
MEPS OVERWHELMINGLY RATIFY EU-KAZAKHSTAN LANDMARK PARTNERSHIP AGREEMENT

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MEPs approved a landmark partnership deal with Kazakhstan on Tuesday (12 December), the EU's first Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (EPCA) with a Central Asian country.

The new deal was passed with 511 votes in favour, 115 against and 28 abstentions.

As MEP Eduard Kukan, former foreign minister of Slovakia tweeted, the EU opened a new chapter in its relations with Kazakhstan, the largest country in Central Asia.

The Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement between Kazakhstan and the EU (EPCA) is indeed unique. A Commission official recently said that the EU's relationship with Central Asia in general and Kazakhstan in particular has never been any stronger or any better.

He said that the EU and Kazakhstan share many common objectives, from regional peace and stability and fighting terrorism, to fostering the rule of law and increasing prosperity and trade.

A Commission official said on Wednesday (4 October) that Kazakhstan was the living proof for Central Asia and the EU's neighborhood that it should be possible for those countries to have good relations both with Brussels and Moscow.

The EU and Kazakhstan signed the 150-page EPCA in Astana on 21 December 2015. It is described as WTO-Plus, as in essence, its chapter on government procurement mirrors the equivalent WTO chapter (GPA). Its provisional application started on 1 May 2016 and it will fully enter into force once ratified by all member states and the European Parliament. So far 18 member states have ratified the EPCA.

For the ratification in the European Parliament, Rapporteur Liisa Jaakonsaari (S&D, Finland), who is

seen as critical of Kazakhstan in Astana, authored a 6-page report, which stressed the need for the EU to prioritise the issues of the rule of law and democracy, fundamental freedoms and human rights.

Monitoring mechanism

Opening the debate in plenary, Jaakonsaari insisted that the Parliament has the power to approve or reject the agreement and said improvements were needed on the human rights front.

Its good that the agreement enhances political dialogue and cooperation with civil society, the respect of human rights and the rule of law are the cornerstones of the agreement and of future cooperation, she said, according to a translation.

On the human rights front, the European Parliament requires tangible reforms and improvements. Economic interests cannot take precedence over human rights. If not, the EU loses its soul, Jaakonsaari argued.

She added that Kazakhstan must recognise the freedom of expression and of association and make reforms for putting in place an independent judiciary system.

The rapporteur said the Parliament will encourage Kazakhstan to continue work with the Venice Commission to improve its legislative frameworks. Also, she said that Parliament demands that Kazakhstan respects the International Labour Organisation (ILO) standards and allows independent trade unions to be set up and operate.

Parliament also calls on Kazakhstan to free three trade unionists who are in prison, she said. It is also unacceptable that peaceful demonstrators are taken to court and sentenced up to five years, Jaakonsaaari said.

Human rights defenders Max Bokayev and Talgat Ayan were sentenced to five years for organising and participating in peaceful protests in April 2016. The Commission has expressed concern over the sentence.

Jaakonsaaari also said that, if EPCA enters into force, we need proper broad-range monitoring.

Commissioner Věra Jourová, responsible for Justice, Consumers and Gender Equality, spoke on behalf of foreign affairs chief Federica Mogherini, who chaired the Foreign Affairs Council and said the EUs relationship with the Central Asian countries had never been stronger.

She said the EU and the partner countries shared the same objectives: regional peace and stability, fighting terrorism, fostering the rule of law, increasing prosperity and trade.

The Commissioner said enhanced cooperation with Kazakhstan was an excellent example of how to advance in practice the goals and interests shared by both sides, adding that the EU has become Kazakhstans first trade partner, representing one-third of its external trade, and its first foreign investor.

The agreement provides for a better economic environment for operators in areas such as trade and services, the establishment and operation of companies, capital movement, public procurement and intellectual property rights, Jourová said.

The Commissioner said the EU appreciated Kazakhstans ambition to promote green economy with ambitious targets, by diversification and investments in renewable energy. These areas represent significant opportunities for the European companies, she said.

EXPO 2017 in Astana will contribute to global sustainable development

Staging such an important exhibition as EXPO 2017 in Kazakhstan will accelerate our transition to a modern and sustainable economy, writes Kairat Abdrakhamanov. EXPO 2017 taking place from 10 June to 10 September 2017 in Astana, Kazakhstan. Its theme is Future Energy.

This is the first time we have concluded a chapter on raw materials and energy in a non-preferential agreement with an oil-producing country, she said, the commitments going well beyond those under the WTO framework and the Energy Charter Treaty.

Beyond the economic ties, the Commissioner also said the EU was keen on consolidating the cooperation in the areas of nuclear non-proliferation, further reforms toward pluralism and

democracy, and also to enhance the mobility of people between the two regions.

In international relations, Jourová said Kazakhstan had become an increasingly important partner in the promotion of peace and security. It provides an essential contribution in the implementation of the EU strategy for Central Asia, notably in the EUs cooperation programs and platforms, she said.

Kazakhstan is ready to continue its role as a facilitator of international dialogue and mediation, Yerzhan Ashikbayev, Kazakhstans deputy foreign minister, said as he briefed reporters in Astana on Tuesday (31 October) and answered many questions about the ongoing Syria talks, North Korea and eastern Ukraine.

Finally, Jourová said the agreement puts a strong emphasis on democracy and the rule of law, human rights and fundamental freedoms, as well as civil society cooperation, including on the involvement of civil society in public policymaking.

The Commissioner said that the EU delegation in Astana visited the imprisoned activist Max Bokayev and was following up on other cases. She specifically mentioned the case of the former head of the journalists union Seitkazy Matayev, sentenced to six years of jail, who was granted early release this month.

During the debate some speakers said they would vote against EPCA, although the general mood was that if adequately monitored, the agreement could be beneficial for both sides.

Julie Ward (S&D, UK) sharply criticised the authorities in Astana for what she described as a worsening human rights situation.

Kazakhstan is publicly neglecting its human rights obligations, she said, adding that politically motivated public prosecutions were becoming more frequent, and that the authorities were unwilling to accept dissident voices. She said she was very concerned from the reported imprisonment and the use of torture.

As the conditions for advancing on relations were not yet met, she said she would vote against EPCA.

Helga Stevens (ECR, Belgium) welcomed the debate, but also stressed the human rights situation needs to be improved.

Iveta Grigule-Pēterse (ALDE, Latvia) commended the positive role of Kazakhstan in the region and said the most important was the positive trends, inviting MEPs to vote for EPCA.

Jean-Luc Schaffhauser (Europe of Nations, France) called EPCA a carrot, but added that the EU was risking another failure. He pleaded for an EU-Eurasia agreement as the only solution to stabilise the region and maintain peace.

Liisa Jaakonsaari said in her final comments that EPCA had already born fruit – people have been released and Kazakhstan will take notice of these critical voices and act accordingly.

Kazakhstans political elite doesnt appear to be upset by criticism over rule of law and human rights.

Kazakhstan, a fledgling democracy bent on stability

The ruling elite in Astana acknowledges that continuous efforts are needed to tackle corruption – recognised as systemic – and bolster press freedom in Kazakhstan. But its a very subtle balance between democracy and stability, local politicians argue.

Kazakhstan should be regarded first of all as a young democracy, which wants to follow this mainstream, and which gained a lot of achievements in its democratic development, the Chairman of the Senate of the Kazakh parliament Kassym Jomart Tokayev recently told a group of visiting journalists.

Kaynak/Source: