EU-RUSSIA CIVIL SOCIETY FORUM

2017

ANNUAL REPORT
EU-Russia Civil Society Forum is a network of thematically diverse non-governmental organisations from Russia and the European Union, established as a bottom-up, non-partisan civic initiative. The Forum serves as a platform for members to engage in joint activities, articulate common positions, provide support and solidarity, and exert civic influence on policy- and decision-making on the (inter)governmental level. Driven by a vision of ‘the civil society beyond borders’, the Forum brings together organisations and people and therefore contributes to the integration between Russia and the EU, based on the common values of pluralistic democracy, rule of law, human rights and social justice.

161 Member organisations
31 Russian regions
20 EU countries
11 New members
1,530 Meeting participants
35 NGOs as co-organisers of joint projects
5,000 Newsletter contacts
2,152 Facebook followers
865 Twitter followers
144 News items
14 Languages used

Data as of 31 December 2017
7TH GENERAL ASSEMBLY
On 1–3 February 2017, the 7th General Assembly (GA) took place. It gathered around 230 representatives from member organisations, observers, donors and media. For the first time in the history of the Forum, events were held in two cities: preliminary meetings and presentations involving selected representatives of NGOs from the European Union took place on 31 January in St. Petersburg; the main venue for proceedings was Helsinki. The GA touched on plenty of relevant topics for both the European Union and Russia – global nationalistic and conservative trends; modern wars, their legacies and memories; sustainable development and poverty reduction; future scenarios for the Baltic Sea Region; etc. Also, the majority of member organisations endorsed the founding of a legal entity for the Forum in the form of an association registered in Germany.

ANNA SKVORTSOVA, NGO DEVELOPMENT CENTRE / FORUM BOARD MEMBER (ST. PETERSBURG, RUSSIA)
In Finland, there are 105,000 registered NGOs with roughly 14.5 million members for 5.5 million inhabitants. With the General Assembly 2017, we used the opportunity to revive cooperation with local NGOs, to learn from them, to invite them to actively participate in the Forum’s discussions and let them speak about current challenges they face and new solutions.

FORUM FOR YOUNG PROFESSIONALS “EUROPE LAB”
On 27–30 July 2017, the Annual Forum “Europe Lab” came to the European Solidarity Centre in Gdańsk, Poland – the birthplace of the “Solidarność” Movement. “Europe Lab” has its origins in initiatives of the Memorial Centre of History of Political Repression “Perm-36” in Russia. Sixty young professionals aged between 25 and 35 from all over Europe and from various sectors worked together in four workshops on climate change, multimedia, solidarity and urban space. The five best project proposals got support from the Forum and will be presented at the Forum’s 8th General Assembly on 15–18 May 2018 in Sofia, Bulgaria.

MICHAEL HUNT, THEATRE AND OPERA DIRECTOR, DIRECTOR OF “FIDELIO” AT “PERM-36” (LONDON, UK):
The spirit of the International Civil Forum “Pilorama” I experienced at “Perm-36” has been brilliantly transferred to “Europe Lab”. The European Solidarity Centre and Gdańsk were a perfect choice for reflection and inspiration. I was honoured to meet and share ideas with an extraordinary group of young people who are driven by an intense desire to contribute something of value to the stories of their communities. I hope that the combination of creativity and entrepreneurship, evident throughout the days at the Forum in Gdańsk, will return to the territory of “Perm-36”, where it surely belongs.

E-CORNER
In one year, E-Corner – an online library run by the Forum – has grown to a diverse platform for continuous learning. Currently, forty publications are available there. They address relevant issues concerning six different topics: active citizenship & democratisation, environment, freedom of speech & access to information, human rights & rule of law, operational management, youth & education. All publications are available in English and Russian.

ÉLISE DANIAUD, FORUM SECRETARIAT, E-CORNER BUILDER (BERLIN, GERMANY):
E-Corner is a great opportunity for Forum member organisations and further civil society actors from the EU and Russia to disseminate their knowledge, raise awareness regarding innovative practices, and share their expertise.

WEBINARS
After having tried out various capacity building formats in 2016, the Forum decided to develop a new tool for Forum member organisations and other interested members of the public. In total, nine webinars and one offline seminar (at the General Assembly in Helsinki) were organised. The presentations were devoted to such topical issues relevant for NGOs and civil society activists as cyber security, pro-bono legal assistance, facilitation, communication with partners and donors, social entrepreneurship, international advocacy, cultural management, and others.

