

The European Parliament's evolving soft power

From back-door diplomacy to agenda-setting: Democracy support and mediation

SUMMARY

For the past 40 years, Members of the European Parliament have been working at boosting Parliament's role in EU foreign policy. These efforts have continued to be stepped up since the launch of the common foreign and security policy (CFSP) in 1993. Over recent decades, the European Parliament has significantly raised its profile as a credible moral force with strong focus on strengthening human rights, supporting democracy and enhancing the rule of law worldwide.

Perhaps less visible than the European Parliament's Sakharov Prize for freedom of thought, the European Parliament's democracy support activities are part of its 'soft-power' approach to international relations. Moreover, Parliament can convey messages through channels that are different from, and complementary to, those employed by the EU's traditional diplomatic players; for example, through its parliamentary networks.

Parliament also enjoys Treaty-based information and consultation rights, which allow its Members to shape the EU's external policies. In addition, the European Parliament has become a public forum for debating with representatives of partner countries and international organisations, as well as influential non-state actors. MEPs pro-actively engage in inter-parliamentary delegations and missions to third countries as well as joint parliamentary assemblies. Moreover, parties in different countries often share strong links via their political families.



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The European Parliament's evolving diplomatic role

Since 1979, Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) have sought to boost the role of their institution in EU foreign policy. These efforts have continued to increase, not least following the establishment of a common foreign and security policy (CFSP) in 1993. The European Parliament is seen internationally as a 'capable moral force with strong focus on strengthening human rights, supporting democracy and enhancing the rule of law worldwide'.¹ Parliament's [Sakharov Prize](#) for freedom of thought is one specific example of this: set up in 1988, it is awarded each year to honour individuals and organisations defending human rights and fundamental freedoms. In this area, Parliament has become an agenda-setter.

Parliament has been pushing the boundaries in a number of areas, not least as regards democracy support and mediation. In its 2014 [resolution](#) on the EU's comprehensive approach and coherence of EU external action, Parliament itself describes its role as follows: 'The European Parliament ... [s]tresses the important role of mediation and dialogue in preventing and resolving conflicts peacefully; ... draws attention to Parliament's engagement to actively participate in election observation, mediation and democracy support; [and] believes that Parliament's involvement in mediation processes in Ukraine and the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM) has demonstrated the important role parliamentarians can play in this field'.

Parliament's comprehensive approach to democracy support has become a vital part of this 'soft-power' in international relations. Launched in 2014, it includes election monitoring, mediation, as well as training of members and staff of non-EU parliaments. In addition to this, Parliament can convey messages in ways and through channels that are different from, and complementary to those employed by the EU's traditional diplomatic players, for example, through its parliamentary networks. Parliament has also become a public forum for debate both for representatives of partner countries and international organisations, as well as influential non-state actors. MEPs pro-actively engage in [inter-parliamentary delegations](#) and missions to third countries, and are members of various joint parliamentary assemblies. Moreover, parties in different countries often share strong links by virtue of the fact that they belong to the same political family.

Parliament also enjoys treaty-based information and consultation rights that allow its members to shape the EU's external policies. The High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy/Vice-President of the Commission (HR/VP) is invited regularly to consult Parliament on the main aspects and basic choices regarding CFSP and common security and defence policy (CSDP). MEPs can also address questions and make recommendations to the Council and the HR/VP. A major innovation in Parliament's powers to shape and control EU foreign policy has been MEPs' exchanges of views with heads of EU delegations after their appointment by the HR/VP, but prior to taking up their post in a third country. EU ambassadors inform Members about the country concerned and the EU priorities and objectives to be pursued in relations with the partner country. MEPs can use these opportunities to question the ambassadors, and to provide advice and suggestions on the conduct of relations.

Democracy support in EU external relations

In 2009, the Council adopted [conclusions](#) on democracy support in EU external relations, together with an EU agenda for action, which outlined a new strategy for [supporting democracy](#) by means of a country-specific approach involving various stakeholders. One of the objectives of EU external action is 'to develop and consolidate democracy and the rule of law, and respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms'. In addition, the objectives of the [EU's Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy 2015-2019](#) include a number of priorities that coincide with the European Parliament's objectives in the area, such as maximising the impact of electoral observation and supporting the capacity of parliamentary institutions.

Democracy support at the European Parliament

As the only directly elected EU institution, the European Parliament is particularly committed to supporting [sustainable democracies](#) throughout the world. This commitment is regularly highlighted in Parliament's resolutions. Democracy support activities focus on a small number of priority countries and are closely associated with the Parliament's role in election monitoring in these priority countries and other non-EU countries. Parliament almost always organises democracy support activities around the electoral cycle, so as to establish a better link between election observation and complementary activities such as mediation, election follow-up, parliamentary support activities and human rights action (Democracy Support Work Programme, 2018).

