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Özlem Sefer

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The European Union's crises and the resilience of EU societies

Özlem Sefer 

Department of Political Science and Public Administration, Bilkent University, Ankara, Turkey

ABSTRACT

Resilience is one of the most popular and yet ambiguous topics in the social sciences. It has been examined not only in an individual sense but also in relation to communities. The European Union (EU) has faced several crises in the 2000s that have shown the level of resilience of EU societies. This paper discusses community resilience within the framework of the EU's recent crises to examine how EU societies have coped with adversity. Specifically, it analyses competences and common policies at the EU level in relation to resilience and crises within the EU.

KEYWORDS

Community resilience;
Eurozone crisis; Brexit;
refugee crisis; Covid-19 crisis

Introduction

The European Union (EU) has suffered from several crises in the 2000s that have affected not only EU institutions but also EU societies. The Eurozone crisis, the refugee crisis, Brexit and the Covid-19 pandemic have affected several dimensions of the EU. Resilience has become a popular concept, not just in psychology, but also in other social sciences and disciplines. Community resilience has become a prominent focus of discussion following the global unexpected shock of the Covid-19 pandemic. Coping with such shocks has required revision of national and international mechanisms (national, supranational and intergovernmental mechanisms in the EU's case). The EU's role in times of crisis has been contentious, especially since the Eurozone crisis. More specifically, questions have been raised about the EU's functioning following problems in its refugee quota system, the need for new mechanisms to handle the crises, uncertainty about future relations with the United Kingdom (UK) and the EU after Brexit and the EU's role during the pandemic. This paper discusses these crises within the framework of the resilience of EU societies by considering the competences of EU member states and the EU itself, and the role of common policies at the EU level.

Living with uncertainties and shocks: are you able to be resilient?

Resilience has been defined as 'The ability to apparently recover from the extremes of trauma, deprivation, threat or stress' (Atkinson et al., 2009, p. 137). While dealing with unexpected or undesired circumstances, it is necessary to be able 'to return the usual shape after pressed' (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.). Being resilient does not ensure that

the individual never experiences difficulty or stress (American Psychological Association, 2012). Rather, people can be considered resilient if they can regain equilibrium physiologically, psychologically and socially after undesired events (Zautra et al., 2008, p. 132). If individuals can become more resilient then this might empower them and improve their life (American Psychological Association, 2012). This implies that not all people are born with resilience: 'Like building a muscle, increasing your resilience takes time and intentionality' (American Psychological Association, 2012). In other words, it is possible to develop and improve this ability. Given that individuals face various problems, shocks and traumas during their lifetime, they need to cope with these problems to continue, so sometimes it is necessary to rebuild themselves. Thus, we can consider '[t]he ability to "bounce back" from setbacks or recover equilibrium as key to the development of resilience' (Atkinson et al., 2009, p. 141).

Resilience can also be applied to the community level. Community resilience can be defined as the community's ability to respond to any kind of shock (Matarrita-Cascante et al., 2017, p. 109), particularly natural disasters like earthquakes. An earthquake is an unexpected event and, if it is major, members of affected communities may have to change or rebuild their lives in both tangible and intangible terms. Resilient communities can rebuild their lives quickly and adapt to their new lives. Through social learning and capacity building, communities can, up to a point, develop their responses to shocks and stresses (Berkes & Ross, 2013, p. 13).

Magis (2010), defines community resilience as '...the existence, development and engagement of community resources by community members to thrive in an environment characterized by change, uncertainty, unpredictability and surprise (p. 401). However, it is not easy to identify solutions or specific methods to build resilience because the same solutions or responses may not always work in similar situations (Johnson & Wiechelt, 2004, p. 663). In other words, there is no universal 'prospectus' for resilience.

