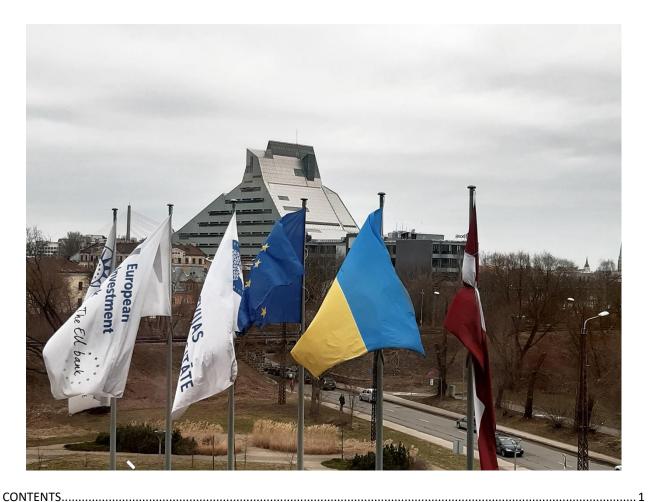# How to Teach Resilience? Pedagogical Experiences from the BAMSE Riga intensive course

by Katalin Miklóssy
with Inna Šteinbuka, Teemu Oivo,
Alexandra Yatsyk, Andrey Makarevych
and Minna Oroza

1. Introduction

"Resilience of Baltic and Eastern European democracies: Theoretical and methodological approaches" was the second course of the BAMSE network organized in Riga, 19-25 March, 2023. Resilience symbolized well our enduring transnational teaching collaboration and the intense discussions of colleagues over the past three years. The new course intended to deepen further intercultural and interdisciplinary collaboration, aiming to invent new methodology and teaching practices in area studies. The choice of the topic was in a sense also self-evident because we wanted to address and emphasize the link to the previous course in Tartu about the "Implications of Crises on the State of Democracy" (11-17 September 2022). Resilience is a subject that is increasingly debated in connection with how Baltic and Eastern European social and political systems can overcome the deep crises of recent years. The multiple exogenous pressures, such as the Covid-19 pandemic, hybrid threats, brutal war in Ukraine, inflation, sky-high energy prices and dropping living standards, are testing the societal resilience of our countries. We elaborated on what kind of consequences these prolonged crises bore on these societies, and how security concerns interact with societal resilience. We concentrated on analyzing the key issues that determined governmentality, economic resilience, environmental awareness, and identity.

The learning objectives were:

- to understand the concept of resilience and the central factors that determine the sustainability of democracy.
- to understand the significance of the spatial and temporal context in the analysis of resilience,
- to be is aware of the available wide multidisciplinary methodological toolkit and able to implement the suitable method for research purposes.

We also recalibrated the pedagogical angle from the previous intensive course in Tartu, due to students' feedback. The Tartu course was too content-oriented for the students and offered only implicit information on methodology. They were also overburdened by group work activities and felt that there was too much pressure in preparing a project during the intensive week. Learning

from these experiences, we restructured the course content, moving the emphasis to methodological approaches in all subjects presented in the course. Furthermore, we recreated the assignments so that they were more balanced between the individual performance and the group-work.

2. Course Design

The course focused on the concept of resilience in the spatial context of Baltic and East European countries. Based on the partner universities' expertise on the subject, the course topics addressed several aspects of resilience. For example, the University of Helsinki discussed ***social resilience***. This section investigated the interaction between political culture and the ability of society to withstand exogenous pressures. We elaborated on the impact of citizens' trust in institutions and powerholders. How does the ever-changing phenomenon of trust correlate with resilience? The University of Latvia concentrated on ***economic resilience***. This theme addresses the impact of populism on fiscal sustainability, international trade, and the welfare of different populations. The analysis of economic consequences was offered through various case studies. The team of Tartu is distinguished by its expertise on ***biopolitical resilience***. In this topic, the focus is on Baltic governmental responses to crises, including the pandemic, economic, environmental, and refugee crises. Attention is drawn to how the biopolitical concept of "responsibilitization" is instrumentalized, appealing to individual "self-discipline" for the sake of social coherence as part of democratic resilience. Vilnius University elaborated ***memory resilience***. This part explored memories and the political legacies from the end of the Soviet era. The analysis concentrated on how the post-communist transition is remembered and possible contradictions in how the transition period is evaluated.

In addition to interactive lectures, the course applied a special learning format, the NGO-café, developed by the Helsinki team. The idea was to bridge academic knowledge with the grass-root experiences of social actors. The aim was to offer the students a unique added knowledge of society that only the NGOs can share, ingrained in their practical everyday work. Furthermore,

students participated in excursions to the National Parliament of Latvia, the Latvian National Library, the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence (NATO StratCom), and the Museum of the Occupation of Latvia. These visits were reflected in the final panel discussion of students.

Students received reading materials prior to the beginning of in-class teaching. These materials combined theoretical approaches to the above-mentioned main subjects and some empirical research. For the preliminary communication between the students, teachers, and organisers, a Google Drive platform was established where all course material was stored. The course offered a wide multidisciplinary toolkit to the students to improve interdisciplinary thinking. The students from Finland, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania were allocated into groups with representatives from all network universities. The groups offered an excellent opportunity for interdisciplinary discussions based on students' multidisciplinary backgrounds. The group-work was designed to strengthen students' oral language skills, teamwork skills, debating skills, and interview techniques. Academic writing skills were targeted in the essay-assignment. The students were also required to write an individual blogpost (of 500 words) on any subject related to resilience. Through this task, we aimed to reflect the social embeddedness of the main theme of the course and to encourage students to take a stance and position themselves to a problem. The blog texts were reviewed by teachers, after which the blogs were language-checked and published on the BAMSE network free-access website. The pedagogical purpose here was to encourage process writing and to give insights into the academic publishing process. Students also participated in excursions and reflected their impressions and learning experience in the final panel discussion moderated by a teacher. The students pondered about what knowledge they gained during the excursions and reviewed the whole course's contribution from the point of view of their academic development.

3. Interactive Lectures

Course content was structured around thematical lectures where the partner universities offered their specific expertise, complementing each other in the overall concept. This allowed all lectures to be based on principles of research-based teaching. The lectures were intended to help the students understand how the various disciplinary or interdisciplinary methodological approaches can provide new perspectives when analyzing the consequences of crises. Therefore, the implemented pedagogy supported problem-based learning and interactivity.

The Helsinki team's lectures were organized on the first day of the course, which was the first time students met each other, the module's purpose was to encourage interaction between the students as well as between students and teachers. The first lecture discussed the relevance of area studies and the added value it offered to disciplinary investigation. The content was structured

around conceptual questions, and the presentation was consciously built on polemic variant statements to inspire the students to react, challenge, and question the teacher's interpretations. The second lecture was on environmental communication. The lecturer made a gradual transition between the substance matter, methodology, and content analysis, which was visualized by matrices. In the lecture, a simplified summary of basic (quantitative), interpretative, and qualitative variants of content analysis was presented, and the students had to select one and apply it to a pre-given case.

The Tartu team addressed the illiberal resilience of Putin's regime as seen from a wider biopolitical perspective. The two lectures offered a consistent whole: the first class discussed a general framework for biopolitical studies in comparative politics and international relations, while the second lecture opened discussion on a variety of regional experiences and practices. The module was particularly problem-oriented: both classes started with a puzzle or academic controversy that was to be discussed in class, emphasizing professional debate and interactive Q&A sessions. The interdisciplinary objective of the course was also furthered by dividing the class into several disciplinary segments (i.e., political analysis, sociology, cultural studies, etc.) to give students a comparative perspective of study. Structurally, each class was a combination of concept analysis (for example, the academic meanings of resilience) and several case studies aimed at illustrating how theories work in practice.

The Riga team analysed economic resilience and the challenges of populism. The presentation relied on *an interdisciplinary* approach, combining economics and political science. The pre-reading material constituted the theoretical and empirical background for the classwork. The in-group discussions were arranged to look at different countries' perspectives on the state of democracy, levels of erosion, and risks of rising populism. Students had to discuss examples from their own countries, to identify what the reasons of the decline of democracy and rising populism are, and to compare them to find out similarities and differences. Students also had to put national country perspectives into global context and search for similarities and differences. The final part of the session was devoted to the presentations of the summaries of the in-group discussions, followed by

a question-and-answer session which allowed the students to collect perspectives from the other groups and compare their findings. The overall summary and conclusions were made at the very end of the class. The Riga team included a politician who previously worked as senior policy advisor and civil activist, establishing the Latvian branch of Transparency International. Based on these work-life experiences, the lecturer shared authentic and practical knowledge about how to build societal resilience with the students.

