The direction of EU-Russia political relations

Russia’s 2014 annexation of Crimea marked the beginning of a new and difficult phase in bilateral relations. The latter are based on the five principles agreed by EU foreign ministers in 2016, in addition to the joint communication of June 2021. During the September plenary session, the European Parliament is expected to debate EU–Russia political relations and vote a draft recommendation to the Council, the Commission and the High Representative. While acknowledging that the EU approach has contained the risk of Russian aggression, the draft recommendation calls for a review of EU policy, including more support for human rights.

Background

In 1994, the EU and Russia signed a Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (still in force). However, relations deteriorated, especially from 2000 under Vladimir Putin, as Russia pursued an increasingly aggressive foreign policy, exemplified by its 2008 war against Georgia. A turning point came in 2014, after Russia illegally annexed Crimea and sent troops and weapons into eastern Ukraine. Since 2014, there has been no progress on ending the Donbas conflict, where Russia continues to back separatists. In April 2021, large-scale military movements by Russian forces close to Ukraine highlighted the threat of further aggression. New areas of contention have emerged with the West. Russia’s military intervention in Syria has come at devastating human cost; in Belarus, Russian backing is helping Lukashenka’s regime to resist calls for change. In an attempt to compromise EU democratic processes, Kremlin trolls spread disinformation on social media, and cyber-attacks target political parties and institutions such as the German Bundestag. In August 2020, Russian Federal Security Service agents attempted to kill anti-corruption campaigner and opposition activist Alexey Navalny with a banned chemical weapon. After his return to Russia from Germany, Navalny was imprisoned; in an unprecedented crackdown ahead of the September 2021 elections, the authorities moved to close down Navalny’s ‘extremist’ organisations and to label leading independent media outlets as foreign agents.

Background – European Union position

The EU responded to Russia’s aggression against Ukraine with hard-hitting economic sanctions. It has added further sanctions since, for chemical weapons, cyber-attacks, and human rights violations in Chechnya. In 2016, EU foreign ministers agreed to base EU-Russia relations on five principles, namely: insistence on full implementation of the Minsk Agreements as a condition for any substantial change in relations, close relations with Eastern Partnership countries, European resilience in the face of Russian threats, selective engagement with Russia on global issues, and support for Russian civil society and people-to-people contacts. European leaders are divided between those who would like to see more engagement, and supporters of harsher sanctions. Despite calls for change on both sides, the EU’s June 2021 Russia strategy confirms this general approach, with relations based on a mix of pushing back, constraint and engagement.

European Parliament position

On 14 July 2021, Parliament’s Committee on Foreign Affairs (AFET) adopted an own-initiative report with a draft recommendation under Rule 118. It calls for a review of EU policy towards Russia, based on six principles: deterring Russian security threats in the Eastern neighbourhood; countering Russian hybrid threats in the EU and its neighbourhood; engagement with Russian civil society, as well as selective dialogue and cooperation with the Kremlin, conditional on the latter ending its aggression against its own people and against neighbouring countries; supporting democracy, through sanctions, international investigations, and curbs on corrupt Russian finance; incentives for Russia’s democratic transformation, such as free trade, visa liberalisation and a renewed strategic partnership; and closer integration with Eastern Partnership countries.

Own-initiative report: 2021/2042(INI); Committee responsible: AFET; Rapporteur: Andrius Kubilius (EPP, Lithuania).