Despite the difficulties of identifying what is required for resilience, researchers have suggested a number of distinct features. According to Norris et al. (2008), one of the key elements for building resilience is having 'a plan for not having a plan' (p.127). More specifically,

[t]o build collective resilience, communities must reduce risk and resource inequities, engage local people in mitigation, create organizational linkages, boost and protect social supports, a plan for not having a plan, which requires flexibility, decision-making skills and trusted sources of information that function in the face of unknowns. (Norris et al., 2008, p. 127)

According to Magis (2010), community resilience depends on the development of community resources, engagement of community resources, active agents, collective action, strategic action, equity and impact. (p. 402). For Aldrich and Meyer (2015), social capital lies at the core of community resilience (p. 260). That is, even if there are cultural and economic differences within communities, recovery and rebuilding is quicker if they have high social capital and community leadership (Aldrich & Meyer, 2015, p. 260). The main factors underlying social capital are networks, relationships, norms and trust (Kirmayer et al., 2009, p. 77). That is, social capital depends on the bonds that tie citizens together (Aldrich, 2010, p. 1). This suggests that if decision-makers can increase social capital by improving policies then that community will recover more effectively and quickly from crises (Aldrich, 2010, p. 12).

The European Union's crises

The EU has experienced several recent adversities, especially in the 2000s, starting with the Eurozone crisis. This not only impacted several countries directly, specifically Italy, Spain, Greece and Ireland, but also affected all EU members in various ways. Before this crisis, the EU's economic integration had seemed successful, with EU-level rules, regulations and treaties. After the crisis, however, it was realized that the EU required more mechanisms and institutions. In particular, the EU's lack of rescue mechanisms affected not only those countries directly involved but also other economically powerful member states. During this period, the EU's intergovernmental responses were more effective than supranational mechanisms as both permanent and temporary institutions were constructed to cope with the crisis.

However, this was not just an economic crisis as it also affected politics, boosted anti-EU political campaigns and encouraged Euroscepticism. While the EU had experienced crises before the 2000s, the Eurozone crisis was one of its major 'earthquakes'. For example, the reluctance of countries like the UK to contribute to rescue packages to overcome the Eurozone crisis fed Eurosceptic attitudes within member states. Similarly, the role of the Eurozone crisis in the UK's withdrawal from the EU should not be underestimated. In the Brexit referendum, a majority of Northern Irish and Scottish votes cast were for remain whereas a majority of English and Welsh votes cast were for leave. Consequently, the overall majority was to leave. As the first withdrawal of a member state, this result shocked the EU and EU societies. Given that the EU lost one of its most powerful members, the arrangements for the future economic relationships became a key issue. It also tested the resilience of the EU and EU societies as discussions about the possibility of other withdrawals increased following the Brexit referendum.

In 2015, the EU experienced another crisis over refugees when 'more than 1 million people, predominantly from Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan, tried to seek refuge in Southern Europe by crossing the Mediterranean on ramshackle boats' (Harteveld et al., 2018, p. 157). This unexpected event shocked the EU because, like many other institutions and countries, it had no plan for coping with the huge numbers of refugees. In particular, it provoked intense discussions on refugee quotas and the negotiation process regarding this problem, given that the EU's Dublin system proved inadequate, especially in terms of fair sharing and asylum application processes. As with the Eurozone crisis, the refugee crisis cannot be ignored in explaining the Brexit vote. Indeed, immigration was one of the main tools used by 'vote leave' campaigns (Hobolt, 2016, p. 1262).

The most recent crisis, which affected the whole world not only the EU, is the Coronavirus or Covid-19 crisis. Although the EU tried to help all member states by distributing vaccines and increasing vaccination rates, its lack of a common health policy was a problem. The pandemic crisis has demonstrated that the EU needs a common health policy, especially to cope with unanticipated health problems, to create a framework of solidarity among member states and thereby increase the resilience of EU citizens. In addition, a common policy could help increase social capital.

