

EU-28 WATCH



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On the project

Euroscepticism and the European Parliament elections in 2014, the EU's Neighbourhood in light of the Ukraine crisis and power relations in the EU: The EU-28 Watch project is mapping out discourses on these issues in European policies all over Europe. Research institutes from all 28 member states as well as Iceland, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and Turkey give overviews on the discourses in their respective countries.

This survey was conducted on the basis of a questionnaire that has been elaborated in March 2014. Most of the 33 reports were delivered in June 2014. This issue and all previous issues are available on the EU-28 Watch website: www.EU-28Watch.org.

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The EU and its neighbourhood: a ‘ring of friends’?

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The question of the EU’s enlargement and neighbourhood policy has been one of the central features of the Union since it began. Since the last EU–Watch Croatia successfully completed its accession process and became the 28th European Union (EU) member state. Currently Turkey, along with Montenegro and Serbia, is in accession proceedings. While the latter have their own hurdles in the accession process, Turkey’s case is interesting however, as the country continues to be plagued by a democratic deficit, which hinders the accession process. The European Neighbourhood policy was put in place in 2004 and has played a significant role in creating partnerships with the EU’s neighbours and disseminating the values of democracy, rule of law and the importance of human rights. In 2014 the main focus of the ENP has been on the Eastern European countries and the aggressions of Russia in the Ukraine. Russia relations have been soured by the government’s annexation of the Crimean peninsula. Partner authors were asked about the perception of Russia in their country, the role of the Eastern Partnership in light of the Ukrainian crisis and how Turkey’s accession prospects are viewed.

Russia: between condemnations and vital interests

Since the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula by Russia in early 2014, much of Europe’s attention has been on its largest eastern neighbour. The question of how to deal with Russia’s actions has been hotly debated throughout the rest of 2014. The EU showed an unusual amount of unity in condemning Russia’s actions. Speaking with one voice for almost the first time in regards to a major international conflict the 28 EU member states condemned Russia’s annexation of the Crimean peninsula and refused to recognize the peninsula as Russian. The Crimean crisis, as it has been called, has put the relationship between all EU member states and Russia to an important test.

Currently the EU and other major countries including the United States have agreed to sanctions against key players in the Russian economy. These sanctions are seen as punishing the Russian government for its continued role in the Ukrainian crisis. While in countries far removed from the Russian border such as the United Kingdom and Portugal Russia is almost a non-topic, other countries closer to the border such as the Baltic countries and some of the Nordic countries clearly perceive Russia as a threat. Discussion of the sanctions is found in almost all EU member states. While most countries support the sanctions they are concerned about the impact on their domestic economies. Almost all Eastern European countries and most of the central European countries are concerned about their bilateral relations with Russia. This is due to the fact that Russia is the biggest investor in many EU countries, especially the more Eastern ones where Russian investment far outweighs that of other neighbouring states. The general consensus is that, while a solution must be found to the Russian problem, it should be negotiated peacefully and with “zero conflict.”

A zero conflict solution is also important in terms of the energy trade with Russia. The EU’s energy dependence on Russia only complicates the matter further. Gas from Russia powers the EU especially in the Eastern states where in some countries as much as 100 percent of natural gas is imported from Russia. Due to this dependence it is necessary to negotiate peacefully so as not to affect the flow of energy. The EU member states are also actively working towards diversifying energy sources to reduce this dependency and to reduce the impact of potentially more effective sanctions. In short, the EU member states are in accordance that the relationship with Russia must remain good.

Rethinking the Eastern Partnership

In light of the crisis in Ukraine, not only the relationship with Russia has been discussed but also that with the Eastern Partnership countries. The Eastern Partnership is a project embedded in the European Neighbourhood Policy but focused on the Eastern neighbours. The Ukrainian crisis has put the Eastern Partnership to a test and sparked discussion about its benefits and drawbacks. Especially Central and Eastern European member states call for a stronger Eastern Partnership. Although the Eastern Partnership does not imply enlargement some of the smaller Western member states are opposed to any enlargement as they see it as a threat to their already low level of power as a small state. In contrast to this most of the Eastern member states are in favour of the expansion of the Eastern Partnership in order to provide the current partner countries with long-term European prospects.

While the Eastern Partnership is still seen as a means of promoting democracy in the East without having to offer EU accession, the member states agree that the Eastern Partnership should in no way become an anti-Russian project. In order to avoid crises such as the one in Ukraine Russia must be involved in the Union's relations with Eastern Partnership countries. Through dialoguing with Russia and trying to make the requirements of the association agreements compatible with possible treaties already in place with Russia the Partnership can be more effective.

Turkish EU membership: no immediate priority

The issue of Turkish accession is also mostly agreed upon. For most member states it is easy to follow the general EU wide acceptance due to stalling negotiations and a general enlargement fatigue. Some of the larger Western countries are not completely for Turkish accession and the remaining roadblocks allow them to remain as such without consequence. Furthermore, all member states are in agreement that there needs to be broad reform in Turkey's political problem zones of democracy, freedom of speech, and the rule of law. At this stage, the on-going accession negotiations are seen as the key driving force behind the country's necessary democratic reforms.

The neighbourhood: between conflict and partnership

The current status of EU enlargement and neighbourhood policy is largely coloured by the events in the Ukraine and the relationship with Russia. The EU and other developed nations have continued to impose sanctions on Russia and will continue to do so until the Ukraine crisis is resolved. Due to the European Parliament elections in May 2014 the roles of High Representative and European Commissioner for Enlargement and European Neighbourhood Policy must be filled which will have an impact on the future direction of the ENP and enlargement policy. The EU has recently signed Association Agreements and Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreements with Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia while the other Eastern Partnership countries are still negotiating. Meanwhile, Turkey's accession plans are stagnating until the government deals with its citizens' basic rights. Currently, with the troubled neighbourhood and the EU's relationship with Russia stealing much of the spotlight, work on the ENP and the accession prospects of Eastern Partnership countries are taking more minor roles in European politics throughout the EU.