



## **European Union Should Increase Support for Civil Society in Russia and Assist in the Development of Co-operation between Civil Societies in the Russian Federation, the Eastern Partnership Countries, and the EU Member States**

### **Policy brief and recommendations to the European Union Institutions<sup>1</sup>**

#### **Summary**

**A few weeks before the Vilnius summit of the Eastern Partnership the government of the Russian Federation is exerting extreme pressure both on civil society organisations in its own country and on those EaP states that intend to sign the Association Agreements with the EU. By that the Russian Federation sets a negative example to other post-Soviet states and endangers the democratisation process in the whole Eastern European region. The EU should send a strong sign of solidarity and support to the Russian civil society. In the Multiannual Financial Framework for 2014 – 2020 the EU should significantly increase direct funding for the Russian civil society and assist in the development of multilateral cooperation with civil society actors in the Eastern Partnership countries and EU member states. Given new legal and political restrictions on foreign funding of Russian NGOs, EU should apply flexible and innovative tools of support, including through partner organizations in Europe.**

Since the presidential elections in March 2012 Russian civil society has experienced unprecedented pressure. Hundreds of non-governmental organizations all over the country have been simultaneously subjected to harassment and paralysing inspections by state authorities in the framework of the “foreign agents” law. Peaceful protesters, civic activists and opposition supporters are facing politically motivated persecution; the number of political prisoners is steadily increasing. Sexual minorities are a new subject to governmental harassment; LGBT activists are publicly defamed and criminalised. These developments are not an internal affair of the Russian Federation. They contradict not only the Russian Constitution but also international obligations of the Russian Federation within the European Convention of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, standards of the Council of Europe and the OSCE commitments.

More than that: these changes in Russia’s internal policies have a direct damaging impact on the overall atmosphere on the continent. Russia sets a negative example in influencing internal politics of its

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<sup>1</sup> This policy brief has been produced by members of the Working Group on Democratic Institutions and Processes of the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum and has been endorsed by the Steering Committee of the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum.

neighbouring states. Methods of legal and administrative prosecution of actors for an open and democratic society, instruments of electoral fraud, laws that restrict personal liberties and civic activism, administrative rules that prohibit international cooperation of non-state actors are shared among state institutions of the Russian Federation and its neighbouring states in the Eastern Partnership region and in other parts of the post-Soviet space. Therefore, deterioration of the rule of law and the crackdown on civil society in Russia may influence negatively the democratization process in the whole Eastern Partnership region and so endanger the success of the European Eastern Partnership policy.

Just a few weeks ahead of the Vilnius summit of the European Union and the Eastern Partnership countries where some of the Eastern Partnership states are expected to sign an Association Agreement with the European Union, the Russian government pursues increasingly aggressive course, using political blackmail and economic pressure aimed at imposing Russia's control over the EaP states economically, politically and in terms of security policies and push them into the project of the Custom's Union and other integration projects dominated by Russia. The European Union should react in a clear and decisive manner to the pressure that the Russian government exerts on the states of the Eastern Partnership ahead of the Vilnius summit in November 2013. A clear reaction is even more appropriate as it is expected that the Russian government will continue putting political and economic pressure on the Eastern Partnership countries after the Vilnius summit.

The European Commission is paying due attention to the development of dialogue and partnership with EaP governments, parliaments and civil society in the framework of the Eastern Partnership programme established in 2008. However, the recent political developments in the post-Soviet region described above mean that these efforts might stay in vain if they are not backed up with an equally intensive dialogue and interaction with interlocutors from the Russian Federation, especially civil society.

Civil society is the best placed actor in the region to promote democratic values, to build bridges between post-Soviet and Western European societies, to monitor their governments and to mobilise citizens to become active in public affairs. Civil society organisations that stand for civil, political, economic and social rights and that conduct monitoring of those conventions and obligations to which the Russian Federation has committed itself with its membership in the UN, the Council of Europe and the OSCE should be supported and strengthened by the European Union.

