



EU-RUSSIA CIVIL SOCIETY FORUM
ГРАЖДАНСКИЙ ФОРУМ ЕС-РОССИЯ

European Economic and Social Committee

CONCLUSIONS

3rd Joint Seminar of the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum and the EESC

Versailles, 23 November 2016

1. The EU-Russia Civil Society Forum and the EESC held their third joint seminar on 23 November 2016 in the city of Versailles, France;
2. The joint seminars are organised in order to promote people-to-people contact and broaden exchanges between civil society actors from Russia and the EU, by discussing – in an open and in-depth manner – economic, social, and environmental topics relevant to both sides. Meetings between both civil societies contribute to overall EU-Russia relations by fostering mutual understanding in a spirit of respect and friendship;
3. At the meeting, delegates from both sides held discussions on a) the current circumstances in which civil society organisations operate, in the EU as well as in Russia, and b) questions relating to migration, with focus, firstly, on the political and societal consequences of the arrival of refugees and migrants in EU countries and Russia and, secondly, on good practices and experiences in integrating newcomers into recipient societies at municipal level.

On the current overall situation in which civil societies operate in the EU and Russia:

1. Members of the EESC and the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum (CSF) taking part in the meeting are deeply concerned about a further deterioration in the situation for civil society organisations and activists in Russia since the 2nd Joint Seminar of the EU-Russia CSF and the EESC in June 2015. They reiterate that building mutual trust and ensuring that Russian and EU civil societies can interact freely is of the utmost importance at this time of crisis in EU-Russia relations, as is providing as much support as possible to Russian independent civil society organisations (CSOs).
2. The EESC and the EU-Russia CSF express their disappointment and deep concern over worsening conditions with respect to the rule of law and fundamental freedoms in Russia over the course of the last year and declare that the preservation of human rights and international

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legal frameworks, along with commitment to democratic procedures must be top priorities for dialogue between the European Union and Russia, regardless of the political, economic, or security interests of the parties. The EU authorities should insist that Russia repeal the foreign agents law and abolish the foreign agents registry. Civil society organisations and activists should be protected from repressive legislation, harassment, and humiliation – be that of a psychological or physical nature. Cases of criminal persecution of civil society activists, including those based on accusations of not complying with the “foreign agents” legislation, shall not be tolerated. The law on “undesirable organisations” should also be repealed.

3. The EESC and the EU-Russia CSF believe that work with the Russian and European public in its broader sense, especially the young generation, brings about positive change and helps to overcome propaganda and the negative images of the “other” that it promotes. Hence, academic, cultural, and other exchanges between Russia and the EU Member States should be fostered. Events for a broader public should be organised both in (where possible) and outside of Russia and visa procedures for such people-to-people exchanges and events should be facilitated. Special focus should be given to educational projects of mutual benefit – in fields such as civic and historical memory education, social activities and entrepreneurship, community development and environmental protection.
4. The EESC and the EU-Russia CSF appreciate the attention given to and the financial resources made available to Russian civil society organisations and activists by the EU. In light of the further deterioration of the context in which Russian CSOs operate, they call upon the EU to further increase support to Russian civil society in the form of flexible, tailored and innovative tools and instruments. The EU's current funding policies should be extended to cover institutional support, as this is essential to the sustainability of civil society. An urgent action/alert system should also be developed for groups and individuals in danger or acute need, including, for instance, quick access to asylum, granting of visas and visa extensions, etc. Additionally, it is of the utmost importance to assist and support civil society activists who have already been forced to leave Russia for political reasons.
5. The EESC and the EU-Russia CSF are very worried about recent negative developments in the situation for civil society in some EU Member States, in particular in Hungary and Poland, but also in some other countries. Concerns include harassment of civil society organisations and activists and unfounded accusations against them of “working for foreign interests”, attempts to introduce legislation similar to the “foreign agents” law in Russia, the use of nationalistic, isolationist and populist arguments to justify pressure against civil society, physical attacks on activists by nationalist groups, and others. NGOs and activists working with minorities and migrants are affected the most. These restrictive policies and rhetoric reproduce many elements of the backlash against civil society in Russia and copy-paste Russian practices. There is also an increasing risk in the more established democracies of “old Europe” of new pressure on civil society groups, limitations on NGO funding, violations of activists' privacy as part of the efforts to fight terrorism, challenges linked to the “migration crisis” and transnational threats.

6. Being an alliance based on common values, the European Union needs to effectively address such destructive developments in its own Member States – developments which contradict core EU values. To achieve this goal effectively, a substantial reform of the EU itself is needed – with less authority for bureaucracy and more empathy for societies, with the aim of ensuring that populist politicians do not usurp present and future generations.
7. The EESC and the EU-Russia CSF believe that Europe and the world as a whole need a strong European Union and a strong Russia – both committed to the rule of law, democracy, and universal values. With the current crisis in EU-Russia relations at state level, civil society ties and people-to-people contact might become a driving force for building a strong, peaceful and prosperous Europe.

On questions relating to migration, with focus, firstly, on the political and societal consequences of the arrival of refugees and migrants in EU countries and Russia and, secondly, on good practices and experiences in integrating newcomers into recipient societies at municipal level.

8. In the wake of the increased number of refugees, displaced persons and migrants in Europe, the EESC and the EU-Russia CSF express their delight and gratitude to the civil society organisations, initiatives, activists, families and citizens of Europe for their support towards incoming refugees. The sharing of best practices and international experiences and the activities of such organisations and individuals should be supported – both practically and financially.
9. Simultaneously, the EESC and the EU-Russia CSF condemn racism and any form of hate speech against refugees and migrants and are dismayed over cases of impediments to civil society organisations, initiatives, and activists assisting the refugees, threats towards them, and further forms of harassment – such as the closure of offices, etc. These cases should not be tolerated and an immediate reaction is needed, along with a call to uphold international norms and prosecute the perpetrators.
10. The EESC and the EU-Russia CSF are also concerned about some developments in Europe linked to the arrival of migrants, which do not comply with human dignity and international obligations for nation states. The rights of refugees and migrants should be secured and international norms safeguarded not only inside the European Union and Russia but also in transit countries. These international norms and obligations should form the basis for intergovernmental and interstate agreements.
11. The EESC and the EU-Russia CSF consider integration programmes for refugees and migrants to be of the utmost importance, as these introduce newcomers to life in recipient societies and, hence, foster their active engagement in the future. In this area, cooperation between civil society organisations of all kinds and municipalities should be enhanced and supported.

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