The Democracy Support and Election Coordination Group

In 2012, the European Parliament decided to create the Directorate for Democracy Support. In setting up this directorate as part of the Directorate-General for External Policies of the Union, four units were created, these are: the Democracy and Election Actions Unit, the European Parliament Mediation and Dialogue Support Unit, the Human Rights Action Unit and the Pre-Accession Unit. The Directorate provides the administrative support for the European Parliament's democracy support activities in general, and the members of the Democracy Support and Election Coordination Group in particular.

In 2014, Parliament set up a **Democracy Support and Election Coordination Group (DEG)** that provides political guidance for all activities supporting democracy (Decision of Conference of Presidents of 13 September 2012). It consists of 15 MEPs and is co-chaired by the chairs of Parliament's Committee on Foreign Affairs and Committee on Development. Parliament's vice-presidents responsible for human rights and democracy and the Sakharov Network and the Chair of the Subcommittee on Human Rights are *ex officio* permanent members. The DEG grew out of a parliamentary body initially set up in 2001, the European Parliament Election Coordination Group.

The DEG provides political guidance for the monitoring of elections, election follow-up, support for parliamentary democracy through training of staff and members of parliaments, assistance with drafting legislation, activities in connection with the [Sakharov Network](#) and human rights related actions, as well as mediation. All activities are geared towards underpinning longer-term efforts to strengthen newly emerging democracies.

The European Parliament's comprehensive approach to democracy support

Recognising that a sustainable democracy building process requires more than support for democratic elections through election monitoring, the European Parliament has developed a comprehensive approach to democracy support. With a view to ensuring that Parliament's democracy support activities are well coordinated and complementary, they take the entire electoral cycle into account and are organised accordingly. The comprehensive democracy support approach (CDSA) goes beyond the traditional focus on election monitoring, broadening the support to cover a wider range of activities that take place throughout the electoral cycle.

The CDSA places more emphasis on pre-election dialogue and the follow-up to election observation. This includes following up on recommendations of the Election Observation Mission. In order to boost the institutional capacity of parliaments in third countries, Parliament organises training programmes and study visits for members and officials of third-country parliaments. Parliament has also built up a mentoring system involving MEPs and newly elected parliamentarians from priority countries. Providing support for mediation and dialogue were added as new types of interventions, with a view to preventing election-related conflicts and violence. For example, Parliament has been involved in activities in Kenya and Tanzania to prevent electoral violence.

Activities – although decided and supervised by the DEG – must be approved by the Conference of Presidents (CoP). The CoP adopted [implementing provisions](#) on democracy support and election

observation activities in February 2019. According to this document, the DEG co-chairs may, for example, submit requests for authorisation for outgoing missions and for high-level conferences in the European Parliament's premises to the CoP at least four weeks prior to the activity concerned. In addition, the DEG co-chairs may submit requests, including urgent ones, to the CoP to mandate a Member or Members to act as an envoy or mediator or to authorise the establishment of a Jean Monnet Dialogue with a third country, under the guidance of a lead Member or Members.

In the first half of 2019, the priority countries for the implementation of the CDSA were Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine, Morocco, Tunisia, Nigeria, and Peru. In two priority countries, Myanmar and Tanzania, activities are currently on stand-by owing to democratic setbacks (Democracy Support Work Programme 2018). A lead MEP is assigned to each priority country. The priority countries/regional parliaments remain unchanged in the second half of 2019. Once the DEG has been established in the autumn, a new [decision](#) on priority countries/lead members and a work programme for the remainder of the year will be drafted.

The European Parliament's democracy support activities fall into three broad thematic areas: capacity building, mediation and dialogue support, and support for human right actions. The following sections describe some elements of the comprehensive democracy support approach in greater detail.

Election observation activities

The European Parliament has conducted election observation since 1994 and has deployed over 170 short-term election observation delegations to different countries around the world, with the objective of assessing whether electoral procedures are conducted in agreement with the host country's national legislation and international commitments. Every year, Parliament sends from 10 to 12 short-term election observation delegations to countries outside the EU. Parliament delegations are integrated into on-going long-term election observation missions. These are either international election observation missions led by the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) in member states of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), or EU election observation missions (EU EOMs) in Africa, the Americas or Asia. The EU EOMs are headed by a chief observer, who is always a Member of the European Parliament.

