU aid volunteer initiative', *Resilience*, 4:2 (2016), pp. 79–94.

[97]Tocci, 'The making of EU Global Strategy', p. 70.

[98]Joseph, *Varieties of Resilience*.

[99]Juncos, 'Resilience in peacebuilding'.

[100]Tocci, 'Resilience and the role of the European Union', p. 184.

[101]Ibid., p. 187.

as the new 'compass' for EU policies, but the shifting context and, in particular, the challenge posed by the Covid-19 pandemic meant that a more inward-looking understanding of resilience began to emerge: 'Europe needs to further strengthen its resilience and bounce forward, i.e. not only recover but emerge stronger'.[102] For his part, Josep Borrell, the EU's High Representative, and Thierry Breton, European Commissioner for Internal Market, would also emphasise how the Covid-19 pandemic also required a new reconceptualisation of resilience: 'Faced with the sudden and devastating effects of the crisis, our fellow citizens are fully aware of the need for a resilient and autonomous Europe, assertive of its values, strong in its convictions, firm in its ambitions and confident of its means.'[103]

The Strategic Compass provides the most recent assessment of the EU's strategic environment, its vision and challenges. Its endorsement by the European Council in March 2022 came under the shadow of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This seemly bore out both the claim to a new, more hostile international environment and the need to bolster the EU's own resilience. The latter is also reflected in the response to the Covid-19 pandemic, the main instrument of which is the Recovery and Resilience Facility, agreed by the European Council in 2020 as part of the Next Generation EU recovery package.

In the case of the Strategic Compass, changes to the global context and particularly the epistemic uncertainty generated by the Covid-19 and Ukraine crises have created opportunities for conceptual contestation. Jacobs et al. refer to this situation as a 'moment of dislocation'.[104] The Strategic Compass speaks of 'an uncertain world, full of fast-changing threats and geopolitical dynamics'.[105] Epistemic uncertainty has led to a recalibration of the concept from a more transformative and outward-looking understanding towards a more descriptive and inward-looking one. The Covid-19 pandemic and Russia's war in Ukraine have diverted more political energy and resources away from the goal of 'building resilience to the East and the South'. Resilience is still present in the EU's narrative (mainly in the section of the Strategic Compass titled 'Secure'). However, this time the focus is not on facilitating or engineering resilience in the neighbourhood, but *of* the EU itself and *within* the EU (i.e. societal resilience against pandemics). For instance, the Strategic Compass states that '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'.[106] According to Jean-Pierre Van Aubel – the penholder of the EU Strategic Compass – one of the main differences between the Compass and the EUGS relates to the changing meaning of resilience. Compared to the focus on 'the resilience of third countries outside the EU' which was evident in the EUGS, the Strategic Compass puts forward a notion of resilience according to which 'we need to protect ourselves from threats from the outside'.[107] For Van Aubel, the meaning of resilience has changed over the past five years 'because we have seen that most of these threats apply to ourselves', including threats such as cyber attacks, hybrid threats, or misinformation.[108]

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[102]European Commission, '2020 strategic foresight report: Charting the course towards a more resilient Europe', 2020, 6, available at: {https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/strategic_foresight_report_2020_1_0.pdf}.

[103]Josep Borrell and Thierry Breton, 'For a united, resilient and sovereign Europe', EEAS website, 2020, available at: {https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/united-resilient-and-sovereign-europe-thierry-breton_en}.

[104]Jacobs, Gheyle, De Ville, and Orbie, 'Hegemonic projects', p. 6.

[105]Council of the EU, 'A Strategic Compass for Security and Defence: For a European Union that protects its citizens, values and interests and contributes to international peace and security', 7371/22, Brussels (21 March 2022), p. 5.

[106]Ibid., p. 2.

[107]EU-ISS, 'What is the Strategic Compass? The EU-ISS Foresight Podcast' (21 July 2021), available at: {https://podcasts.apple.com/gb/podcast/what-if-the-euiss-foresight-podcast/id1496326539?i=1000527602907}.

[108]Ibid.