Experiences from previous shocks also play a significant role. As Ladi and Tsarouhas note (2020), '[t]he nature of the crisis in question, and previous steps taken to ameliorate pre-existing problems, have an important effect in dealing with sudden shocks' (p. 1052). Thus, the previous crisis experiences helped the EU and EU societies learn to cope and

become more resilient. For example, the lack of supranational mechanisms to manage the Eurozone crisis showed that the EU and its institutions needed more competence. Drawing on this experience, the EU managed its most recent crisis, the Covid-19 pandemic, more effectively. This in turn increased EU societies' belief in its effectiveness. In other words, community resilience is increased by effective community leadership and high social capital (Aldrich & Meyer, 2015, p. 260).

Societies that are resilient can 'stretch' and 'bounce back' after unexpected and undesired events. As mentioned earlier, resilience can be learned at both the individual and community level. Given that these four crises were stressors for EU citizens, their resilience is critical for the EU's future and the EU's performance during crises may be vital for constructing or strengthening resilient societies. 'Overall community resilience can be maintained and enhanced only when the commitment to it is so strong that it is integrated into all ongoing community development activities' (Colten et al., 2008, p. 46). The level of community resilience can be understood by considering recovery and sustainability as the two main features of resilient social systems (Zautra et al., 2008, p. 132). Societies that experience adversities require an efficient and sustainable recovery process. Both national and EU-level recovery plans should be prepared to deal with disasters, financial or political stressors, and health-related problems like Covid-19. Community resilience also depends on the sustainability of these solutions and the development of mechanisms to cope with these unexpected problems. Although it is not possible to control adversities and conditions at the community level, communities can change conditions to increase their resilience (Berkes & Ross, 2013, p. 13).

The resilience of EU societies and common EU policies

The Eurozone crisis, Brexit, the refugee crisis, and Covid-19 have affected both member states and the EU itself. With its twenty-seven member states, the EU has tried to adapt to the new conditions, trying to rebuild inadequate regulations and add missing elements recognized during these unexpected crises. However, the question remains: Have EU societies become more or less resilient following these crises?

One main issue concerns the resources required to cope with adversity. For instance, during the Eurozone crisis, it was realized that new institutions should be constructed such as the European Financial Stability Facility and European Stability Mechanism. To cope with the Covid-19 crisis, it was realized that policies in the EU level were needed, specifically a common health policy as EU citizens expect support from the EU as well as their national governments.

The various recent crises suffered by the EU have caused anxiety. Because EU societies have been affected by these crises, their members may naturally feel anxious because of uncertainties about finding solutions to overcome them. However, the level of anxiety is also related to resilience. If societies are resilient enough then their anxiety levels may be low. Life can involve various problems and difficulties, some of which may be related to disasters, economic and political crises, and other unexpected events. These adversities can affect the lives of both individuals and society. The shocks may be related to any financial problems, health problems and stressful events. These problems can affect both nation-states themselves and the supranational organizations they belong to, such as the EU. Consequently, these shocks have led to discussions of the EU's possible

disintegration. Of course, adaptation after these adversities at the EU level and rebuilding the lives of EU citizens after these crises are both related to trust in the EU. Therefore, one of the main factors that should be examined for increasing social capital is trust (Kirmayer et al., 2009, p. 77).