The role of the European Parliament in election observation activities has been growing constantly in recent years. Since the EU's HR/VP issued the [2010 Declaration on Political Accountability](#), the European Parliament – through the DEG – is consulted on the identification and planning of EU EOMs and their follow-up, as well as on the nomination of possible candidates for chief observers of EU EOMs. The [Decision](#) of the Conference of Presidents of 13 September 2012 sets out criteria and procedures for election observation delegations.

Election observation and democracy support activities are coordinated by the Parliament secretariat's Democracy and Elections Actions Unit (DEAC), which sets out its objectives every year. The 2019 objectives include implementing the comprehensive democracy support approach (CDSA) in Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, Tunisia, Morocco, Peru and Nigeria, and with the Pan-African Parliament until the end of the legislature; follow up activities in Honduras and Lebanon; and review the CDSA list of priority countries and regional bodies for the first part of the new legislature in the second part of the year. In the first three quarters of 2019, the European Parliament [observed elections](#) in Nigeria, Moldova, Senegal and Ukraine. In the second half of the year, Parliament will observe elections in Tunisia, Kosovo and Mozambique.

Composition of and rules for election observation delegations

Election observation delegations are made up of [MEPs only](#). They are accompanied by staff from the secretariat and from Parliament's political groups. A delegation consists of seven members appointed by the political groups in accordance with the rolling 'D'Hondt system'. The minimum required for an election observation delegation is three members. Delegations are made up of MEPs

from at least two different political groups and two different nationalities. As a rule, the chair of an election observation delegation should have previous experience as a member of a Parliament election observation delegation or as chair of an EU-EOM. At the end of each visit, the chief observer and the chair of the European Parliament election observation delegation report to the relevant bodies of the European Parliament.

Election observation delegations arrive in the relevant country two to three days before the date of the election and stay until after election day. The members of delegations play an active role on election day: they attend polling stations and observe the opening, voting, closing and counting. The implementing provisions of February 2019 state that the Conference of Presidents shall authorise each election observation delegation on the basis of a request from the Democracy Support and Election Coordination Group. The implementing provisions make clear that 'Only official election observation delegations, authorised by the Conference of Presidents, shall be permitted to carry out election observation on behalf of the European Parliament and to make representations about its official position'.

Mediation activities

Members of the European Parliament engage in a wide range of mediation, conflict prevention and dialogue activities that complement the EU's overall approach. These include:

The Jean Monnet dialogue for peace and democracy

The European Parliament prides itself in having a 'culture of dialogue', a set of norms and rules that require political opponents to engage in dialogue to bring about a compromise. Efforts have been made to 'export' this culture of dialogue to non-EU parliaments, through a mediation and consensus-building process known as the 'Jean Monnet dialogue for peace and democracy'. Named after one of the [founding fathers of the European Union](#), Jean Monnet dialogues often – although not always – take place at the historical Jean Monnet House. Located in rural France, far away from the media attention characterising either Brussels or national capitals, Monnet's house has proven to be an ideal location for constructive dialogue among opposing political factions. Four series of dialogues with representatives of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine (VRU) have taken place so far.

Young political leaders programme

The European Parliament is committed to building strong and lasting relations with future leaders outside of the European Union. A programme targeting young political leaders was set up in 2015. The young political leaders programme (YPL) expands on existing activities organised by Parliament, such as the annual fora for young leaders from the European Neighbourhood (Maghreb, Middle East, Eastern Partnership), and the young political leaders initiative for the Sudan. The programme cooperates with young political activists, including political party representatives, civil society actors and young business leaders in the European Neighbourhood countries, priority countries agreed under the comprehensive democracy support approach (CDSA), and ad hoc countries requiring assistance in the area of parliamentary conflict prevention and democracy support. Recent YPL activities have targeted young leaders from Israel and Palestine, the Maghreb, the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, the western Balkans, Armenia and Azerbaijan.

Democracy support for Ukraine

Ukraine is a key example of how the European Parliament has increased its 'soft', diplomatic power. As explained below, Parliament has played an increasingly visible role in relation to democracy support before and after the Maidan revolution in 2013-2014, which was sparked by the decision by the then president, Viktor Yanukovich, not to sign an association agreement with the European Union.² In February 2014, the Verkhovna Rada (Ukrainian parliament) voted to impeach Yanukovich, who fled Kyiv. The conflict in Ukraine represents a struggle for respect for international law, which Russia violated through its illegal annexation of Crimea in March 2014 and its hybrid war against

Ukraine. The European Parliament, whose diplomatic role has steadily expanded, is now leading internal reform and capacity-building efforts for the Verkhovna Rada.