NEIL CLARKE, MINORITY RIGHTS GROUP (BUDAPEST, HUNGARY):
Webinars turned out to be a good opportunity for us not only to share our knowledge but also to get feedback and learn new things ourselves. The webinar provided by my colleague Glenn Payot and myself has generated insight into approaches available to NGOs in Europe for using international advocacy for the enhancement and protection of human rights.
TOURING EXHIBITION “DIFFERENT WARS: NATIONAL SCHOOL TEXTBOOKS ON WWII”

This exhibition revealed the differences in the narration and perception of the history of the Second World War in the latest and most commonly used high school textbooks in the Czech Republic, Germany, Italy, Lithuania, Poland and Russia. In 2017, the tour continued to enjoy success: the Russian version was shown in Pskov, St. Petersburg, and Syktyvkar; the English version was displayed in Brussels, Milan, Vilnius, and Wojnowice; the new German version in Münster. A catalogue of the exhibition was published in English.

NIKITA LOMAKIN, INTERNATIONAL MEMORIAL / ONE OF THE EXHIBITION AUTHORS (MOSCOW, RUSSIA):

Each country presented at the exhibition had its own tragedies, crimes and deeds. Each country has tackled the consequences of World War II in its own way. Each country has worked on its narrative of these horrible events over the years. As a result, we have “different wars”.

GREEN SCHOOL OF BAIKAL

In July 2017, the Russian–German Baikal Green School organised by the Buryat Regional Union on Lake Baikal (Republic of Buryatia, Russia) and the Dekabristen e.V. (Berlin, Germany) took place in Ulan-Ude. As a result of a two-day seminar, workshops and expert discussions, the participants agreed to establish a centre of “green” entrepreneurs within the business incubator that would work on sustainable development and the elaboration of innovative approaches to solving environmental problems in the region. By December the initiative had already been realised. The project coordinator on the Buryat side was appointed Head of the centre.

ARMIN PIALEK, BMW FOUNDATION (BERLIN, GERMANY):

In Europe and around the world, social innovations have been developed in no small part thanks to professional communities. A system of “qualified volunteering” allows public environmental organisations and young entrepreneurs obtain legal, design, marketing or other professional services free of charge, allowing them to launch their projects as soon as possible.

CIVIC EDUCATION WORKSHOPS IN WARSAW AND BUDAPEST

Following a successful practice in 2014 and 2015, the Working Group “Civic Education” ran two workshops in 2017. Both in Warsaw and in Budapest, the participants had an opportunity to meet representatives of local NGOs, find out more about their situation and the conditions of their work as well as discuss pressing issues for the group and visit relevant museum institutions, such as the POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews in Warsaw and the House of Terror in the Hungarian capital. The workshops built a solid basis for the future work of the group.

ANDREI SUSLOV, CENTRE FOR CIVIC EDUCATION AND HUMAN RIGHTS / COORDINATOR OF THE WORKING GROUP “CIVIC EDUCATION” (PERM, RUSSIA):

One of the most striking impressions of the trip to Budapest was a tour of the Holocaust Memorial Centre. On the one hand, it has to do with the exhibition itself, which is modern, emotional and interactive. Our guide was in fact a daughter of survivors of the Nazi genocide. On the other hand, we were working with photos using a special method that may be applied in educational activities with students.

HISTORY OF MIGRATION

Within the Study Tours Programme, one of the meetings supported was a visit by the Working Group “Historical Memory and Education” to Berlin. The next project by the Working Group will be devoted to the topic of (forced) migration with a historical approach. Group members visited the Memorial Site “Notaufnahmelager Marienfelde” and the German-Russian Museum Berlin Karlshorst whilst also finding time for in-depth discussions and reflections. The first results of the new working direction are expected in 2018.

MAJA KONSTANTINOVIC, ANTIKOMPLEX (PRAGUE, CZECH REPUBLIC):

This study tour was an important step forward for our Working Group. Visiting different museums and memorial places in Berlin gave us major impulses for the following discussions and projects.
SUPPORT FOR ORGANISATIONS AND ACTIVISTS

ADVOCACY WORK
The group organised three visits: one exploring the Berlin NGO field, one – in cooperation with the Prague Civil Society Centre and the European Endowment for Democracy – on innovations in support for the Russian civil society, and one on regressive reforms and increasing limitations for civil society in Central European EU member states. The Group also established priorities for its future work – preserving the common European legal framework, support for the Russian civil society, rule of law under pressure in single EU member states.

