
EU needs to earmark money to withstand Russia, say Foreign Affairs MEPs

As a return to "business as usual" with Russia is now out of the question, the EU should earmark specific funding to counter its propaganda and infiltration of EU politics and support independence movements there, say Foreign Affairs Committee MEPs in a resolution voted on Monday. EU countries should refrain from doing bilateral deals with Russia and step up their own collective efforts to withstand it, whilst retaining a return to cooperation with Russia as a long-term goal, they add.

By illegally annexing Crimea, waging an armed conflict against Ukraine, imposing illegal trade embargoes and concluding treaties with separatist regions; Russia has "profoundly damaged its relationship with the EU" and can no longer be considered a "strategic partner". The EU must re-assess its relations with Russia and come up with a "soft-power contingency plan" to counter its "aggressive and divisive policies", says the committee in a resolution passed by 53 votes to 10, with 3 abstentions.

Russia is now openly positioning itself against the international democratic community and its law-based order and seeking to redraw borders within Europe by force, say MEPs, who call on the European Commission and EU member states to earmark money for specific "soft power" projects to withstand Russia.

Money needed to counter misinformation...

The Commission should earmark funding without delay or specific projects to counter Russian propaganda and misinformation in the EU and abroad, supply objective information to public opinion in the EU's eastern partner countries, develop Russian-language alternatives to Russia's state-controlled media, and get credible independent information to Russian-speaking audiences.

They also ask the Commission to program a "more ambitious financial assistance to Russian civil society", and continue supporting Russian human rights defenders, bloggers, independent media, academics and NGOs. MEPs are concerned of the worsening state of human rights and fundamental freedoms in Russia, including crackdown on NGOs and restriction of LGBTI people rights.

... and monitor meddling

They suggest that the Commission and member states set up a mechanism to monitor Russian financial, political or technical assistance to political parties and other organisations in the EU and assess its influence over political life and public opinion in the EU and its eastern neighbour states.

Link energy networks

EU member states should maintain their collective solidarity and refrain from engaging in bilateral relations and agreements with Russia, say MEPs. More specifically, they urge EU member states and candidate countries to suspend defence cooperation with Russia and work to strengthen the EU's common European foreign and security policy instead.

To reduce the EU's energy dependence on Russia, MEPs urge member states to interconnect their energy networks and enforce EU energy legislation, so as to create a genuine "European Energy Union" without delay. This is how to fight Russia's use of energy "as a political and diplomatic bargaining chip", they say.

Renewed partnership with Russia is the long-run goal

MEPs nonetheless reiterate that the solution to the conflict in eastern Ukraine can "only be of political nature". They believe that "in the long run" a constructive EU-Russia relationship is "possible and desirable", given their political, trade, transport, energy and people-to-people links and "common challenges on the world scene", such as fighting terrorism.

The EU must be ready to resume cooperation with Moscow once it shows respect for the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Ukraine, including Crimea, implements the Minsk ceasefire agreements in full and ceases its "destabilising military and security activities at the EU borders", say MEPs.


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