When resilience was introduced in the Global Strategy, it was defined as 'the ability of states and societies to reform, thus withstanding and recovering from internal and external crises'.[109] The above definition of resilience in the EUGS also focused mostly on the external dimension. Although there were a few references to the internal dimension of resilience, e.g. when it comes to fostering the resilience of European democracies or the resilience of 'critical infrastructure, networks and services, and reducing cybercrime',[110] the main use of resilience during the period 2016–19 was in relation to the EU's external promotion of resilience, specifically in its neighbourhood. References to resilience also appear in the Strategic Compass, intended to guide the use of military at the EU level, but in the context of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, resilience is strongly associated with the 'internal dimension of resilience', i.e. the protection of critical infrastructures, fighting misinformation and disinformation, and cybersecurity within the EU.[111]

The RRF policy documents also explain how the Covid-19 crisis has put to the test the capacity of member states and the Union to cope with large and unexpected shocks, including vulnerabilities of health systems to cope with high contagion rates, disruptions in demand and supply, or other underlying structural weaknesses to their accessibility, effectiveness, and resilience.[112] Here, resilience is understood as a form of social cohesion and a way of mitigating the worst effects of the crisis. The general objective of the RRF is 'to promote the Union's economic, social and territorial cohesion by improving the resilience, crisis preparedness, adjustment capacity and growth potential of the Member States, mitigating the social and economic impact of the crisis'.[113] It is also about restoring and promoting sustainable growth, further integrating the economies of the member states, and contributing to the 'strategic autonomy' of the EU.

Indeed, the RRF is part of the broader EU project Next Generation EU, which is based on the ideas of repair and prepare. Thus, recovery is linked to longer-term 'next generation' aims for a 'collective and cohesive recovery that accelerates the twin green and digital transitions [which] will only strengthen Europe's competitiveness, resilience and position as a global player. This is why solidarity, cohesion and convergence must drive Europe's recovery'.[114] This has the twin effect of emphasising Europe's togetherness while also promoting a competitive attitude towards key rivals. Indeed, accelerating the green and digital transformations is explicitly linked to strengthening the EU's strategic autonomy.[115] This will only be achieved through strengthening the EU's internal resilience through internal cohesion and solidarity, strategic investment, and stronger crisis preparedness and management.

While the definition of resilience in the EUGS implied both a transformational ('ability to reform') and a more static ('recovery') notion of resilience, it is the understanding of recovery that clearly carries over into the RRF. The stated aim of the RRF is to mitigate the social and economic impact of the pandemic and make European societies more resilient, sustainable, and better prepared for new challenges such as green and digital transitions. It aims 'to help the EU emerge stronger and more resilient from the current crisis'.[116] Resilience, as understood here, is about a robust recovery. It is transformative in the sense that it is related to the EU's plans for green and digital transformations, but it is also very much in line with existing EU priorities on inclusive

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[109]High Representative and Vice-President of the European Commission, 'Shared vision, common action: A stronger Europe. A global strategy for the European Union's foreign and security policy' (2016), p. 23, available at: {https://eeas.europa.eu/archives/docs/top_stories/pdf/eugs_review_web.pdf}.

[110]Ibid., pp. 15, 22.

[111]Council of the European Union, 'Strategic Compass'.

[112]European Commission, 'Commission staff working document guidance to member states recovery and resilience plans', SWD (2021) 12 final (2021), p. 7.

[113]Ibid., p. 3.

[114]European Commission, 'Europe's moment: Repair and prepare for the next generation', SWD (2020) 98 final (2020), p. 1.

[115]Ibid., p. 2.

[116]European Commission, 'Recovery and resilience facility', Recovery and Resilience Facility (2021), available at {europa.eu}.

growth and social cohesion, now packaged as making economies and social systems 'more future-proof and more resilient to shocks and change'.[117] While these might be commendable objectives, it is difficult to work out what difference the notion of resilience is making to these strategies, or how it might be distinguished from the more prominent discourses of sustainable growth and social cohesion. Nor is the growth strategy much different to what was already in place prior to the pandemic. However, pushing the discourse around 'recovery' allows this to be presented as a consensus-building approach and appears to put the member states in the driving seat.