One of the critical factors for building resilience in a community is having trusted sources of information (Norris et al., 2008, p. 127). Thus, trust in EU declarations could help resilient EU societies. Since the situation was unprecedented, it was necessary to hear from trusted sources. To build resilient communities at the EU level, it is necessary to establish trust in the EU. According to the Eurobarometer Survey, 55 per cent of Europeans trust the EU while 62 per cent trust it to cope with Covid-19 by making correct decisions in future (Official Website of the European Union, 2020). This is an important indicator because despite the lack of a common health policy and ambiguity in the responses to coronavirus, problems in vaccination and criticisms about vaccine nationalism, EU societies trust the EU to overcome this health crisis. Therefore, EU citizens would like to see the EU cope with this problem perhaps with more competence. According to another survey, Eupinions 2020/2022, 91 per cent of EU citizens would like to work together with the EU during the pandemic (De Vries & Hoffman, 2020). Thus, people want cooperation at the EU level and believe that trying to find solutions together may be more effective than working alone as a nation-state. In other words, there is a recognition that social capital in the society can enable a bring quick recovery (Aldrich, 2010, p. 10). According to Magis (2010), one factor in community resilience is having 'active agents' (p. 411). That is, EU citizens' willingness to be the actors of the EU affects their communities' wellbeing, so to increase community resilience, they should be active and be eager to rebuild after crises. In other words, the EU needs more social capital during and after crises to handle these adversities. The key to resilience is adaptation to changes after unexpected or undesired events, such as the crises recently experienced in the EU. Considering the role of social capital from Aldrich's perspective (2010) on recovery and rebuilding, the core factor may be the bonds of EU societies and their willingness to help each other after crises. Regarding the main factors affecting the social capital in the EU's case, the networks and relationships within EU societies and their trust towards each other and the EU may be essential for building resilience.

One of the main fears since Brexit is the domino effect. Because of this possibility, discussions on disintegration have been popular. However, survey data shows that it is not a popular option. For example, post-Brexit survey data in March 2021 show that 72 per cent of member states prefer to remain in the EU (De Vries & Hoffman, n.d.). In other words, they are satisfied with being EU citizens and participating in the EU. However, it should be noted that there are both short-term and medium-term effects in the UK and in the EU. Therefore, without observing the long-term effects, it might be too early to comment on the advantages and disadvantages of being inside or outside the EU.

Regarding migration, the picture is not positive as one of the main problems for EU citizens is immigration (Official Website of the European Union, 2015), with negative attitudes towards immigrants rising, particularly after the 2015 refugee crisis and for extra-EU immigrants (Di Mauro & Memoli, 2021, p. 1318). Like others, this crisis was multidimensional. One main reason for citizens' anxiety could be the lack of a common EU migration policy. The public considered the EU's response as unsuccessful because of this lack of cooperation on immigration policy (Di Mauro & Memoli, 2021, p. 1305).

All four crises share one common point: the lack of mechanisms and common policies at the EU level. During the Eurozone crisis, one of the main discussions concerned the lack of a common EU fiscal policy. Some thought that the crisis could have been prevented or at least minimized had the EU been more competent and had such a policy. Similarly, during the refugee crisis issue, there were discussions and criticisms about the EU's lack of a common migration policy. During Brexit, one of the main issues was the ambiguity in implementing the right to withdraw. Because Brexit was unexpected, the implementation of the right to withdraw was unclear.

During the Covid-19 crisis, however, the EU was more successful because of its experience of previous crises, despite not being prepared for this kind of pandemic. For instance, the European Central Bank prepared a temporary Pandemic Emergency Purchase Programme (PEPP) to cope with the risks of the monetary policy transmission because of Covid-19 (European Central Bank, 2022). In addition, the Recovery and Resilience Facility was created to support member states and make EU societies more resilient while dealing with Covid-19 (The Official Website of the European Commission, n.d.). Other mechanisms include the Recovery Assistance for Cohesion and the Territories of Europe (ReactEU), EU4Health, Health Emergency Response Authority (HERA), European Medicine Agency (EMA) and European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) (European Parliamentary Research Service with the Directorates-General for Internal Policies (IPOL) and External Policies (EXPO), 2021). Thus, the EU was more active and adaptable than in previous crises (European Parliamentary Research Service with the Directorates-General for Internal Policies (IPOL) and External Policies (EXPO), 2021).

Nevertheless, the lack of a common health policy has been criticized because it limited the EU's ability to respond to the Covid-19 pandemic, despite the other regulations mentioned above. As Paccès and Weimer (2020) note, '[t]he EU does not have legal nor a sufficiently strong democratic-political authority to take the lead on Covid-19, especially given the current scientific uncertainty' (p. 284).

