Европейски парламент Parlamento Europeo Evropský parlament Europa-Parlamentet Europäisches Parlament
Euroopa Parlament Ευρωπαϊκό Κοινοβούλιο European Parliament Parlement européen Parlaimint na hEorpa
Europski parlament Parlamento europeo Eiropas Parlaments Europos Parlamentas Európai Parlament
Parlament Ewropew Europees Parlement Parlament Europejski Parlamento Europeu Parlamentul European
Európsky parlament Evropski parlament Euroopan parlamentti Europaparlamentet

THREE EASTERN PARTNERSHIP NEIGHBOURS: UKRAINE, MOLDOVA AND BELARUS

> The EU's Eastern Partnership policy, inaugurated in 2009, covers six post-Soviet states: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. It was created to support political, social and economic reform efforts in these countries with the aim of increasing democratisation and good governance, energy security, environmental protection, and economic and social development. All the members except Belarus are part of the Euronest Parliamentary Assembly.

UKRAINE

The dramatic events that have taken place in Ukraine since November 2013 began as a pro-EU protest against the government's failure to advance with its Association Agreement with the EU, which had been initialled in July 2012. Many protesters held pro-EU views and probably regarded the agreement as a step that would take them closer to a process of accession. This movement eventually led to a change of government and to parliamentary elections (in October 2014), which brought pro-European and pro-reform parties to power.

During the period of upheaval, Russia illegally annexed Crimea in March 2014, and the eastern part of Ukraine plunged into a separatist war. According to the UN, over 10 000 people have been killed in Ukraine since the onset of the conflict. This includes the 298 people travelling on 17 July 2014 on Malaysian Airlines flight MH17, which crashed in a separatist-controlled area.

While the military conflict has somewhat lessened thanks to a ceasefire agreed in Minsk and renewed several times, periodic outbreaks of fighting have called into question the sustainability of the truce. Clashes during the summer of 2016 were followed by a fragile truce agreed on 1 September 2016. The EU has linked its economic sanctions against Russia to Moscow's full compliance with the Minsk agreement. The sanctions have remained in place ever since.

In March 2014, the Commission agreed to measures to support the country and on 27 June 2014, the EU and Ukraine signed the Association Agreement. The chapters on political dialogue, justice, freedom and security, and economic, financial and sectoral cooperation entered into force provisionally on 1 November 2014. The trade part of the Association Agreement entered into provisional application on 1 January 2016. The provisional entry into force also marked the end of trilateral trade talks with Russia, which suspended the country's trade preferences under the Commonwealth of Independent States Free Trade Agreement (CIS FTA) from 1 January 2016. The Association Agreement entered into force on 1 September 2017.

Ukrainian citizens enjoy a visa-free regime in the Schengen area for short stays of up to 90 days. The regulation on visa liberalisation for Ukraine entered into force on 11 June 2017.

A.   The European Parliament's position

The European Parliament has passed nine resolutions relating to Ukraine. The most recent (on the Ukrainian prisoners in Russia and the situation in Crimea) was passed on 16 March 2017.

On 11 October 2016, the leader of the Crimean Tatars, Mustafa Dzemilev, was shortlisted for the 2016 Sakharov Prize.

B.   Inter-parliamentary cooperation

Relations between the European Parliament and the parliament of Ukraine (the Verkhovna Rada) are conducted within the framework of the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement, in the EU-Ukraine Parliamentary Association Committee (PAC). The first meeting of the EU-Ukraine PAC was held in Brussels on 24 and 25 February 2015. The sixth PAC meeting took place in September 2017. On 3 July 2015, the European Parliament and the Verkhovna Rada signed a Memorandum of Understanding in Kyiv on a joint framework for parliamentary support and capacity-building. Following a 'needs assessment mission', a report setting out specific recommendations was presented during 'Ukraine week' (29 February to 2 March 2016) in Brussels.

The European Parliament continues to pursue the mediation and dialogue process with the Speaker of the Verkhovna Rada and leaders of the political factions. Known as the Jean Monnet Dialogue after its first meeting, which took place at the French statesman's historic house in Bazoches in October 2016, the process has focused on institutional reform of the Ukrainian Parliament.

C.   Election observation

Parliament has been invited to observe national elections in Ukraine. An international election observation mission deployed in 2014 included a group of election observers from the European Parliament and delegations from the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE ODIHR), the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) and the NATO Parliamentary Assembly.

According to the international observers, the October 2014 parliamentary elections were well organised, transparent, democratic and generally in compliance with international standards. The vote was seen as consolidating the positive electoral practices recognised during earlier presidential elections in the country. However, some irregularities persisted, mostly (90%) on the part of candidates in single-mandate districts in the southern regions.

On 2 November 2014, 'presidential and parliamentary elections' were held in the eastern regions of the country. The EU did not recognise the elections and considered them to be illegal and against the letter and the spirit of the Minsk agreements. The elections to the Russian Duma took place throughout the territory of Crimea on 18 September 2016, but were not observed by the OSCE ODIHR. It did however observe them throughout the territory of the Russian Federation.

MOLDOVA

On 27 June 2014, the EU and Moldova signed an Association Agreement, including a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA), which has been applied provisionally since September 2014. In April 2014, Moldova became the first country in the Eastern Partnership to benefit from a visa-free regime. EU assistance to Moldova under the European Neighbourhood Instrument (ENI) has also increased significantly, from EUR 40 million in 2007 to EUR 131 million in 2014. Following the banking fraud scandal in 2014, EU assistance was temporarily suspended. Bilateral assistance to Moldova under the ENI could range from EUR 335 million to EUR 410 million in the 2014-2017 period. Following a critical Court of Auditors report published in December 2016, only a limited amount of assistance has been disbursed, with implementation of the key recommendations pending.