The European Parliament's evolution to becoming an agenda-setter in Kyiv has also boosted its visibility in Brussels. While initially limited to monitoring the 2012 [trial](#) against former Ukrainian prime minister Yulia Tymoshenko, a European Parliament-initiated mission led by former Polish president Aleksander Kwasniewski and former European Parliament president Pat Cox, later expanded its function.³ Cox and Kwasniewski helped to pave the way for the negotiation of the association agreement. The function of the mission evolved from monitoring to mediation; in Cox's own words, it became a 'point of exchange between not only Brussels and Kiev, but also between the Ukrainian government and the opposition'.

The simultaneous [ratification](#) of the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement by the European Parliament and the Verkhovna Rada on 16 September 2014 was a historic demonstration of the commitment of both parties to develop solid inter-parliamentary ties, preparing the ground for continued mutual commitment to democracy support activities. The European Parliament and the Verkhovna Rada signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) in Kyiv on 3 July 2015 with the stated purpose of establishing a joint framework for parliamentary support and capacity-building of the Verkhovna Rada. In line with the MoU, a needs assessment mission (NAM) led by Pat Cox was conducted in Ukraine to identify the key needs of the Verkhovna Rada in this respect.⁴ Parliament's NAM and the resulting [report and roadmap](#), which was presented at the February-March 2016 'Ukraine Week' held at the European Parliament in Brussels on 29 February-2 March 2016, prepared the ground for the EU/UNDP project 'Rada for Europe: driving reforms across Ukraine',⁵ with 52 recommendations recognised in a March 2016 Verkhovna Rada [resolution](#).⁶ According to a 2019 [study](#) on Parliament democracy support activities and their follow-up, the 52 recommendations lack prioritisation. Despite this, 'the conduct of a NAM, even in a slightly more limited scope, is a good practice that could be replicated elsewhere', the authors asserted.

Launched within the framework of the European Parliament's democracy support activities for Ukraine in 2016, the concept of using the Jean Monnet House in Bazoches (France) for mediation and dialogue activities is expanding, as the European Parliament is demonstrating the added value of parliamentary mediation as a soft power tool to complement overall EU approaches.⁷ The experience with Ukraine sparked the [first 'Jean Monnet Dialogue'](#) with a parliament in the western Balkans, namely the [Sobranie](#) of North Macedonia in 2018 (see below).

The 2018 Sakharov Prize was awarded to Ukrainian filmmaker Oleg Sentsov – a prominent civil society activist during the Maidan, who was arrested by the Russian Federal Security Service in Crimea in May 2014. The European Parliament increased the pressure on Russia to release Sentsov, also drawing attention to other Ukrainian political prisoners in Russia.⁸ Sentsov was released in the context of a prisoner swap between Russia and Ukraine on 7 September 2019.⁹

Democracy support for North Macedonia

The Republic of North Macedonia was the first western Balkan country to sign a stabilisation and association agreement (SAA) with the EU; it entered into force in [2004](#). North Macedonia became a candidate country in 2005. Since 2009, the European Commission has been recommending that the Council open accession negotiations with North Macedonia. The recommendation was made conditional, in 2015 and 2016, on the implementation of the [Pržino Agreement](#), which in 2015 had been facilitated by European Commissioner for European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations Johannes Hahn, as well as by three members of the European Parliament to overcome the [political crisis](#) in the country. The resolution of the 27-year-long dispute with Greece in February 2019 with the Prespa Agreement opened the way for EU membership talks.

Since July 2015, Commissioner Hahn and three European Parliament mediators have continued to monitor political developments in North Macedonia, including verifying the implementation of the Pržino Agreement. The three MEPs travelled to Skopje eight times between July 2015 and February

2018, facilitating discussions among political parties and helping them overcome internal political obstacles.

Inspired by Ukraine's experience with the 'Jean Monnet Dialogue', the first dialogue with a Parliament in the western Balkans – the [Sobranie](#) of North Macedonia – was held in Ohrid, North Macedonia, on 17-18 May 2018. The European Parliament was represented by MEPs Fleckenstein, Kukan and Vajgl. The dialogue is seen as a key component of the EU's overall engagement with the country's accession process.¹⁰ The Commission's 2019 [progress report](#) on North Macedonia acknowledges that the 'adoption of the Code of Ethics, aiming at addressing GRECO [the Council of Europe's Group of States against Corruption] [recommendations](#), was a concrete result of this process, and inclusive work on the Rules of Procedure is at an advanced stage'.

