

Assessing and setting priorities for EU relations with the eastern partnership countries

2013/2149(INI) - 12/03/2014 - Text adopted by Parliament, single reading

The European Parliament adopted by 592 votes to 64, with 24 abstentions, a resolution on assessing and setting priorities for EU relations with the Eastern Partnership countries.

Parliament recalled that the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), in particular the Eastern Partnership (EaP), is based on a community of values and on a shared commitment to international law and fundamental values and aims extend, share and promote the values and the principles upon which the EU is founded.

Successive EU enlargements have brought Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine and Belarus closer to the EU and that these countries have **deeply rooted European aspirations** but are still undergoing difficult transformation processes towards a democratic system, following decades of existence within the USSR.

Against this background, Parliament recalled the purpose of the EaP, which is the **strengthening of the political, economic and cultural European integration of the Eastern Partners**. It expressed concern at the fact that the EaP as a whole has recently been seriously challenged by **third parties**. It stressed that a **European perspective**, including the right to apply for membership under Article 49 of the Treaty on European Union, could constitute a driving force for reforms in these countries and further strengthen their commitment to shared values and principles such as democracy.

To give a new impetus to the Eastern Partnership, the resolution urged the EU to focus particularly on investing in immediate progress for citizens, and in this context to establish **visa-free regimes**, to support youth and future leaders, and to devote greater attention to the empowerment of civil society.

Vilnius Summit: Parliament believed that the outcome of the Vilnius Summit (November 2013) highlighted the need to enhance the strategic character of the Eastern Partnership. It recommended, therefore, making flexible use of the tools at the EU's disposal, such as macroeconomic assistance, easing of trade regimes, projects to enhance energy security and economic modernisation, and swift implementation of visa liberalisation, in line with European values and interests. It called on the Commission to produce a green paper on the post-Vilnius future of the Eastern Partnership.

Parliament also welcomed, as a positive conclusion of the Vilnius summit, the initialling of the Association Agreements including a DCFTA with the Republic of Moldova and Georgia. However, it regretted that the outcome of the Vilnius summit did not match all expectations, and urged that association agreements be swiftly signed and fully, rapidly and efficiently implemented, where applicable, with the partner countries.

Promoting exchanges, including with young people: Parliament recalled in this connection that visa liberalisation is only one of a number of processes aimed at bringing the societies closer together, and that more efforts are required in this area, particularly with regard to advancing cooperation in the fields of education, science, culture and sport. In parallel, it highlighted the importance of **investing in projects for youth** and future leaders, by making full use of the scholarship opportunities under the 'Erasmus +' programme to foster student and teacher exchanges between EaP countries and the EU Member States. Members invited the EU to increase its presence in the partner countries using more interactive audiovisual means and social media in the respective local languages in order to reach all of society.

Energy issues: Parliament emphasised that the EU and the Eastern European partners face **common political challenges with regard to ensuring a reliable and safe energy supply**. It underlined the importance of focusing more on the consolidation, improvement and efficiency of the energy sector, as **one of the main conditions for modernisation of the economy**, strengthening energy security and competitiveness as well as developing energy strategies in line with European Energy Community obligations and EU targets.

In an amendment adopted in plenary, Parliament recalled that the Energy Community Treaty lays the basis for establishing a fully integrated regional energy market favouring growth, investment and a stable regulatory framework. It considered further progress in the integration of the gas and electricity networks, including reverse-flows, in the region to be essential to achieving the goals of the Energy Community. It also underlined the importance of focusing more on the consolidation, improvement and efficiency of the energy sector, as one of the main conditions for modernisation of the economy, strengthening energy security and competitiveness as well as developing energy strategies in line with European Energy Community obligations and EU targets. It called for the continuation of gas and electricity market reforms and an adequate share of energy from renewable resources, in line with EU policies and standards.

Plenary recognised that Eastern Partnership countries' energy dependence on third countries and inadequate diversification of supply complicate the dynamics of European integration and recalled that projects such as South Stream **increase the EU's dependency on Russian gas**. Parliament called on the Commission and the Member States to fast-track projects that will help mitigate the situation.

Principle of differentiation: Parliament called for a more tailored approach to individual partner countries, also by better taking into account their specific geopolitical vulnerabilities, implementing the principles of differentiation and **'more for more'** but with overall coordination. It is convinced that the depth and scope of relations with each partner country should reflect its own European ambition, commitment to shared values, and progress in aligning with EU legislation, assessed on the basis of clear benchmarks and on its own merits. It stated that the Eastern Partnership architecture must be forward-looking and flexible - institutionally and conceptually – in order to provide long-term incentives for all partners, including the most advanced ones and thus further intensify relations with the EU. It further believed that the EaP should not only focus on normative objectives but also reach the **citizens** through bottom-up approaches aimed at anchoring the benefits of prospective association to public opinion.