How can the lack of these policies be interpreted? These crises have affected the resilience of EU societies. As seen in all four cases, EU societies can cope and prefer to remain in the EU. Withdrawing from the EU might be an option for a member state if resilience is low in that country. As mentioned earlier, low resilience reduces the ability to bounce back, so recovery is harder and reluctance of rebuilding can be observed. Furthermore, after adversities, there could be less effort to build a new life.

These crises have shown that the EU needs reforms and new plans after these unexpected events to handle their effects. One of the dimensions of Magis' dimensions of community resilience is the development of community resources (Magis, 2010, p. 402). These resources, whether human, natural, financial, social or and political are dynamic so they can be developed, expanded, depleted or destroyed (Magis, 2010, p. 410). The collective action and strategic action dimensions cannot be managed just with the participation or decision of EU elites, but with EU citizens. As mentioned earlier, Aldrich emphasizes the role of social capital (2010) to increase trust in EU institutions and enhance the role of EU citizens during the recovery. Therefore, to cope with potential future crises, these resources can be expanded, such as more common policies and implementations at the EU level. Social capital seems important for resilience, hence for EU citizens and the EU. Therefore, in these actions, EU citizens should be the actors as well.

Changes in the EU to cope with such crises seems inevitable. Discussion is still widespread concerning *Kompetenz-Kompetenz*, which is related with the competences at the national level and EU level. One reason why the EU's role during crises is limited is its lack of competence.

According to Cohen et al. (2017), the main element underlying community resilience is leadership (p. 119) while Magis (2010) argues that leadership is one of the requirements for collective action besides participation (p. 411). , 2010. However, leaders must be competent in order to respond to crises and be a leader. To make EU societies consider the EU to be an effective and powerful actor during crises, changes are needed to deepen its role within the framework of differentiated integration or additional regulations by preserving the *status quo* in the EU. In this way, they can respond to changes, renew the community and develop new paths for the future of the community (Magis, 2010, p. 402). If there is a shock, trauma, health, economic or political crisis, EU societies should be able to recover, adopt the new regulations at the national and supranational level and be the actors of the rebuilding process. For the new regulations to cope with future crises, rebuilding is inevitable and adaptation is vital. Considering the EU's crises, common areas and policies should be examined to deal with potential new crisis.

Various surveys have measured European public opinion regarding a common fiscal health and migration policies. According to Eupinions (2016),

56 per cent of all Europeans in the EU and 57 per cent of all Europeans in the Eurozone believe that it would be useful to have a European finance minister; 41 per cent and 42 per cent respectively think that this minister should oversee the spending of his or her national counterparts; 40 and 37 per cent respectively think that he or she should control the budget of the Eurozone and 35 and 39 per cent respectively think that he or she should be authorized to offer debt relief. (De Vries & Hoffman, 2016)

These findings indicate that EU citizens are willing to deepen EU processes. Following the economic crisis, data from 2016 indicated that EU citizens want more common financial regulations, such as a European finance minister and more integration within the EU. This indicates that these new rules and regulations could help manage future crises.

The findings from Standard Eurobarometer 84 in 2015 revealed that immigration is the most important concern of 58 per cent of EU citizens. The year of the survey is important because it is when refugee flows rapidly increased. In contrast, although its effects were still quite recent, only 21 per cent of EU citizens considered the financial crisis to be one of the most important issues in the EU (Official Website of the European Union, 2015).

Regarding Brexit, '68 per cent of EU citizens consider that their country has benefited from EU membership' (European Parliament, 2018), which is the highest percentage since 1983 (European Parliament, 2018). Thus, the UK's decision to leave the EU did not make EU citizens more likely to consider withdrawal from the EU as an option.