During the negotiations on the new Multiannual Financial Framework for 2014 – 2020 the European Commission should pay the most serious attention to the significance of a strong civil society in Russia and increase its financial support to Russian civil society actors. Stability and democratic development not only in the Russian Federation itself but in the whole Eastern Partnership region depend on this. Therefore cooperation programmes that can foster dialogue between civil society in EU member states, Eastern Partnership countries and the Russian Federation should be developed in order to pave the way for a free, wealthy and democratic Europe.

## **Recommendations**

### **Political position:**

1. Leaders of the European Union and the EU member states should continue to raise their voice and speak loud and clear against the crackdown on civil society in Russia. They should put this issue at the top of their agenda in all their interactions with the Russian officials. They should make clear to the Russian government that this crackdown goes contrary to the very essence of international human rights norms and that it fundamentally undermines the EU relations with Russia. They should express their strong disagreement with unprecedented harassment of NGOs in Russia not only in closed-door meetings with their Russian counterparts but also in public, including at joint press-conferences with Russian officials.
2. Leaders of the European Union and the EU member states should speak clearly and strongly against Russian government pressure on the governments of the Eastern Partnership states aimed at prevention of their cooperation with the European Union.
3. 3. Preservation and strengthening of cross boarder and multilateral civil society cooperation should be seen as a priority in developing a common and democratic European space and should be facilitated by EU institutions and member states in terms of policies and funding

### **Funding instruments:**

1. EIDHR annual budget for the Russian Federation should be increased from today 3 million € up to 9 million € annually from 2014 on;
2. NSA/LA programme should continue to be applied in the Russian Federation with an annual budget of not less than 5 million €;
3. The European Neighbourhood Instrument should be opened for participation of Russian civil society organisations in common cross-border and multi-lateral programmes with civil society organisations from the EaP and EU countries. Appropriate funding for such multi-lateral programmes should be provided;
4. Russian civil society organisations should be made eligible as beneficiaries for projects of the Partnership Instrument; EU support to the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum through this instrument should be considered;
5. The European Endowment for Democracy should be opened for the support of Russian civil society organisations.

### **Funding methods:**

1. Institutional funding is an indispensable part for the development of a robust and professional civil society. After the forced termination of USAID's activities in the Russian Federation the EU should bridge the gap and include institutional support for Russian civil society organisations into its methods of support;
2. Sub-grants system to smaller and regional civil society organisations through well established Russian civil society networks and resource centres should be instituted;
3. Russian non-registered organisations, including those which were deprived of registration as a result of the government pressure, commercial organisations if established and controlled by non-profit organisations as well as civil society organisations established in exile by Russian citizens and

with the purpose to develop civil society in the Russian Federation should be made eligible for EU funding;

4. Small and medium scale projects, administered through the EU Delegation in Moscow should be given priority over large projects or even service contracts administered from Brussels.
5. Confidentiality and security in communications with NGO partners in Russia, in transfer of funds, and in reporting requirements should be made a priority. Lessons from the EU experience of provision of support to NGOs in other countries experiencing crisis in human rights and a high degree of pressure on civil society should be applied.

### Funding Priorities

1. Programmes for the monitoring of and pursuing improvement in the compliance of governmental action with international obligations of the Russian Federation in the framework of the UN, the Council of Europe and the OSCE should receive increased support;
2. Human rights defenders and civil society activists under risk should find non-bureaucratic protection in EU member states through fellowship programs, temporary shelter, and even political asylum if necessary;
3. Joint projects and initiatives among civil society actors from Russia, EaP countries and EU member states should be facilitated;
4. Programmes for the professional development and capacity building of Russian civil society organizations should be increasingly supported: methods of community involvement at regional and local levels, international exchange of best practices in civic participation and citizens' watch, professional training and capacity development for CSO staff and volunteers, capacity building in strategic development, fundraising and public private partnership
5. Coalition-building and sector-specific networking of CSO in the Russian Federation should be developed
6. EC should further encourage the development of philanthropy in the Russian society, including "crowdsourcing" from the Russian public: "seed money" from EC programmes could contribute to the development of local civil society projects in the Russian Federation

**The EU-Russia Civil Society Forum is ready to provide expert consultation to the EU institutions on how to design legal and effective funding structures and mechanisms for these purposes.**

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