Enhancing multilateralism: Parliament recognised the importance of inclusiveness in ensuring that the Partnership advances with the participation of all six partners. It highlighted therefore, the need to further enhance the multilateral dimension, and encourages the holding of regular meetings at ministerial level across the policy spectrum. It stressed, in this regard, **as in the case of Ukraine**, the importance of the Council taking immediate action, including increased diplomatic pressure and the introduction of individual targeted measures, travel bans and asset and property freezes directed at officials, legislators and their business sponsors responsible for human rights violations, and of stepping up efforts to stop money laundering and tax evasion by companies and businesspeople of the country concerned in European banks.

Parliament recommended the further strengthening of the multilateral track of the Eastern Partnership in order to foster a climate of cooperation, friendship and good neighbourly relations that will support the objectives of political association and particularly economic integration and the encouragement of multilateral initiatives for cooperation and joint projects, as well as making further progress on cross-border and regional cooperation, especially in areas such as transport, people-to-people contacts, the environment, border security, and energy security. It stated that cooperation should nevertheless continue, where possible, on a **bilateral basis** between the EU, on the one side, and the partner countries, on the other.

Enlightening citizens about the EaP: Parliament is concerned about the lack of shared understanding of the essence of cooperation between the EU and the EaP countries. It noted with concern that the EU is frequently seen as a donor and partner countries as beneficiaries, while all should perform a double role. It warned that this kind of public perception might create unrealistic expectations among the societies of the Eastern Partners. It also regretted that the Member States often have divergent views and do not take a common position in relations with, and developments in, EaP countries and called for a comprehensive review of the ENP, especially as regards the Eastern Neighbours, in the light of recent events and also in terms of concrete and tangible measures, especially concerning EaP citizens.

Sectoral issues: other sectoral issues were highlighted such as:

- easing trade barriers;
- sharing experiences of democratic reforms, drawing on the rich experience that European countries have in the process of establishing and protecting democratic regimes based on respect for fundamental values and the rule of law;
- strengthening measures aiming to protect human rights defenders;
- frozen conflicts hamper the full development of the EaP and exacerbate hate, animosity and tensions among the peoples of several EaP countries;
- enhancing the participation and the role of civil society;
- raising awareness of the complexity of the economic problems, promoting good governance in the financial sector and cooperation with international financial institutions, adopting a sectoral approach, and encouraging legislation conducive to the development of the SME sector;
- strengthen the business dimension of the Eastern Partnership;
- promoting joint activities with other strategic partners and cooperation in international and European organisations;
- the need to promote social and cultural ties and cooperation in the field of research and innovation.

Pressure from Russia: Parliament stated that the countries concerned are still exposed to strong pressure and blackmail by third parties in their sovereign decisions. It recalled that the EaP countries must be free and sovereign so as to fully exercise their right to determine their future without being subjected to undue external pressure, threats or intimidation. For the Parliament, every country has the sovereign right to join any international organisation or alliance and to define its own future **without any external influence**.

The resolution deplored the continuous pressure exerted on the EaP countries, through economic, political and military tools, by Russia, which perceives the strengthening of relations between the EU and the EaP countries as **actions against its own interests**. It highlighted the need to address this in talks with Russia, as well as the need for a serious discussion among EU Member States on **new ways of constructively engaging Russia in initiatives** that reflect common interests in the context of a secure, stable and prosperous European neighbourhood, thus overcoming obsolete and dangerous thinking in terms of spheres of influence. Parliament called on the EU to take concrete measures, including economic assistance, easing of trade regimes, projects to enhance energy security and economic modernisation, in order to support the EaP countries in their European aspirations, and to adopt a common strategy vis-à-vis Russia.

Criticisms of the EaP: Parliament stressed that, while the EaP is being widely criticised, the success of the initiative is dependent on the engagement and political will of both the EU and its Eastern neighbours. Furthermore, it noted that it is essential that any criticism of the EaP should be constructive in character and should be targeted on improving it rather than discrediting it.

In a recital, Parliament stressed the need for a real political will which has proven an insufficient driver of change and reforms. Recent developments in the EaP countries, as well as the outcome of the Vilnius

Summit, highlighted the need to strengthen the strategic character of the Eastern Partnership and to make increased efforts to promote and increase awareness of the **mutual benefits of the Association Agreements**.