All this suggests that resilience within the EU has become a security-driven and inward-looking narrative that has little to do with its roots in complexity and systems thinking. This undermines the potential of resilience as an approach guiding the EU's *external* action, a foreign policy paradigm of sorts. This shift sees resilience revert to a stable, descriptive concept that emphasises the EU's own security, stability, and predictability in relation to its neighbourhood. Korosteleva calls this an 'analytic of governance', claiming that the external–internal dynamic within the EU led to a shift from a 'transformational approach to resilience' in its external application to 'resilience as an analytic of governance, that focuses on developing the internal strength and capacities of a system, and how this thinking could make external governance more adaptive today'.[118] Resilience has been turned back into an exercise in governing, risk-analysis, and monitoring benefiting the EU's own resilience concerns.

The response to the pandemic can also be seen as the EU's attempt to prove its legitimacy as well as unity, through a display of competence and quick action. As Wolff and Ladi note, the pandemic provided an opportunity for a show of renewed commitment to the European project, leading to an acceleration of projects and decisions that had been put in place prior to the outbreak, thus highlighting the resilience of the EU itself.[119] In the early months of the pandemic, this was shown through a display of adaptability, use of the EU's various crisis management and preparedness tools, quick decisions and mobilisations in areas such as Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) and vaccine research, and of course the establishment of the RRF itself.[120] The Ukraine war presented a further challenge, with the EU needing to respond quickly to the energy crisis. To this end, Recovery and Resilience Plans (RRP) are being modified to reduce energy dependence in line with the new REPowerEU strategy launched at by EU heads of state in their Versailles Declaration.[121]

Agency and contestation

As will be discussed below, in the case of the RRF, conceptual consensus is achieved through the Semester mechanism, which allows significant leeway for member states to implement their preferred policy options.[122] However, reaching an agreement on how to fund a common response was also a major issue to negotiate, and this led to competing narratives. The RRF and wider Next Generation initiative represent something of a break from the previous austerity policy that the EU pursued in response to the financial crisis. France and Germany jointly proposed a significant recovery fund, supported by countries such as Italy and Spain, who favoured a mutualised debt instrument as the only way to stave off rising populism and further disintegration. By contrast, a northern camp, or 'frugal four', of the Netherlands, Austria, Denmark, and Sweden (with

[117]Ibid., p. 14.

[118]Elena A. Korosteleva, 'Reclaiming resilience back: A local turn in EU external governance', *Contemporary Security Policy*, 41:2 (2020), pp. 241–262 (p. 244).

[119]Sarah Wolff and Stella Ladi, 'European Union responses to the Covid-19 pandemic: Adaptability in times of permanent emergency', *Journal of European Integration*, 42:8 (2020), pp. 1025–1040 (p. 1026).

[120]Ibid., pp. 1027–8.

[121]European Commission, 'Commission Notice: Guidance on recovery and resilience plans in the context of REPowerEU' (2022); European Commission, 'Proposal for a regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council amending Regulation (EU) 2021/241 as regards REPowerEU chapters in recovery and resilience plans and amending Regulation (EU) 2021/1060, Regulation (EU) 2021/2115, Directive 2003/87/EC and Decision (EU) 2015/1814' (2022).

[122]Bart Vanhercke and Amy Verdun, 'The European semester as Goldilocks: Macroeconomic policy coordination and the recovery and resilience facility', *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 60:1 (2022), pp. 204–223 (p. 208).

the looser support of Germany and Finland) were worried that excessive 'coronabonds' would undermine the proper functioning of the Eurozone. Following the Franco-German initiative, their consent to the RRF was only achieved through the promise of higher budget rebates and the toning down of some of the proposed measures. As well as such compromises between member states, the RRF and Semester allowed for the incorporation of multiple actors within the EU's institutions. For example, there is a key role for the Employment Committee and different Commission Directorates-Generales .[123] All these groups are important for the RRP monitoring process and the assessment of national plans. From a trade perspective, others suggest a process of contestation and signification between those looking for an opportunity to link trade and social protection and a neoliberal approach that regards this response as outdated 'protectionism' that ought not to be part of a longer-term recovery plan.[124] To return to our focus on resilience, in this case the concept of resilience (alongside that of strategic autonomy) also served as a focal point or coalition magnet to facilitate consensus and fence off contestation from different actors within the EU:

