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
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THREE EASTERN PARTNERSHIP NEIGHBOURS: UKRAINE, MOLDOVA AND BELARUS

> The EU's Eastern Partnership policy, established 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 participate in the Euronest Parliamentary Assembly.

UKRAINE

The dramatic events that have taken place in Ukraine since November 2013 began as a pro-EU protest against then-President Victor Yanukovych's decision not to sign the Association Agreement with the EU, which had been initialled in March 2012. 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.

Following the Euromaidan movement, Russia illegally annexed Crimea in March 2014, and the eastern part of Ukraine plunged into an armed conflict spurred by Russia-backed separatists. According to the UN, more than 12 000 people have been killed in Ukraine since the onset of the conflict[1]. This includes the 298 people travelling on 17 July 2014 on Malaysian Airlines flight MH17, which crashed in a separatist-controlled area.

Despite the Minsk agreements brokered in 2015, and the establishment of negotiating formats such as the Trilateral Contact Group (OSCE, Russia and Ukraine) and the Normandy format (Russia, Ukraine, Germany and France), periodic outbreaks of fighting have called into question the sustainability of the truce. 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.

On 11 June 2017, visa-free travel to the EU for up to 90 days entered into force for Ukrainian citizens with biometric passports, as Ukraine fulfilled the visa liberalisation action plan benchmarks. This short-term visa-free regime aims to facilitate people-to-people contacts and strengthen business, social and cultural ties between the EU and Ukraine[2].

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[1]https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Countries/UA/ReportUkraine16Nov2018-15Feb2019.pdf
[2]https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-Homepage/4081/eu-ukraine-relations-factsheet_en

The Association Agreement entered into force on 1 September 2017, having been provisionally and partially applied since 1 November 2014. One of the agreement's cornerstones, the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA), became fully operational on 1 January 2016.

The Association Agreement offers new economic opportunities to both the EU and Ukraine. The EU reinforced its position as Ukraine's most important trading partner as a result. In the first eight months of 2017, exports from Ukraine to the EU and Ukrainian imports from the EU both increased by about 27 % compared to the same period the previous year[3].

In the April 2019 presidential elections President Poroshenko was defeated by newcomer Volodymyr Oleksandrovych Zelensky. Parliamentary elections are set to take place in October 2019.

In addition to political backing, the EU has also pledged a EUR 12.8 billion support package to support the reform process in Ukraine, EUR 2.81 billion of which has already been disbursed in macro-financial assistance (MFA). Under a jointly defined reform agenda, the EU is closely monitoring progress in a series of priority areas: the fight against corruption, reform of the judiciary, constitutional and electoral reforms, improvement of the business climate, energy efficiency, and reform of public administration. The third and final instalment of EUR 600 million of MFA was cancelled on 18 January 2018 on account of Ukraine's failure to comply with the conditions set. The Commission then proposed a new EUR 1 billion MFA programme in March 2018, which was approved by the European Parliament in June 2018 and by the Council in July 2018[4].

In autumn 2014, the Commission created a dedicated Support Group for Ukraine, comprising experts from the EU institutions and Member States, who provide coordination and advice to the Ukrainian authorities in key reform sectors.

Deployed in Ukraine in December 2014, the EU Advisory Mission for Civilian Security Sector Reform Ukraine (EUAM) coordinates international support for the civilian security sector and, in addition to operational activities, provides strategic advice, including training, to the Ukrainian authorities on how to develop sustainable, accountable and efficient security services that strengthen the rule of law.

A.   The European Parliament's position

Since the start of the current legislative term in July 2014, the European Parliament has passed 19 resolutions relating to Ukraine. The most recent, on the Implementation of the EU Association Agreement with Ukraine, was adopted on 12 December 2018. The European Parliament passed a resolution on the situation in the Sea of Azov on 25 October 2018. In 2018 Parliament also awarded the Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought to the Ukrainian film director, Oleg Sentsov, who has been sentenced to 20 years in prison in Russia for protesting against Russia's illegal occupation of Crimea.

