

EU-Ukraine people-to-people contacts

The 2014 Revolution of Dignity in Ukraine began as a grassroots movement, channelling public calls for a functioning democracy, a European outlook and an end to corruption. Since then, the European Union (EU) has been unrelenting in its support for Kyiv's ambitious reform process as well as for Ukraine's vibrant civil society.

Ukraine: a priority Eastern Partnership country

The 2013-2014 'Revolution of Dignity' (or Euromaidan) was [triggered](#) when Ukraine's pro-Russia President Viktor Yanukovich refused to sign the Association Agreement with the EU. Since the toppling of Yanukovich in February 2014, as well as Russia's subsequent [illegal annexation of Crimea](#) and its launch of a [hybrid war](#) against the country, the EU has increased its [support](#) for Ukraine's reform process. Ukraine is a priority country within the EU's Eastern Partnership (EaP). The [Association Agreement](#) (AA) with its deep and comprehensive free trade area entered fully into force in 2017. It is the main framework for EU-Ukraine ties, and has led to significant progress on bilateral trade and reforms. Whereas Ukraine has made unprecedented changes and governance reforms on national and local administrative levels, Ukrainian citizens have not always felt the impact immediately.

Civil society's key role in EU policies towards Ukraine

Public discontent with the widespread corruption in Ukraine was a key [driver](#) behind the protests in the winter of 2013 to 2014. The protests mobilised the entire spectrum of the country's civil society: Ukrainians demanded a functioning democracy and a European future. After the newly elected, pro-European government took office in 2014, civil society organisations (CSOs) expanded their activities to monitor reform efforts and help those affected by the armed conflict. As a vibrant civil society is key to economic growth and social innovation, and CSOs are crucial to sector-reform dialogue, the engagement with civil society is a cross-cutting issue in the EU's Eastern Partnership priorities, '[20 deliverables for 2020](#)'.

Is the space for civil society shrinking in Ukraine?

Despite or perhaps even because of its key role, the [pressure on civil society](#) in post-Euromaidan Ukraine appears to be growing. At the same time, the armed conflict with Russia has further given rise not only to peace-making groups, but also to more radical nationalistic groups, kindling tensions in the civic sphere. Mainstream CSO criticism of Ukrainian authorities that counter the official narrative is sometimes discredited as 'unpatriotic', and there are increasing reports of [attacks](#) against activists. In November 2018, anti-corruption activist and adviser to the Mayor of Kherson [Kateryna Handziuk](#) died after an acid attack in July. The risk of harassment is reportedly increasing the tendency towards self-censorship. Although analysts argue that Ukraine's space for civil society appears to be [shrinking](#), public opinion polls [suggest](#) that, while trust in political elites (most notably the President) has plummeted, public trust in CSOs has grown since 2014. In 2017, more than 62 % of respondents said they trusted volunteer organisations 'fully' or 'mostly', and 54 % said they trusted civic organisations. Some 61 % said non-governmental organisations (NGOs) had 'strong' or 'some' influence in society. In 2013, only 4 % of respondents to a similar poll said they trusted NGOs.

Visa liberalisation: a milestone on Ukraine's European path

Visa liberalisation agreements directly benefit sending countries' citizens, and constitute an important [incentive](#) for reforms in key policy areas such as freedom, security and justice. Ukraine met all the [benchmarks](#) in the visa liberalisation action plan launched in 2008, and progress in document and border security, anti-corruption efforts and migration management qualified Ukraine for visa-free travel to the Schengen area. The law, allowing Ukrainians with a biometric passport to enter the EU for 90 days without a visa, was [approved](#) by the European Parliament in April 2017, and entered into [force](#) in June 2017. This both signifies Ukraine's progress and demonstrates the EU's support for the reforms demanded by the Ukrainian people. Between June 2017 and August 2018, Ukrainians made over 25.9 million [trips](#) to the EU.

Education/training

The EU [supports](#) Ukraine's integration into the European Higher Education Area, including the country's reforms to modernise the education system. At the same time, Ukraine is one of the most active participants in academic exchange programmes with Europe. Between 2015 and 2018, Ukraine participated in more than 10 000 academic exchanges both to and from Ukraine – 42 % of all academic exchanges with the Eastern Partnership region. Since 2014, 191 Erasmus+ scholarships have enabled Masters students from Ukraine to follow Erasmus Mundus joint degree programmes. In addition, the EU is to dedicate €5 million as a specific bilateral window for Ukraine under Erasmus+ to increase opportunities for student and academic mobility and traineeships, boost reform in higher education institutions and allow for greater involvement of Ukraine in Jean Monnet activities in 2019 and 2020.

People-to-people contacts programme: 'House of Europe'

The EU's December 2018 [decision](#) to invest €18 million in mobility and people-to-people contacts for the 2018-2020 period under the European Neighbourhood Instrument reflects the importance the EU attaches to Ukraine's civic sphere. A new programme for mobility and people-to-people contacts, including social inclusion – 'House of Europe' – was launched in December 2018. The idea is to enhance contacts between broad sections of the Ukrainian public and the EU, through a combination of support measures promoting cultural, educational and professional exchanges. In line with the [2017 Eastern Partnership Summit declaration](#), this programme aims to increase people's engagement with civil society. The goal is to boost the bottom-up dimension of the implementation and sustainability of the reforms that the EU is supporting with other programmes, thus complementing and strengthening the ongoing institutional reform process.

What does the new programme entail?

The programme will organise professional exchanges, cooperation and mobility schemes for specific target groups in the culture, education, youth and health sectors. It includes the following four elements:

- a professional exchange scheme, providing opportunities for short-term professional internships in EU Member States, primarily through existing Member State programmes and projects;
- a programme and information hub, 'House of Europe', to manage cooperation, dialogue and exchange programmes, ensuring synergies with existing EU and Member State programmes;
- a dedicated Erasmus+ window for Ukraine (€5 million);
- 50 % reimbursement of Ukraine's contribution to the EU's Creative Europe programme (2018-2020).

The role of the European Parliament and the Committee of the Regions

The European Parliament continues to play a key role in EU-Ukraine relations, not least through its delegation to the [EU-Ukraine Parliamentary Association Committee](#) and its [democracy support activities](#) (lead MEP for Ukraine: Elmar Brok, EPP, Germany). In its November 2017 [resolution](#) on the EaP, Parliament called for transnational civil society platforms and cross-border projects such as people-to-people programmes involving intercultural dialogue and the younger generation. Parliament awarded the [2018 Sakharov Prize](#) for freedom of thought to Ukrainian filmmaker Oleg Sentsov – a prominent Crimean civil society activist during the Revolution of Dignity, who was arrested by the Russian Federal Security Service in Crimea in May 2014, and is currently detained in a penal colony in Siberia. In doing this, it increased the [pressure](#) on Russia to release Sentsov. The Committee of the Regions, meanwhile, launched a pilot project in March 2018 aiming to forge partnerships between cities and regions in Ukraine and the EU, to boost civic engagement.

The EU-Ukraine Civil Society Platform

The EU-Ukraine AA (Article 469) stipulates the establishment of a [Civil Society Platform](#), tasked with promoting regular meetings of representatives of the civil societies of both parties. Established in April 2015, the EU-Ukraine Civil Society Platform consists of members of the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) on the one hand and representatives of Ukraine civil society on the other. The platform can make recommendations to the Association Council (at ministerial level). The Association Committee (senior civil servant level) and the Parliamentary Association Committee are, meanwhile, obliged to obtain their representatives' views on the fulfilment of AA objectives on a regular basis.