> the European Commission quickly realized that a purely defensive strategy was risky given how the COVID-19 crisis disrupted public perceptions of globalization. In April 2020, the Commission started to embrace two new concepts that might have been less threatening for its existing paradigm as they could more easily be moulded into neoliberal discourse: 'resilience' and 'strategic autonomy'. These concepts progressively became legitimate signifiers in public debates about trade politics, and the heterogeneous logics that inserted them into the debate gained acceptance.[125]

In the case of the Strategic Compass, the change in the meaning of resilience reflects two power dynamics. Firstly, the policy entrepreneurs who had successfully built a coalition around a broader conceptualisation of resilience, High Representative Federica Mogherini and her team,[126] left the institutions in 2019 with the establishment of a new Commission and a new High Representative after the 2019 European elections.[127] As the competition between the United States and China intensified and the tensions between the two sides of the Atlantic became more palpable, the von der Leyen Commission moved from the more ambiguous and fluid concept of resilience towards a more protective and geopolitical Union. In this context, the political programme of the 2019–24 Commission only refers to resilience once.[128] Tellingly, this reference appears in the section 'Defending Europe', where it is mentioned in relation to hybrid threats. This more geopolitical and geoeconomic use of resilience serves the interests of the European Commission by enabling it to expand the scope of its competences, including to areas relating to emerging and disruptive technologies and dual-use technologies. Hence, it is not surprising that the Commission has also favoured this understanding of resilience as captured by the Strategic Compass.[129]

Secondly, the exit of the UK from the EU meant that neoliberal understandings of resilience, which so far were prevalent in the fields of humanitarian and development policy, gave way to a more Continental approach emphasising state-led responses and the notions of robustness and protection as represented by countries such as France and Germany or Central and Eastern European countries. 'Continental' discourses of resilience are less individualistic and more focused

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[123] Vanhercke and Verdun, 'European Semester', p. 215.

[124] Jacobs, Gheyle, De Ville, and Orbie, 'Hegemonic projects'.

[125] Ibid., p. 8.

[126] E.g. Nathalie Tocci and Alfredo Conte.

[127] Nathalie Tocci returned as a Special Advisor to HRVP Josep Borrell on framing the EU's Global Strategy in 2020 but left her position in February 2022.

[128] Ursula von der Leyen, 'A Europe that strives for more: My agenda for Europe' (2019), available at: {https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/political-guidelines-next-commission_en_0.pdf}.

[129] Raluca Csernatoni, 'The EU's hegemonic imaginaries: From European strategic autonomy in defence to technological sovereignty', *European Security*, 31:3 (2022), pp. 395–414; Calle Håkansson, 'Where does the compass point? The European Commission's role in the development of EU security and defence policy', *European View*, 21:1 (2022), pp. 5–12.

on the relation between states and societies, where the state has a responsibility for protecting the population.[130] Hence, it is not surprising to see that the main section featuring resilience in the Strategic Compass is the section entitled 'Secure'. This section starts with the following statement:

> Our strategic competitors are targeting us with a broad set of tools and testing our resilience with the aim to diminish our security and actively undermine our secure access to the maritime, air, cyber and space domains. We are increasingly confronted with threats of a hybrid nature. Furthermore, transnational threats such as terrorism and arms proliferation remain a continuous challenge. We need to significantly bolster our resilience by better anticipating, detecting and responding to such threats.[131]

The Strategic Compass mentions resilience in the context of partnerships (for instance, building the resilience of the EU's partners in the Balkans, Eastern Europe, or Africa). However, it is also telling that references to resilience are framed in the context of partnerships that serve the EU's interests. Here, the geopolitical turn is also evident:

> We will bolster tailored partnerships where they are mutually beneficial, serve EU interests and support our values, particularly when there is a shared commitment to an integrated approach to conflict and crises, capacity building and resilience.[132]