KATARZYNA BATKO-TOŁUĆ, CITIZENS’ NETWORK WATCHDOG / ADVOCACY GROUP MEMBER (WARSAW, POLAND):
The meetings in Brussels were positive. Our interlocutors agreed that times are calling for a more decisive and active European values policy and that there is a need for allocating funds in the EU budget to help pro-European citizens and grassroots organisations promote and foster freedom, equality and the rule of law in EU member states.

SOLIDARITY ACTIONS
The shrinking space for civil society organisations in Russia as well as in isolated EU member states has demanded an increased number of solidarity actions from different Forum bodies – the Steering Committee / Board, the Solidarity Group, or also calls for signatures by single member organisations. The reactions came after the detention of participants of peaceful anti-corruption protests in March in Russia, announced changes to the Polish judicial system, further crackdown on NGOs in Hungary, attacks on the members of the Volgograd Human Rights Council, and other cases of concern. The Forum also expressed condolences to “Memorial” colleagues over Arseni Roginsky’s death. Letters of congratulation were sent to holders of international awards or organisations celebrating anniversaries – “Citizens’ Watch”, Committee against Torture, “Novaya Gazeta”, etc.

ANIKÓ BAKONYI, HUNGARIAN HELSINKI COMMITTEE (BUDAPEST, HUNGARY):
The pressure on Hungarian civil society intensified significantly in 2017, with the law on foreign-funded organisations being passed. The Hungarian Helsinki Committee decided not to register. As a consequence, our organisation has been exposed to further attacks. We are grateful to the Forum for its support in these difficult times.

CONFERENCE “INNOVATION OR RESILIENCE-BUILDING? STRATEGIES FOR THE CIVIL SOCIETY IN RUSSIA AND THE EU”
The conference organised on 15-16 May 2017 in Berlin brought together representatives of the donors’ community and NGOs, who partly worked in parallel and then exchanged ideas for the civil society support. For the public, two discussions with the guests – “Free and Fair Elections in a Post-Truth Environment?” and “Russia in 2017: Enabling or Disabling Environment for Civic Activism?” were organised.

DANUTA PRZYWARA, HELSINKI FOUNDATION FOR HUMAN RIGHTS (WARSAW, POLAND):
We discussed the state of civil society with our colleagues from the Czech Republic, Germany, Hungary, the Netherlands, Poland and Russia. The far-right movements are using the language and symbols that we agreed to give them, for example, such words as “patriotism” or phrases like “history tells us”, and so on. I think there is much to do for us to restore the original meaning of these words. If we build trust in the society and between us, then we will become stronger and more effective.

RIGHTS IN PRISON
Within the project initiated by member organisations “Antigone” from Italy and “Man and Law” from the Republic of Mari-El (Russia), two major achievements can be mentioned. The publication “The European Court of Human Rights and Protection of Fundamental Rights in Prison” summarises materials on the topic made available over the years by the European Court of Human Rights. An online database was also prepared listing organisations from EU member states and Russia whose activities are aimed at protecting fundamental rights in prison.

ALESSIO SCANDURRA, ANTIGONE (ROME, ITALY):
Our inspiring cooperation was overshadowed by the detention of my colleagues at “Antigone”, “A Buon Diritto”, “Arcigay”, and myself in Nizhny Novgorod. Unfortunately, although we were released after several hours, we had no other choice than to change our plans and immediately go back to Italy. Nevertheless, we duly finished our project and are glad to be able to share the results of our work with other civil society organisations and activists.
STRENGTHENING OF EUROPEAN LEGAL FRAMEWORKS

LEGAL DIALOGUE
In addition to the annual symposium in November 2017 in Berlin, the work with students and legal clinics (especially in the field of protection of refugees in Russia) was intensified – with various events held in Germany and Russia. The bilingual online journal www.legal-dialogue.org turned into a permanent platform with items and news on up-to-date European topics – the protection of those defending human rights, endangered UNESCO World Heritage sites, digitalisation, etc.

EKATERINA OSIPOVA, LAW CLINIC AT THE BALTIC FEDERAL UNIVERSITY (KALININGRAD, RUSSIA):
As a rule, there are no specialised courses on the legal regulation of refugee status and the skills required for work regarding them at Russian universities. At the same time, refugees are in a poor financial state when bringing their legal needs to law clinics in the different regions of this country. Thus, we can see that it is necessary to familiarise students with the legal basis of refugee protection and to emphasise the need for lawyers in this field.