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[3]https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-Homepage/4081/eu-ukraine-relations-factsheet_en
[4]http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-18-6600_en.htm

B. Inter-parliamentary cooperation

Under the leadership of Elmar Brok, the lead MEP for its democracy support activities in Ukraine, the European Parliament is also implementing a far-reaching capacity-building programme for the parliament of Ukraine, the Verkhovna Rada. These efforts build on the recommendations drawn up as part of the needs assessment mission conducted by former Parliament President Cox between September 2016 and February 2017.

Parliament is also responsible for steering a mediation process, the Jean Monnet Dialogue, which brings together the speaker of the Verkhovna Rada and leaders of the political factions to follow the implementation of these recommendations.

The legal frameworks for Parliament's support and capacity-building are the Memorandum of Understanding, signed with the Verkhovna Rada on 3 July 2015, and the Administrative Cooperation Agreement, signed by the Secretaries-General of the two legislatures in March 2016.

The ninth meeting of the EU-Ukraine Parliamentary Association Committee took place on 13 and 14 March 2019 in Strasbourg. In the final statement and recommendations, the Committee reiterates its strong support for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine within its internationally recognised borders. It expresses its deepest concern at the further deterioration of the security situation in the Donbas and condemns Russia's actions in the Sea of Azov insofar as they constitute a breach of international maritime law and Russia's international commitments. It recognises the reform efforts made since 2014 despite the very unfavourable conditions, and particularly welcomes the progress made in areas such as energy, health, public administration, pensions, education, decentralisation, public procurement, defence and security, the banking and financial sectors, corporate legislation and governance. It also reiterates that an effective fight against corruption is paramount for the success of the entire reform process and for the completion of the justice reform[5].

C. Election observation

The European Parliament has been very active in observing elections in Ukraine, sending three observation missions in 2014-2015: for the presidential elections on 25 May 2014, the parliamentary elections on 26 October 2014 and the local elections on 25 October 2015.

The elections to the Russian Duma took place throughout the territory of Crimea on 18 September 2016, but were not observed by the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (OSCE ODIHR). On 18 March 2018 Russian presidential elections were also held in Crimea, drawing condemnation and prompting the adoption of new sanctions by the EU[6]. On 11 November 2018, 'presidential and parliamentary elections' were held in the eastern regions of Ukraine. The EU did not recognise these elections and considered them to be illegal and against the letter and the spirit of the Minsk agreements. The European Parliament sent an observation mission for the presidential elections

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[5] http://www.europarl.europa.eu/delegations/en/d-ua/activities/inter-parliamentary
[6] https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2018/05/14/ukraine-eu-adds-five-persons-involved-in-the-organisation-of-russian-presidential-elections-in-illegally-annexed-crimea-and-sevastopol-to-sanctions-list/

in March/April 2019. According to ODIHR, fundamental freedoms were generally respected and candidates could campaign freely. The voting was well organised, transparent and efficient. Some irregularities and numerous indications of misuse of state resources and vote-buying undermined the credibility of the process.

MOLDOVA

On 27 June 2014, the EU and Moldova signed an Association Agreement, including a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA), which entered into force in July 2016. The Association Agreement strengthens Moldova's political and economic ties with the EU. It sets out a reform plan in areas vital for good governance and economic development and strengthens cooperation in several sectors. By signing the agreement, Moldova committed to reforming its domestic policies on the basis of EU laws and practice. The roadmap for the implementation of the Association Agreement is defined in the revised Association Agenda 2017-2019 adopted in August 2017, with 13 key priorities. In order to carry out this ambitious agenda the country benefits from substantial EU support.