The Vilnius team discussed the role of memory politics, with special reference to the changes and continuities from the Soviet era. The content was constructed to help students recognize the link and interactive dynamics between theory and the everyday practice of the political use of memory. Hence, this module was divided between a lecture and an excursion to the Museum of the Occupation of Latvia. The lecture elaborated on the significance of oral history as a central methodology in situations where archival materials are destroyed or unavailable.

4. Excursions

The excursions were designed so that the destinations would deepen the theoretical knowledge of the classroom by either providing an example of political practices related to decision-making and communication, or by representing different ways of presenting knowledge. Hence, students visited the Parliament of the Republic of Latvia "Saeima," the Museum of the Occupation of Latvia, the National Library of Latvia, and the NATO Stratcom.

The Museum of the Occupation of Latvia was depicted to further elaborate the lecture on the resilience of memory in the course. The students had a guided tour where the guide offered an additional interpretation of the displayed objects. The students were actively asking questions during and after the tour, so the museum visit became an interactive learning experience for all in a way that we could not have imagined during the planning phase.

The National Library of Latvia is a hub of knowledge and a unique meeting place with an interesting history. The library was established when Latvian became independent, and the design of the current library building is inspired by Latvian folklore. When the library was opened, Latvians could donate books to a huge book shelve covering one of the atrium walls. The idea behind this excursion was to show how the storage of information is relevant for researchers, students and the wider audience, and contributes to resilience both in the individual and community level.
The National Library also serves as a working place for researchers and students and as a meeting place of people.

Democracy was also the main topic in choosing the Parliament of the Republic of Latvia, the *Saeima*. By organizing the visit, we aimed at focusing on how political decision-making works on the top level of a representative democratic system. Students learned about the history of the Saeima, how it was established when Latvia became independent. This excursion was thematically connected to one of the intensive course lectures that gave an insight on how the development of

political system and civil society activism in Latvia after the collapse of the Soviet Union and regaining independence.

The NATO Stratcom provided additional insight into the course's security themes. This destination also offered a wider geopolitical view on the complex ways societal and political systems are affected by international conflicts. Students became acquainted with the concept of strategic communication including elements such as public diplomacy, political marketing, persuasion, and military strategy. Students learned that the NATO StratCom produces publications on topics such as geopolitical challenges, social media manipulation, and information operations that are relevant in studying resilience especially on institutional level.

5. Speed-Dating with NGOs: learning from civil society

One of the central ideas of the intensive course was to bring the non-academic world, and especially civil society, closer to university activities. This part of the BAMSE project had a threefold aim. First, we wanted to raise the students' awareness of the enormous amount of information that social actors possess. Secondly, the goal was to point out to students that theoretical knowledge, often characteristic of tertiary education, has wider relevance for society and is applicable in practice. Thirdly, the course discussed the impact of crises on the state of democracy, hence, civil society and civic actors are incredibly important objects of study. Keeping these ideas in mind, we approached five NGOs to share their reflections on resilience in their work.

We chose NGOs that represented various fields of civic action. We invited **Ķekava** neighborhood resident' association, that works for the development of civil society in Riga metropolitan area. A similar type of organization was the Riga youth center **KAŅIERIS**, This NGO creates trainings and provides non-formal education to improve young peoples' competencies, to encourage them to participate, and to take responsibility. The Latvian Student Union was also a natural choice that gave a comparative angle to student life for our international group. The NGO called **Resilience** also focused on youth matters. The **Latvian Transatlantic Organization** fed into the themes of security and resilience. It also resonated with the excursion to the NATO StratCom. The **Latvian Platform for**

Development Cooperation LAPAS strengthens the resilience of local communities and represents public sustainability by developing cross-sectoral cooperation between public administration, parliament, and local governments.

The NGOs provided students with important knowledge from the field, which students then had to integrate into their group assignments to formulate their own research agenda. We developed a 'speed-dating' learning format where representatives from the various NGOs sat at different tables arranged in a circle, with each table having a 'host NGO.' The task for the groups of students was to go around the circle and interview each NGO one by one for 20 minutes and – according to speed-dating choreography – switch to another table and interview another NGO when the time expired. This meant that every NGO was interviewed by every group. The interviews were totally in the hands of the groups: they each constructed an interviewing strategy to obtain the information they were interested in. After the session with the NGOs, a discussion was organized about what the groups learned from the NGOs. This was moderated by a teacher with a predefined list of questions.