Institutions

That the resilience approach in EU foreign policy was only weakly institutionalised might also explain why we have seen a recent shift in meaning. Resilience as a policy paradigm was only loosely codified in the 2017 Joint Communication,[133] and even then, as discussed above, there was no agreement regarding its meaning. The lack of embeddedness of resilience within the EU's institutional structure is illustrated by the fact that the implementation of resilience was never assigned to a particular organisation or individual, unlike the integrated approach, whose implementation was tasked to a specific unit within the EEAS hierarchy (the Integrated Approach for Security and Peace [ISP] Directorate). In the case of early warning, for instance, there was only a recommendation to include 'appropriate indicators of resilience' within the existing EU Early Warning System, but this was generally done on a case-by-case manner and not systematically.[134] The only long-lasting impact of resilience thinking at the EU level was the requirement for joint programming in the new Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument of the EU's budget 2021–7, though this can also be attributed to the EU's integrated approach.

In the context of the RRF, resilience has also been shaped by institutional legacies; in particular, the governance of the RRF is closely aligned with the European Semester. Indeed, the Commission says that they are 'intrinsically linked', with the deadlines of the two mechanisms overlapping.[135] This is despite the European Semester never having been designed as a mechanism for the allocation of funds.[136] Perhaps this is the attraction, since it allows for a governance framework that gives the impression of non-binding recommendations that leave final fiscal responsibility with the

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[130]Jonathan Joseph, 'Resilience turn in German development strategy and humanitarian intervention', Global Cooperation Research Papers, No. 20, University of Duisburg-Essen, Käte Hamburger Kolleg / Centre for Global Cooperation Research (KHK/GCR21), Duisburg (2017).

[131]Council of the European Union, 'Strategic Compass', p. 21.

[132]Ibid., p. 39.

[133]European Commission and HR/VP, 'Joint communication to the European Parliament and the Council'.

[134]Sarah Bressan and Aurora Bergmaier, 'From conflict early warning to fostering resilience? Chasing convergence in EU foreign policy', *Democratization*, 28:7 (2021), pp. 1357–74.

[135]European Commission, 'Recovery and resilience plans'; Sonja Bekker, 'The EU's recovery and resilience facility: A next phase in EU socioeconomic governance?', *Politics and Governance*, 9:3 (2021), pp. 175–185 (p. 177).

[136]Ben Crum, 'How to provide political guidance to the recovery and resilience facility?', Brussels: Economic Governance Support Unit (EGOV) Directorate-General for Internal Policies PE 651.371 (2020), p. 14.

member states. Country-Specific Recommendations are initially proposed by the Commission, but adoption of these is formally in the hands of member states. This leads Vanhercke and Verdun to describe the RRF as employing a 'Goldilocks' mode of governance, or a 'relatively soft mode of governance … set-up' as 'not too soft and not to hard', leaving ample room for manoeuvre regarding the choice of policies to be implemented.[137] It also creates the impression of consensus and solidarity among member states by having national parliaments decide on levels of financial support and reform measures.[138] Vanhercke and Verdun argue that this situation has arisen because different EU actors did not want to 'reinvent the wheel' and that by sticking with already-existing coordination instruments, it allows member states a certain degree of low compliance.[139] Nevertheless, there is still plenty of room for disagreement among other actors and institutions, and it is a political choice as to where funds will be targeted, not just in terms of which member states, but which economic sectors. As Crum notes, the RRF's objectives – cohesion, sustainability, digitalisation – are not just matters of technical optimisation.[140]

Given that the RRF mechanisms allow such room for manoeuvre among different parties, there is less need for an ambiguous or flexible understanding of resilience to play such a role. Hence, the RRF advances the following 'descriptive' understanding: resilience means the ability to face economic, social, and environmental shocks and/or structural changes in a fair, sustainable, and inclusive way.

Member states should outline how their recovery and resilience plans will strengthen 'economic, social and institutional resilience, in particular how the implementation of the plans will support them to come out stronger from this crisis, be better prepared to address future challenges, turning them into opportunities for all, and reinforce their long-term competitiveness'.[141] And so it is that resilience, as a concept at work, becomes something of an empty buzzword despite the apparent proliferation of its usage in the EU's most recent discussions.