In April 2014, Moldova became the first country in the Eastern Partnership to benefit from a visa-free regime. Following a banking fraud scandal in 2014, EU assistance was temporarily suspended. However, after an agreement was struck at the end of 2016 on a programme between Moldova and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the main aim of which was to stabilise the banking sector, the EU resumed its disbursement of budget support. Bilateral assistance to Moldova under the European Neighbourhood Instrument (ENI) ranged from EUR 335 million to EUR 410 million during the 2014-2017 period. The new EU multiannual programme for 2017-2020 (EUR 284 million to EUR 348 million) was adopted in September 2017 and focuses on the following priority sectors: economic development and market opportunities; strengthening institutions and good governance, including the rule of law and security; connectivity, energy efficiency, environment and climate change; and mobility and people-to-people contacts.

Moldova's parliamentary elections in 2014 led to a coalition of Liberals and Democrats, although the pro-Russian Socialist Party became the biggest party. However, the composition of the government changed several times and party affiliations in parliament changed dramatically as well, altering the political landscape and highlighting the political instability of the country. The Socialist Party's pro-Russian candidate, Igor Dodon, won the presidential elections in autumn 2016.

The governing coalition adopted a new electoral law in July 2017, shifting from a proportional to a mixed system, with 51 MPs elected in single-member constituencies and 50 MPs elected by proportional vote, this notwithstanding the negative opinions of the Venice Commission, OSCE ODIHR and several EU leaders. The February 2019 parliamentary elections were again won by the Socialist Party (35 seats), followed by the Democratic Party (30 seats), the ACUM bloc (26 seats) and the Șor Party (7 seats). ACUM represents voters who do not want to support the Socialists but were not satisfied with the Democratic Party's rule of the last five years, which was marked by political manipulation and corruption.

A major challenge for Moldova remains the issue of the breakaway region of Transnistria, which has unilaterally declared independence. The EU participates as an observer in the 5+2 negotiation process on the settlement of the Transnistrian conflict and it continues to support a comprehensive, peaceful settlement based on the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Moldova with a special status for Transnistria.

In addition, political tensions between Chisinau and Comrat, the capital of Gagauzia, surface from time to time, as a result of the special status of Gagauzia.

A. The European Parliament's position

On 4 July 2017, the European Parliament adopted its position on the Commission proposal granting a maximum of EUR 100 million in macro-financial assistance (MFA) to Moldova. Parliament emphasised that this assistance should help to support its economic and social development and stressed that respect for effective democratic mechanisms, including a parliamentary system and the rule of law, would be a precondition for the disbursement of macro-financial assistance. In July 2018, the first instalment of MFA was frozen after the invalidation of the local elections in the capital Chisinau, when they were won by opposition candidate Nastase.

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 sixth meeting of the EU-Moldova Parliamentary Association Committee took place in Chisinau in April 2018[7]. In the final statement and recommendations document, the Committee encourages the Moldovan institutions to work cooperatively and focus on tangible reforms which aim to bring about concrete improvements in Moldovan citizens' lives, including increased prosperity and strengthening of the rule of law, and stressed the need to continue to focus on the implementation of the Association Agreement / Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area. The Committee highlights the important role that civil society plays in monitoring the implementation of the Association Agreement. It also recalls the importance of ensuring media pluralism, including a plurality of TV channels, and the protection of independent media and freedom of expression. Finally, particular stress was placed on the fight against corruption and money laundering and the need to promote an impartial and well-functioning judiciary, with the authorities being encouraged to ensure that the new justice strategy for 2018-2020 addresses the existing shortcomings.

C. Election observation

Parliament was invited to observe all the recent parliamentary elections in Moldova. The European Parliament delegation also observed the 2016 presidential election. The delegation praised the work of the central electoral commission and commended the large number of female candidates, while condemning the abuse of administrative resources, lack of campaign finance transparency and unbalanced media coverage. In February 2019, Parliament observed the Moldovan parliamentary elections and stated that the vote had taken place without major incidents and was generally well managed. However, there were concerns about reports regarding citizens being paid to vote

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[7]http://www.europarl.europa.eu/cmsdata/141500/1150543-5_VE.pdf

for particular parties in an organised movement of voters by bus from Transnistria. The ODIHR preliminary report noted that the campaign was tainted by allegations of pressure on public employees, strong indications of vote-buying and the misuse of state resources. The PACE delegation stated that the new electoral system confirmed the main concerns raised by the Venice Commission: lack of effective mechanisms to prevent undue influence by wealthy business people, combined with poor supervision of party and candidate funding and inadequate penalties.

