On Wednesday 29 June 2016, supported by ACCESS Europe, the Amsterdam Centre for Contemporary European Studies, the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam hosted the seminar ‘Governing (In)Security Through Resilience: Problems and Promises’. The seminar was part of a wider project titled ‘Resilience Governance of Humanitarian Emergencies’ at the VU's Department of Political Science and Public Administration and the VU Institute for Societal Resilience (ISR), which aims to explore the politics around the policy concept of resilience.

As the first speaker, Joris Rijbroek introduced ISR as the Faculty of Social Sciences’ interdisciplinary research institute, which aims to not only add to academic knowledge, but also to contribute to what is happening in the world by working together with non-academic partners. ISR research is spread out over four research themes: governance, care and welfare, diversity and inclusion, interconnectedness, in which researchers from different departments are working together.

The second speaker, Yamen Hrekes, a student originally from Syria but currently studying in Bosnia and Herzegovina, told his personal story of resilience. How do you deal with everyday life when your family and friends are trapped in a...
war? How can you enjoy life, socialising with friends, and focus on your studies, when your brother escapes with his life from terrorist sniper attacks? Or when, on Skype, you see the paintings on your parents’ wall topple down because of bombings in nearby streets? Somehow, people carry on, even in war. Yamen narrates how his brother, a musician, continued to play his instruments, how the people continued to dance, despite explosions nearby. People try to adapt the best way they can. When terrorist groups had cut off all telephone lines to Aleppo, calls were sent to nearby towns that still had reception, where they were subsequently transmitted over radio signal to the people in Aleppo. Over social media a lot of local information is shared in the knowledge that traditional news outlets cannot always be trusted.

Photo by Rosanne Anholt.

Professor Emeritus Mark Duffield from the University of Bristol in the UK, the third speaker, placed resilience in the more academic context of the automation of contemporary social life. With the help of automation, resilience pushes for ‘structural abandonment’: governance from a distance, remote management and intensive monitoring. As such, it requires computers, data, and algorithmic governmentality. Where the liberal peace of the 1990s and 2000s has failed, government is now supposed to coach and nudge, rather than plan and execute. As a result, the burden of development is shifting to the poor themselves, aid takes the form of information and is self-administered. Resilience signals the disappearance of the outside world of political possibilities, the vanishing of autonomy. Mere transcendence of one’s own circumstances is not political: it is no longer learning not through reason, but machine-learning. He said it is like we are in an ecological experiment: they’re applying poison to the lake to see how the fish adapt, thereby sacrificing the fish that will not survive, in order to see how their resilience functions.

The fourth speaker, Dr Kees Boersma, who is an associate professor at the Department of Organization Sciences, elaborated on his experience with disaster management after the earthquake in Kathmandu, Nepal. How do extraordinary communities arise in times of disaster? He described the importance of communities’ own initiatives in the first hours following the disaster, before (international) help arrives. He retold the story of a Nepalese woman, whose neighbour provided her with a car-cover to use as a tent – sleeping in buildings had become too dangerous and tents became essential assets. However, a car-cover functioning as a tent does not fit within the policies and protocols of international organisations. So how can international aid organisations incorporate communities’ own initiatives and self-organisation? We must be aware that disasters (at least and in particular natural disasters) do not necessarily produce chaos: often, social mechanisms remain intact, and coordination and collaboration is the proper response, rather than command and control.

The final speaker, Rosanne Anholt, co-organiser of the seminar and working on the project ‘Resilience Governance of Humanitarian Emergencies’, shared the study’s preliminary findings. She addressed the rise of resilience as a policy concept in the wider context of a changing understanding of the world and how we relate to risks and crises, the subjectivities that resilience aims to create, and the implications of resilience-building activities by governments or international organisations. Although the
concept is still much contested and the critiques in academic circles are fierce, resilience nevertheless provides a lingua franca – a common language that is already allowing international organisations to search for new ways to work together on protracted crises.

Photo by Rosanne Anholt.

The discussion afterwards was lively. Could resilience not be described as just another counter-insurgency strategy? And why is the label resilience selectively employed? Why are refugees who, in their rage and hope, try to smash down the high walls of ‘Fortress Europe’ making their political demands, not seen as resilient?

What is the role of luck in resilience, when the continuity of life may depend on as little as dodging a bullet? Resilience may not be the innocent metaphor we take it to be: it was imported from an apolitical context (ecosystems) and inserted into a very political context, where it seems to normalise structural violence, and instigate expensive processes of yet again revising policy language to fit with the newest buzzword. Although resilience as a new narrative (not unlike sustainable development, or human security) is unlikely to radically transform the security, aid, or development sectors, we are nevertheless witnessing some interesting shifts into less ambitious and perhaps more realistic policy goals, bold private sector engagement, and integrated responses to emergencies. Whatever else resilience will bring, time will tell.

The organisers want to thank ACCESS Europe, ISR, the VU, and the speakers for making this event possible.