Conclusion

On the face of it, it seems like the concept of resilience continues to proliferate across a range of international organisations and government departments and is central to the EU's response to the Covid-19 pandemic and the subsequent recovery process. Counter to arguments that suggest the 'end of resilience',[142] national and international responses to the pandemic highlight the continued use and perceived relevance of resilience-thinking. Yet the responses in both the Strategic Compass and the Recovery and Resilience Facility also demonstrate the retreat of more 'transformative' (but often neoliberal) approach to resilience inside the EU in favour of another variety of resilience: Continental approaches emphasising state-led responses and the notions of robustness and protection. Various factors, including structural shifts, hegemonic power struggles, and existing institutional path dependencies and competing interests, help explain this outcome. In terms of our conceptual analysis, this move represents a shift from the idea of resilience as transformative back to a safer, more descriptive understanding and can be said to be a common feature of concepts at work within international institutions.

While resilience has always had an internal purpose as a way to affirm the EU's identity as a global actor and manage the EU's own complexity, such purpose has become more evident in recent years. Resilience has become increasingly linked to internal (e.g. resilience of EU's critical infrastructures, cybersecurity, resilience of EU democratic systems and its societies) rather than external dynamics, as demonstrated by the use of the concept in the Strategic Compass. The arrival of a new

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[137]Vanhercke and Verdun, 'European Semester', p. 207.

[138]Bekker, 'The EU's recovery and resilience facility', p. 177.

[139]Vanhercke and Verdun, 'European Semester', p. 219.

[140]Crum, 'How to provide political guidance to the Recovery and Resilience Facility?', p. 11.

[141]European Commission, 'Recovery and resilience plans', p. 7.

[142]David Chandler, 'Coronavirus and the end of resilience', *E-International Relations* (2020), available at: {https://www.e-ir.info/2020/03/25/opinion-coronavirus-and-the-end-of-resilience/}.

'geopolitical' Commission in 2019 has meant a more inward-looking approach to resilience, which is now reserved for internal security policies and/or the EU's own (societal) resilience. The 'external' dimension of resilience has instead vanished from policy debates in Brussels or been circumscribed to the development and humanitarian field.

The Covid-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine have accelerated this turn from external to internal resilience, with the focus of the new RRF being on building state and societal resilience, but this time within the EU. While mitigating the social and economic impact of the pandemic, the RRF has a longer-term aim of encouraging green and digital transitions. This links resilience to sustainability and future growth but is not a radical departure from existing EU priorities, and it is difficult to see what resilience adds to the more prominent discourses of sustainable growth and social cohesion.[143] In effect, it is a strategy of 'bouncing back better', but not of radical transformation, and can better be understood as an inward-looking discourse of consensus-building and solidarity. Similarly, we have seen how the EU has embraced the concept of open strategic autonomy in trade as a response to a more geopolitical international context.[144] Following the war in Ukraine, the REPowerEU strategy explicitly links the NextGenerationEU's twin goals of green and digital transition to the Strategic Compass's call to make Europe more resilient in the context of new uncertainties and a disputed global context.[145]

The analysis presented in this article shows the significance of examining concepts at work and the conceptual politics surrounding concepts. The way the use of resilience has changed over time highlights the role of epistemic uncertainty in times of crisis, opening up spaces for conceptual contestation that are used as windows of opportunity for policy entrepreneurs to mobilise coalitions around a particular concept. However, the extent to which actors can do so is determined by the inherent qualities of the concept (its valence and polysemic meaning) and institutional legacies. The article also shows that when it comes to the life cycle of a coalition magnet, actors might pursue a dual strategy of ambiguity and fixity, but that the way these strategies are deployed will vary over time. Ambiguity might precede fixity as a coalition-building strategy, but where a coalition is not needed then fixity might be a better strategy to stabilise meaning, as the shift from the EUGS to the Strategic Compass and the RRF illustrates.

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[143]European Commission, 'Recovery and resilience plans', p. 14.

[144]Schmitz and Seidl, 'As open as possible'; Jacobs, Gheyle, De Ville, and Orbie, 'Hegemonic projects'.

[145]European Commission, 'Proposal for a regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council', p. 1.