

State of EU-Russia political relations

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The Committee on Foreign Affairs adopted an own-initiative report by Sandra KALNIETE (EPP, LV) on the state of EU-Russia political relations.

Members recalled that the EU remains open to a stronger relationship and to dialogue leading thereto, and wishes to return to cooperative relations with Russia, once the Russian authorities have met their international and legal obligations and have proven Russia's genuine commitment to restore broken trust.

Shared challenges and interests

While condemning the illegal occupation and annexation of Crimea, as well as Russia's continued violation of the territorial integrity of Georgia and Moldova, Members stressed that the EU cannot envisage a gradual return to 'business as usual' until Russia fully implements the Minsk Agreement and restores the territorial integrity of Ukraine.

As Russia can no longer be considered a 'strategic partner' in the current circumstances, Members believe that the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement should be reconsidered. They stated that any framework for the EU-Russia relationship should be based on the full respect of international law, the Helsinki OSCE principles, democratic principles, human rights and the rule of law, and allow for dialogue on managing global challenges, the strengthening of global governance and ensuring enforcement of international rules.

Members condemned Russia's involvement in the Skripal case, and in disinformation campaigns and cyberattacks carried out by the Russian intelligence services aimed at destabilising public and private communications infrastructure and at increasing tensions within the EU and its Member States.

They are concerned about the relations between the Russian government and the extreme right-wing and populist nationalist parties and governments in the EU, such as in Hungary. They also recalled that the interference of Russian state actors in the referendum campaign on Brexit is currently under investigation by the UK authorities.

Human rights and sanctions

Members deplored the significant deterioration in the human rights situation and the widespread and undue restrictions on the rights to freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly in Russia and are concerned that Russia is showing its readiness to use military force against other nations through concrete actions, including advanced nuclear weapons. They condemned the government's continued repression of dissent and media freedom as well as statements inciting violence against LGBTI people. They also condemned Russia's money laundering activities, illegal financial activities and other means of economic warfare.

Although the Union's position is firm and consistent on EU sanctions against Russia, which will continue as long as Russian violations of international law continue, Members believe that its approach to the Union's foreign and security policy towards Russia requires better coordination.

In this context, they call on Member States to end their 'golden visa/passport' programmes which benefit Russian oligarchs who are often Kremlin supporters, and may undermine the effectiveness of international sanctions.

The report also condemned Russia's activities in the Azov Sea as a violation of international maritime law and Russia's international commitments.

Areas of common interest

Members reiterated their support for the five principles guiding the EU's policy towards Russia and called for further definition of the selective engagement principle. They recommended that the focus be placed on issues relating to the Middle East and North Africa and the Northern and Arctic region, terrorism, violent extremism, non-proliferation, arms control, strategic stability in the cyberspace, organised crime, migration and climate change, including joint efforts to safeguard the UN Security Council endorsed Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action with Iran, and bringing an end to the war in Syria.

They also recommended that the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline project, which increases Europe's dependence on Russian gas supplies, should be stopped.

Recommendations

The report argues in favour of;

- continued political and financial support for people-to-people contacts in general, and in particular for civil society activists, human rights defenders, bloggers, independent media, investigative journalists, outspoken academics and public figures and NGOs;
- increased people-to-people contacts focusing on young people, enhanced dialogue and cooperation between experts, researchers, civil society and local authorities in the EU and Russia, as well as increased exchanges of students, vocational trainees and young people, in particular within the framework of Erasmus+;
- the unconditional release of all human rights defenders and other persons detained for the peaceful exercise of their rights to freedom of expression, assembly and association;
- intensifying EU efforts to increase their resilience, in particular in the fields of information technology and the media, including mechanisms to detect and combat interference in elections; Members called for the development of a binding legal framework, both at EU and international level, to deal with hybrid warfare and to enable the EU to react firmly to campaigns that threaten democracy or the rule of law;
- stronger unity between Member States and clearer communication of the red lines on the EU side;
- the establishment of an EU-wide mechanism allowing the screening of political parties' funding, and for subsequent measures to be taken to avoid some parties and movements being used to destabilise the European project from within.

The report urged the Commission and the European External Action Service (EEAS) to prepare without delay a legislative proposal for an EU-wide Magnitsky Act (the EU Global Human Rights Sanctions Regime) which would allow the imposition of visa bans and targeted sanctions, such as blocking property and interests in property within the EU's jurisdiction on individual public officials or persons acting in an official capacity, who are responsible for acts of corruption or serious human rights violations.