FIGHTING TRANSBORDER CORRUPTION
The Expert Group “Fighting Transborder Corruption” issued its third report “Failed in Action. Why European Law Enforcers are Unable to Tackle EU-Russian Transborder Corruption” featuring the Khimki Forest affair with involvement of the VINCI company and the corrupt behaviour of Russian diplomats in Bulgaria as well as the limitations of the criminal justice system in tackling transborder corruption. The group also organised three events in total on the issue.

ANDREI KALIKH, INDEPENDENT JOURNALIST / GROUP COORDINATOR (ST. PETERSBURG, RUSSIA):
In Sofia, we agreed that law enforcement units needed to build bridges to connect with civil society in order to react to transborder corruption cases in Europe more efficiently. We sketched out specific steps for this cooperation, including the sharing of materials and data between investigative journalists and European prosecutors.

STATE OF CIVIL SOCIETY REPORT
The State of Civil Society Report is a major analytical product of the Forum that combines academic and practical approaches to civil society studies, in order to identify the main characteristics and trends of civil society in any given year. In 2017, the Report 2016 featuring Germany, Hungary, Poland, Russia and Spain was presented at the General Assembly in Helsinki, Finland as well as in other places such as Berlin, Germany and St. Petersburg, Russia. The Report 2017 is dedicated to the situation of civil society in Bulgaria, Italy, Lithuania, the Netherlands and Russia and will be presented on various occasions in 2018.

VIACHESLAV BAKHMIN, MEMBER OF THE MOSCOW HELSINKI GROUP / EXPERT OF THE COMMITTEE OF CIVIC INITIATIVES (MOSCOW, RUSSIA):
Research on the state of civil society is mostly based on surveys and interviews of civic activists themselves, who have been steadily working in the field. In the report, we can feel their mood and emotions, hopes and concerns. We can observe dynamics in the development of civic initiatives in single countries. This is what makes the report different from a lot of other similar publications.

WHAT IS HAPPENING WITHIN THE CIVIL SOCIETY
The series of publications on the situation within the civil society in single EU member states established in 2016 continued this year. In 2017, the Italy issue was published, a further three – on France, Poland and Spain – were prepared for publication. Simultaneously, the cases of Croatia, Finland and Lithuania that had appeared a year earlier were translated into Russian and uploaded online.

PATRIZIA BERTONI, FORUM TERZO SETTORE (ROME, ITALY):
Despite Eurosceptic tendencies, the social domain is the one in which Europe is seen as an opportunity for inclusion and cohesion. A European civil society without borders is capable of working as a network to influence future policies.
INTERNAL DEVELOPMENT & SECRETARIAT

2017 was a key year for the Forum’s institutional growth and legal incorporation. Following an earlier decision by the General Assembly in 2014, the Steering Committee presented the vision for a new legal entity to the delegates of the 7th General Assembly on 1-3 February 2017 in Helsinki, Finland. With the qualified majority of votes, the decision to register in the form of an association according to the German legislation headquartered in Berlin was endorsed.

The founding meeting of the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum e.V. took place in Helsinki and was attended by members of the Steering Committee, the Executive Director, interested representatives of member organisations, and a lawyer (24 persons in total). The current Steering Committee members formed the Board of the association with Ralph du Long and Łukasz Wener- ski elected as Co-Chairs. The EU-Russia Civil Society Forum e.V. (CSF e.V) was registered in Germany on 11 April 2017.

Throughout the transition year 2017, all major activities continued to be run via DRA / German-Russian Exchange, the seat of the Secretariat since 2014, while the new legal entity was being operationalised. On 1 January 2018, the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum e.V. took over all operations and was set in motion.

In mid-2017 the Board in cooperation with representatives of interested member organisations and the Secretariat drafted extensive by-laws. They were presented for final comments to all members and endorsed by the majority of Board members and coordinators of the Working Groups. The next step is voting for the package at the 8th General Assembly on 16-18 May 2018 in Sofia, Bulgaria.

Another important process initiated was transfer of memberships / joining the CSF e.V. association - as a full member or as a supporter. The deadline for this process was set at 1 May 2018.

The institutional development will continue in 2018-2020 thanks to the support of the European Commission.
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