Democracy support for Tunisia

Tunisia provided the trigger to the revolts in the Arab world in 2011 that became known as the Arab Spring. In December 2010, anti-government protests broke out in Tunisia's interior after a street vendor named Mohamed Bouazizi set himself on fire in protest against state repression and a lack of economic opportunities. Protests spread to neighbouring towns and eventually to the capital. On 14 January 2011, President Zine el Abidine Ben Ali, in power since 1987, fled the country for exile in Saudi Arabia, where he died in September 2019. Since the so-called 'Jasmine revolution', Tunisia has taken significant steps towards democracy. The country adopted a new constitution in January 2014, and held presidential and parliamentary elections later in the same year. Municipal elections were held in 2018. Parliamentary and presidential elections are also taking place in 2019: following the death in July 2019 of President Beji Caid Essebsi, a secularist who was instrumental in steering the country's transition to democracy, a first round of presidential elections took place on 15 September 2019, two months earlier than originally scheduled; a second round and parliamentary elections will take place in October 2019.

Election observation delegations from the European Parliament participated in all EU election observation missions (EU EOM) to Tunisia between 2011 and 2018, including the Constituent Assembly elections in October 2011, and the country's general and presidential elections in 2014. Most recently, an [EU EOM](#) comprising a European Parliament election observation delegation composed of several MEPs observed the municipal elections that took place on 6 May 2018. The EU does not generally observe local elections. However, the DEG considered that a fully-fledged EOM ought to be deployed in Tunisia, given that it is a crucial partner for the EU in the region and a country that has delivered on its commitments to democratisation since 2011. A Parliament election observation delegation will also be part of the EU EOM for the forthcoming parliamentary elections.

The European Parliament has also actively supported Tunisia on its path to democracy. Tunisia has been a 'priority country' for the purposes of the comprehensive democracy support approach since 2014. In February 2016, then European Parliament President Martin Schulz visited Tunisia, followed by former Parliament President Enrique Baron Crespo. The lead MEP for Tunisia has been a regular visitor to the country, as have other MEPs.

Delegations from Tunisia have participated in study visits and workshops organised by the European Parliament in Brussels, and the European Parliament has sent experts to participate in workshops in Tunisia. Topics have ranged from the work of parliamentary groups, relations between executive and legislature, parliament's role in the budget cycle, parliament's relations with civil society, the relations between committees and delegations, scrutiny of the executive (also in the field of commercial relations), and the role of parliamentarians in the area of foreign affairs, to parliaments' role in fighting gender-based violence and women's economic empowerment. Tunisians have also participated in the European Parliament's young political leaders programme and in the democracy fellowship programme.

In May 2017, the European Parliament organised a 'Tunisian week' on its premises. On this occasion, MEPs welcomed a 50-strong delegation from the *Assemblée des Représentants du Peuple* (ARP) led

by Mohamed Ennaceur, who was then speaker of the parliament and is currently acting president, for a three-day programme of meetings and workshops involving members of both parliaments.

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ENDNOTES

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- ³ M. Olchawa, [A delayed success: The result of the Kwaśniewski-Cox mission in Ukraine](#), 30 October 2017.
- ⁴ [Report and roadmap](#) on internal reform and capacity-building for the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, European Parliament's Needs Assessment Mission to the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine led by Pat Cox, President of the European Parliament 2002-2004, September 2015 to February 2016.
- ⁵ EU/United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), [Rada for Europe helps turn Verkhovna Rada into a modern European parliament](#), 17 October 2016.
- ⁶ Verkhovna Rada [resolution](#) 1035-VIII, 17 March 2016.
- ⁷ European Parliament, [Jean Monnet Dialogues for peace and democracy](#).
- ⁸ N. Bentzen and I. Zamfir, [The 2018 Sakharov Prize](#), EPRS, European Parliament, December 2018.
- ⁹ Following the release of Oleg Sentsov, the President of the European Parliament David Sassoli [stated](#): 'I look forward to meeting Oleg Sentsov in person in the European Parliament soon and to be able to hand him the Sakharov Prize' (7 September 2019).
- ¹⁰ For detailed information and about the European Parliament's role in the Macedonian crisis, see D. Fonck: [The Emergence of the European Parliament as a Diplomatic Mediator: Conceptualising, Exploring and Explaining Parliamentary Diplomacy in EU Foreign Policy](#), KU Leuven, 2019.

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eprs@ep.europa.eu (contact)

www.eprs.ep.parl.union.eu (intranet)

www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank (internet)

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