As soon as the Association Agreement with the EU was ratified by the Moldovan National Assembly, Russia introduced a series of measures targeting imports from Moldova and withdrawing the country's trade preferences under the CIS FTA.

Following a relatively calm election campaign focused mainly on geopolitical issues (the EU versus the Eurasian Economic Union), Moldova's parliamentary election on 30 November 2014 ushered in a pro-European and pro-reform liberal majority coalition, although the pro-Russian Socialist Party obtained 21.37% of the vote. Local elections took place on 14 June 2015, with pro-European parties gaining a narrow victory over the pro-Russia camp. Major corruption scandals sparked street demonstrations, involving thousands of people. There have been four governments since the election, highlighting the political instability of the country.

On 4 March 2016, the Constitutional Court of Moldova reinstated the popular election of the president of the Republic, abolishing a law of July 2000 which had introduced a parliamentary election. The first round of the presidential election took place on 30 October 2016, with the Socialist Party's pro-Russian candidate Igor Dodon and the pro-EU candidate Maia Sandu from the Liberal Democratic Party going through to the second round on 13 November 2016. Igor Dodon won the election.

A major challenge for Moldova remains the issue of the breakaway region of Transnistria, which has unilaterally declared independence. While official talks aimed at settling the conflict resumed in November 2011, meetings — including two in 2014, one in 2015 and another in 2016 — have so far produced only limited results. Thanks to a bilateral protocol, the DCFTA was extended to Transnistria from 1 January 2016.

In addition, political tensions between Chisinau and Comrat (the capital of Gagauzia) surfaced in the autumn of 2016, as a result of the interpretation of the 1994 law on the special status of Gagauzia and other political developments (including the arrest warrant issued for four Gagauzian deputies). The political conflict has since been resolved thanks to the mediation of the OSCE, US and EU ambassadors to the country.

A.   The European Parliament's position

The European Parliament approved the Association Agreement between the EU and Moldova on 13 November 2014. Earlier in 2014, Parliament had endorsed the entry into force of the visa-free regime for the country.

Parliament has noted the stalemate on the Transnistrian issue and has highlighted the importance of finding a political solution several times.

B.   Inter-parliamentary cooperation

EU-Moldova relations were formalised in 2014 with the signing of the Association Agreement. The first meeting of the EU-Moldova Association Council was held on 16 March 2015 and the fourth meeting of the EU-Moldova Parliamentary Association Committee took place on 22 May 2017 in Chisinau.

C.   Election observation

Parliament was invited to observe all the recent parliamentary elections in Moldova. The legislative elections of 30 November 2014 were assessed relatively positively by the international observers of the OSCE ODIHR long-term observation mission. Together with OSCE ODIHR, PACE and the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, a European Parliament observation mission followed the parliamentary elections of 8 October 2016. The 2016 presidential election was also observed by the European Parliament delegation led by Igor Soltes (Greens/EFA, Slovenia). The delegation praised the work of the central electoral

commission and commended the high number of female candidates, while condemning the abuse of administrative resources, lack of campaign finance transparency and unbalanced media coverage.

BELARUS

The EU is committed to a policy of 'critical engagement' with Belarus. A recent bilateral rapprochement between the two countries prompted the EU to ease, on 25 February 2016, the sanctions applied to Belarus — asset freezes, travel bans and trade and financial restrictions. The Council decided on 25 February 2016 not to prolong restrictive measures for 170 people and three companies whose listings had already been suspended. However, it extended the other measures, including an arms embargo and an asset freeze and a travel ban imposed on four people listed in connection with the unresolved disappearances of two opposition politicians, a businessman and a journalist.

The EU has also given Belarus further encouragement: the conclusions of the May 2015 Eastern Partnership Summit in Riga noted the progress made in the visa facilitation and readmission dialogue and opened the way to re-launching the EU-Belarus Human Rights Dialogue. That dialogue, which had taken place in 2012 and 2013, consisted of an exchange of views between the EU and representatives of Belarusian civil society. From 2014, the dialogue was replaced with a project focused on the implementation of proposed reforms.

The EU and Belarus began negotiations on visa-facilitation and readmission agreements in 2014, and on a Mobility Partnership in 2015. Cooperation in the area of migration will also be developed in the coming years. Belarus is not negotiating an Association Agreement with the EU.

A.   The European Parliament's position

The European Parliament has adopted a number of resolutions criticising Belarus on account of its political prisoners, its constraints on media freedom and civil society, its failure to respect human rights and its flawed parliamentary elections. In September 2013, Parliament adopted a recommendation on the EU's overall strategy on Belarus, calling for the release and rehabilitation of all political prisoners. While the basic tenets of this strategy still remain in place and have been echoed in every annual report on the Common Foreign and Security Policy/ Common Security and Defence Policy, Belarus's constructive role in regional politics has also been recognised. On 6 April 2017, Parliament passed an urgent resolution on the situation in Belarus, condemning the crackdown, in February and March 2017, on peaceful protests across the country.

B.   Inter-parliamentary cooperation

Parliament does not recognise the country's National Assembly because of the manner in which elections are held in Belarus. Consequently, it does not maintain bilateral relations with that Assembly. Instead, Parliament's Delegation for relations with Belarus meets regularly with members of the Belarusian opposition and civil society to discuss political and economic developments in the country.

The EU's recent rapprochement with Belarus prompted a European Parliament delegation to travel there in June 2015 and in July 2017.

C. Election observation

Belarus has not invited Parliament to observe elections since 2001. The last parliamentary elections took place on 11 September 2016, with election observation missions by OSCE ODIHR and PACE.

Krzysztof Bartczak
09/2017