Lastly, the Covid-19 pandemic shocked the EU and tested the resilience of European integration (Bongardt & Torres, 2020, p. 130). Indeed, as an unprecedented and unexpected global historical moment, its unique character upset plans and tested the resilience of people and communities everywhere. It created a health problem for which we had no experience and affected politics, economics, social lives, education, international relations and many other areas.

As mentioned above, the 2015 Eurobarometer survey suggested that the most important issue for EU citizens then was immigration. However, priorities changed following the pandemic. Thus, according to the 2020 Eurobarometer survey for the EU 27, the two most important issues facing the EU are now the economic situation (33 per cent) and health (31 per cent), with immigration relegated to third with only 11 per cent of EU citizens considering it the most important problem (Official Website of the European Union, 2020), that the economic situation has probably become the greatest concern of so many EU citizens because the severe economic effects of the Covid-19 crisis.

The survey also indicated the preferences of EU citizens regarding the EU's priorities in its response to the pandemic: 37 per cent believed that the EU should develop financial tools to discover a vaccine; 37 per cent said that the EU should establish a strategy to manage future pandemics; and 30 per cent said that the EU should develop a European health policy (Official Website of the European Union, 2020). The relatively low percentage preferring a common EU health policy may reflect that the crisis was ongoing and an unprecedented situation. Therefore, the priority of EU citizens might have been financing vaccine research or medical treatments.

In Norris et al.'s (2008) community resilience model, trusted sources of information are one of the main elements to build community resilience, which could apply here. That is, if EU citizens know that the EU intended to develop a common health policy to cope with such unexpected health crises then more EU citizens may support it. Finally, the survey also measured EU citizens' optimism regarding the EU's future, indicating that 60 per cent of EU citizens were very optimistic (Official Website of the European Union, 2020). This percentage is particularly high considering the damaging effects of the Covid-19 crisis on people's lives and the EU's lack of mechanisms to manage the pandemic. Thus, despite discussions about the EU's potential disintegration and future withdrawals, especially a series of crises, EU citizens have retained their optimism regarding the EU. In other words, they still believe that the EU can handle such crises.

Conclusion

The Eurozone crisis, Brexit, the refugee crisis and the Covid-19 crisis have severely affected the EU and EU societies, and raised doubts about the EU's competence and efficiency. The situation of EU societies cannot be compared with the national level because resilience may vary between member state societies. These crises cause anxiety in societies because they are unprecedented and undesired. EU societies can adapt to the EU's new conditions through new policies and mechanisms that should be developed both during and after crises. These crises have thus empowered and strengthened EU societies, thereby reducing negative attitudes with the EU-level responses. In other words, EU societies have become more resilient and better adapted. In addition, trust in the EU has remained relatively high.

Three of these crises exposed specific deficiencies at the EU level: a lack of a common migration policy during the refugee crisis in 2015; the lack of a common fiscal policy during the Eurozone crisis; and the lack of a common health policy during the Covid-19 crisis. The EU's response shows that the creation of common policies can strengthen the resilience of EU societies when faced with unexpected circumstances, trauma and shocks. However, it is not possible to judge the level of resistance of individuals or

societies by analysing only one specific time or event. To build resilience in itself and its societies, the EU needs to develop its current resources and raise the awareness of decision-makers on the importance of building social capital.

Drawing on their experiences during the Eurozone crisis, European institutions tried to develop mechanisms and support national governments respond effectively to the Covid-19 pandemic (Ladi & Tsarouhas, 2020, p. 1047). This suggests that preparedness for the next crisis is likely to be better in societies that have experienced crisis conditions before. Resilient people and communities know that life is not without difficulties and adversities – but they also know that they should respond. Similarly, the EU has tried to improve the ‘muscles’ of the EU and EU societies to respond better to future crises. If the Union can develop common policies in more areas than by widening its roles and responsibilities with the involvement of EU societies, the EU will strengthen resilience.

Disclosure statement

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ORCID

Özlem Sefer  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7730-6556>

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