BELARUS

In recent decades, the EU's relations with Belarus have been difficult at times, owing to constant human and civil rights violations in the country. Since 2015, however, Belarus has displayed a more open attitude towards the EU and the Eastern Partnership. Its relations with western countries improved ahead of the October 2015 presidential election, and it played an important role as host of the EU-mediated talks on the Ukraine crisis. In response, the EU committed itself to a policy of 'critical engagement' with Belarus, as outlined in the Council conclusions of 15 February 2016.

While the EU condemns Belarus's well-documented human rights violations, Brussels is open to further EU engagement and sectoral cooperation on the condition that the relationship is based on common values. Tangible steps by Belarus to respect universal fundamental freedoms, the rule of law and human rights, including with respect to the death penalty, remain key to shaping the EU's policy towards the country in the years to come.

On 25 February 2016, the Council decided not to prolong restrictive measures for 170 people and three companies whose listings had already been suspended. However, it did extend the other pre-existing measures, including an arms embargo, 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 Council prolonged the restrictive measures until 28 February 2020[8].

The EU-Belarus Human Rights Dialogue resumed in 2016, with the most recent round taking place in July 2017. In order to provide a forum for a policy dialogue at the level of senior officials, the EU-Belarus Coordination Group was established in 2016. The main goal of this body is to steer cooperation between the EU and Belarus and oversee the further development of relations. In April 2018, the EU-Belarus Coordination Group convened for the fifth time: the need for a comprehensive reform of the electoral legislation and opposition to the death penalty were reiterated by the EU[9].

Belarus participates proactively both bilaterally and in the multilateral formats of the Eastern Partnership. Negotiations on a Mobility Partnership were concluded in 2017 and negotiations on visa facilitation and readmission agreements are under way. Both sides are currently concluding talks on the partnership priorities, which will become the first document to be signed between Belarus and the EU.

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[8] https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2019/02/25/belarus-eu-prolongs-arms-embargo-and-sanctions-against-4-individuals-for-one-year/
[9]https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/belarus_en/43689/EU-Belarus%20Coordination%20Group%20met%20for%20the%20fifth%20time

Despite undeniable progress, the situation remains worrying when it comes to human rights. A wave of protests which spread across Belarus in February and March 2017 marked another turning-point in bilateral relations. The EU strongly condemned the crackdown on peaceful protesters. In addition, with two prisoners having been executed in 2017 and four others in 2018, Belarus remains the sole country on the European continent that still carries out capital punishment. Debates on a moratorium on the death penalty with a view to its possible abolition are regularly evoked but have yet to come to fruition.

A. The European Parliament's position

The European Parliament has passed 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, including retention of the death penalty, and its flawed parliamentary elections. 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. In its resolution of 19 April 2018, Parliament expressed support for the EU's critical engagement with Belarus, as long as this is conditioned on concrete steps being made towards democratisation and respect for fundamental freedoms and human rights. In particular, it calls on Belarus to join a global moratorium on the death penalty as a first step towards its permanent abolition. In its resolution of 4 October 2018, Parliament condemned once again the harassment and detention of journalists and independent media and reiterated calls to strengthen respect for democratic principles, the rule of law, and human rights and fundamental freedoms.

B. Interparliamentary cooperation

The European Parliament does not recognise Belarus's National Assembly because of the manner in which elections are held in the country. 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. Meeting OSCE standards for elections is a precondition for Belarus's admission to the Euronest Parliamentary Assembly (which means that until democratic standards for parliamentary elections are met, Belarusian Members of Parliament do not sit in the Euronest Parliamentary Assembly or its different organs). However, European Parliament delegations have travelled to Belarus several times, for instance in June 2015, July 2017 and October 2018.

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 the OSCE ODIHR and PACE.

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04/2019