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Korosteleva, Elena and Petrova, Irina (2020) Resilience is dead. Long live resilience! . Hertie School/London School of Economics Article.

### DOI

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### Document Version

Author's Accepted Manuscript

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# Resilience is dead. Long Live Resilience?

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*The Coronavirus brings to the surface the limits of discourses of resilience*  
([Chandler, 2020](#))

*Reflections about the ongoing Coronavirus pandemic and its implications for Europe and the world engendered the view that 'resilience is dead'. In this post, Elena Korosteleva & Irina Petrova argue that what we observe today is the demise of the 'neo-liberal' framing of resilience. Meanwhile, the resilience of human grit lives on.*

## Introduction

The concept of 'resilience' has recently emerged as a possible solution to the increasing impotence of national and global governance, to deal with frequent crises and the adversity of the VUCA - more vulnerable, uncertain, complex and ambiguous - world around us. According to [David Chandler](#), resilience was seen to offer 'a more flexible and responsive approach' to manage uncertainty by local means, which, if anything, should empower and bring greater sustainability to the locally-vested communities. And yet, as Chandler contends in the same piece, the Coronavirus pandemic has starkly exposed resilience's inner contradiction: the inherent irrationality and weakness of the people to solve the problems at source, thus paradoxically requiring more regulation, and central control to minimise the spread of infection.

In these circumstances, it would only be natural to claim, as [Chandler](#) does, that ‘the societies can no longer trust themselves to be resilient’, spelling the end of resilience as we know it.

This short piece, however, dares to argue otherwise: we can, and indeed we must, trust each other to grow our resilience at every level and opportunity. This is not just for the sake of surviving under barely-copying governments. We need to re-learn the well-forgotten art of self-governance - this is, what resilience really is about - as the only way to allow complex ‘self-referential’ social systems to find their [own state of equilibrium](#), to adapt, and transform. According to Chandler, the true corollary of this pandemic is ‘the end of resilience’. We argue, that it *is* – as a ‘smoke screen for neoliberal cost-cutting’. What we observe now is its rebirth as a human effort and self-organisation, to withstand the (real) crisis of governance.

### **The promise and the ‘end’ of resilience-thinking**

In view of the often-inadequate interventionist approaches (primarily in international development and peacebuilding), resilience emerged as a new governance paradigm. Drawing on the [complexity theory](#), resilience-thinking highlighted that political processes are complex (that is, inputs do not directly define output) and nonlinear (missing causality), which results in underlying uncertainty and inability to programme the desired policy outcomes in advance, hence, effectively govern top-down. The resilience approach naturally shifted attention from the international and state actors and their predefined development policies to the local actors - that is, directly zooming to a problem, because in a complex world they can only be dealt with bottom-up at the source.

Resilience-thinking refers to the ability of a person or an entity to self-organise itself. In doing so, [they draw](#) on their strength, knowledge of available resources, and – most importantly, on their hope for a better life, worth fighting for. This kind of thinking calls for [re-examining](#) how we govern today, as well as how we use our finite natural resources in the [era of the Anthropocene](#). Furthermore, it requires exploring how we can empower ‘the local’ and ‘the person’ – with their emotions and collective aspirations for ‘the good life’ – to be more in charge of their destiny especially when managing complexity. This novel approach to governance quickly proliferated to the discourse of major international organisations, stressing ‘partnership’, ‘bottom-up engagement’ and [‘local ownership’](#) as a way to make the global/local interaction more effective and sustainable.

Yet, the response to the COVID-19 pandemic triggered profound criticism of resilience as a governance mode. On an individual level, people are simultaneously viewed a source of threat and a subject to be secured. The person has proven irrational and vulnerable, which contradicts the major assumption behind resilience-thinking, particularly, the ability by the ‘human’ and community to provide the best response to crises. [Critics](#) go as far as to claim that “our society no longer believes in anything but bare life”, giving up relationships, friendships, values and ambitions to staying secure. The observed processes of closing, withdrawing and [“removing ourselves](#) from the collectivity that we might harm despite our best intentions” are opposed to resilience because “people cannot be trusted and people do not know better,” according to [Chandler](#). In line with this, on a state level, an unprecedented set of measures has been rolled out restricting basic human rights, such as freedom of movement and assembly. Accordingly, as Bruno Latour [has observed](#), ‘people are stuck inside, while

police and ambulance horns rule the roost'. Governments are taking back control, reviving nationalism, borders, and, above all, the 19th century state - the state that governs, protects and regulates the human. While observing these responses to the pandemic critics concluded that resilience might have exhausted its potential.

### **The untapped meaning of the human GRIT, or what resilience should mean in practice**

In his timely article, [Pol Barges](#) notes that 'resilience is always more'. This means that the **potential of resilience** as we *do not yet know it* - both as a quality and an analytic of governance to find more simple and adequate solutions locally, inside-out and bottom-up ([Korosteleva, 2019](#)) - is still an untapped resource. Contrary to the mounting criticism and rejection of resilience on the basis that humans allegedly lack 'the capacities for autonomy and reason when it counts', [and that](#) 'being resilient will make the virus spread', the COVID-19 pandemic has paradoxically demonstrated the opposite. That is, we have seen an incredible resourcefulness and grit of 'the person', both as individuals and as communities, in an effort to resist the virus and survive the crisis. If we cannot 'keep calm and carry on' in a normal pre-crisis way, we would seek and find other ways to be resilient, and support each other at every level of society. And this is what seems to be emerging in Britain and across Europe today: the true rise of civil society, which Margaret Thatcher thought never existed, and which [the incumbent UK Prime Minister called on](#) to mask the inadequacies of the government response to crisis.

*On a personal level*, people took resilience 'underground', to their homes turning every household into a bastion of self-isolation and a complex war machinery to survive the crisis and continue 'business as (almost) usual'. This involved an incredible fit on the part of everyone: moving work online, reorganising homes to accommodate family needs, schooling children, looking after the vulnerable, feeding, shopping and keeping everyone healthy and entertained - in other words, fighting the crisis, on a personal level, by way of adapting lives to bare essentials and mundane routines, and all for the purpose of ... saving lives and helping the frontline medical staff. The psychology studies analysing the current public response to the pandemic across Europe, concluded that ['resilience is our default mode'](#).

*On a community level*, we can observe remarkable acts of defiance. University labs across Europe turned into science factories to attempt to develop a vaccine; partnerships have been created between businesses and Higher Education ([Mercedes & UCL](#)) to produce much needed breathing aids, [schools have used their design & technology](#) skills to laser cut a batch of personal protective equipment for the frontline staff, [laundries have reopened](#) to offer free round-the-clock assistance, supermarkets have introduced special hours for medical staff, and neighbours have offered to look after the vulnerable. This has all demonstrated our ability to stay resilient and beat the crisis with the human grit, and humour. In one particularly striking anecdote, the creative signing of the [Marsh family from Kent](#) went viral across Europe. This is observable worldwide ['turning us into caring neighbours'](#).

The state too seems to be acting as a one living system having all measures in place, to protect its citizens, combat the spread of infection and enforce order as necessary, having the police patrolling the streets, and the army on standby. And yet, [society is on guard too](#),

watching the state not to overstep the mark, calling it to observe the legality of action and keeping the necessary taps on the government via social media even in the times of crisis.

So, who are the weak and irrational, allegedly bringing the crisis on themselves and requiring taking control over? As the societal response across Europe attests, those, the resilient, are still standing tall and vigilant, correcting the initial (emotional) responses to the crisis as necessary (of stockpiling), and (re)balancing the system to its rightful equilibrium. Every crisis brings both danger and the opportunity. While the Coronavirus pandemic still ravages, resilience, as a human response, brings the best in us, and the system back to normality.

### **Resilience is dead. Long live resilience!**

The Coronavirus crisis has spelt the end of resilience as we know it. Even the more radical protagonists of resilience have agreed that it indeed failed to fulfil its promise, claiming, as Chandler does, that 'when facing a global pandemic, even this reactive, flexible and community-led approach to resilience is not an option', because people are required to withdraw rather than to collectively self-organise in response to the crisis. This piece has argued that while the neo-liberal framing of resilience is certainly dead, what we observe now is the rise of a new resilience paradigm premised on humanity, grit and a collective belief in a better tomorrow. This is what this crisis has brought to light: not just our ability to cope and bounce back, but to withdraw and still be resilient, and caring for everyone and at every level.

Resilience lives on!

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