



Newsletter Nr. 1

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1. Successful start in Prague

After months of preparation the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum (CSF) was successfully established in Prague at the end of March. The venue could hardly have been better – the imposing palace of the Czech foreign ministry. Foreign Minister Karel Schwarzenberg welcomed more than 100 participants and encouraged them to stay committed ‘for a long adventure’.

Dmitry Medvedev’s top human rights adviser, Mikhail Fedotov, admitted to serious problems for Russian civil society, but used careful wording to say the first step to improvement was for people in Europe and Russia to first understand each other. “We’re all members of one civil society on the planet Earth.”

Heidi Hautala, who chairs the European Parliament’s Human Rights Subcommittee, told participants the forum’s recommendations should be included in major summits and other meetings between European and Russian leaders. “That’s a demand that’s been made many times in the past, but if it comes from this forum there will be more chance to have Moscow finally accept a very natural thing: the participation of civil society in official discussions.”

These encouraging words from the opening speakers were followed by explanations of who had taken the initiative to start the CSF, why such a forum was needed and how it could be organised. One of the organizers, Rostislav Valvoda of the Czech NGO People in Need, said the forum was unique for being a grassroots initiative. “Those of us who co-operate anyway wanted to bring that cooperation to a new level and draw in new organizations because we feel there can be interesting results if the Russians and Europeans cooperate more.”

Veteran Russian human rights activist Lev Ponomaryov praised the new forum as the first significant attempt to bring together Russian and European NGOs. He hoped the forum would be able to influence the official negotiations for a new agreement between the EU and Russia.

Jens Siegert, head of the Heinrich Boell office in Moscow, warned that the forum should not become just another voice of opposition to the current Russian leadership. “That’s not necessary, there are already so many critical voices in the EU. There must be a bridge between the critics and those able to talk to the Russians.”

There was an animated but good-natured discussions on the documents prepared for the forum. Many participants thought the documents were too detailed and a compromise was reached with just two shortened papers agreed by the general assembly (full details on the [website](#)).

The assembly agreed a work programme based on the four working groups that had met in Prague and also elected a new steering committee.

The one weakness of the Prague event was the relative lack of EU compared to Russian participants. The steering committee agreed this will have to be a priority in the coming months – to reach out to possible NGO partners in EU member states.

A second CSF meeting is planned towards the end of the year in Warsaw. The size and focus of this meeting will depend on various factors, including fund-raising. The truth is that we do not have any source of income yet for the CSF. This will be another priority in coming weeks.

2. EU-RUSSIA-SUMMIT 9./10.6. in Nizhny Novgorod

On June 9 – 10 in Nizhniy Novgorod a summit EU-Russia will be organized with participation on Dmitry Medvedev and representatives of European Union. The participants of the summit will be discussing relations between the EU and RF. During these days Steering Committee of The Forum is organizing several events and we will be happy if Forum members manage to participate in them.

On June 9 at Interfax office there will be a press-conference with participation of representatives Of Steering Committee. On June 10 at Ibis hotel there will be a meeting with local NGOs.

The Steering Committee is inviting all Forum members to participate in the mentioned events. Unfortunately, the Forum can not cover any expenses expect accommodation for two people.

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact Olga Sadovskaya (Sadovskaya@pytkam.net).

3. Why do we need the CIVIL SOCIETY FORUM?

Interview with one of the Steering Committee Members, Rostislav Valvoda (People in Need/ DEMAS, Prague)



Q: Why did you and your Russian and EU colleagues decided to create such a Forum?

RV: We felt that Russian and European civil societies need to have a stronger say in the EU-Russia relationships and political dialogue. We believe NGOs and other civil society organizations are crucial in promoting consolidation of shared values, helping Russian and European integration, and developing common positions in the spheres of human rights, social justice, democracy, the rule of law, the environment and other important issues of common interest for the development of our societies.

Q: Who runs the Forum day-to-day?

RV: The Forum is run by a Steering committee. Currently, the SC has 10 members, half from the EU and half from Russia who were elected individually for a two year term by the General Assembly by a simple majority of the attending members participating in the voting.

Q: What is the funding behind the Forum?

RV: Currently, all the meetings of the Forum were made possible either by the support of the participants themselves, or by our sponsors – Open Society Praha, Robert Bosch Stiftung, National Endowment for Democracy, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic. There is a hope that European Union will support this initiative out of the newly created budget line for EU-Russia relations.

Q: What does the European Commission think about the Forum? Will it financially support it? Will it use it as a tool of influence on the Russian government?

RV: Currently, EC has not provided any funds for the Forum. It is well informed about the Forum's progress and development and closely monitors its activities. Forum is an independent organization run by its members and cannot be used by anyone as a tool to do anything.

Q: How do you choose your members?

The entrance criteria seem quite complicated. Surely, such a Forum should welcome all participants to ensure it follows its own principles of genuine equality and democracy.

RV: Forum is an open and voluntary organization, firmly committed to the values of democracy, human rights and honest public dialogue. Any organization that is willing to join is welcome to do so. However, we feel important for the Forum to be secured from the point of view of potential infiltration of organizations who do not share our values and have different aims on their agenda.

Q: Why there is no Oborona, Solidar-nost', National Bolsheviki or other prominent Russian organizations with a lot of followers in the list of participants?

RV: Forum is a non-party-political organization. According to its membership criteria, no political party can be its member. Though not registered as parties, these organizations are more or less designed as parties, therefore, they cannot be member of our Forum. However, they are welcome as observers.

Q: Is your Forum a part of the Russian election campaign in support of Medvedev?

RV: No.

4. CIVIL SOCIETY FORUM: A path from idealistic aspirations to influence on policy making

Article by Yuri Dzhibladze, Member of the Steering Committee of the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum, President of the Centre for the Development of Democracy and Human Rights, Russia

Participants of the founding conference of EU-Russia Civil Society Forum in March this year in Prague agreed that this new common platform will have two main goals. The first one is intensification of horizontal ties between civic initiatives and organisations of EU countries and Russia, development of solidarity and support, direct exchanges and joint actions; in essence it is building of a pan-European civil society beyond borders. This is movement in the direction of creating of common civic, cultural and social space of Greater Europe. We want integration of Europe and Russia to happen not only at the level of political and legal decisions and erasing of state boundaries but also through direct interaction between societies on the basis of values of freedom, democracy, human rights, social justice, and environmentally sustainable development. It is exactly these values that were enshrined in the Forum's Mission Statement, adopted in Prague.

The second goal is based on a deep conviction of the Forum's founders in the idea that international relations and moreover all decisions on the European continent should not be left to politicians and diplomats alone. Active citizens and civil society groups should participate in decision making. There have been quite a few success stories in the last 20-30 years in the world when NGO efforts played a key role in important decisions made by politicians and governments. However, at the pan-European level the common voice and position of civil society are not strong enough, and inter-governmental dialogue between EU and Russia is happening, in essence, behind closed doors. We would like to increase the role of civil society in policy decisions and in actively influencing EU-Russia relations with the goal of bringing the issues of concern for civil society high on the agenda of intergovernmental dialogue.

Therefore, the Forum, according to the concept by its organisers, will perform two roles at the same time: both of a communications space, a "forum" in its classic, historical meaning as a gathering place of free people, and of a tool for joint action for bringing about change in a vast space of some three dozen of states and societies. Will we succeed in passing the way from these nice idealistic words in the Forum's Mission Statement to actually implementing them in the complicated conditions of real life?

Answer to this question depends on many factors but first of all on the Forum's participants themselves. First, we will have to simply work hard, focus on the Forum's initiatives and their implementation on a regular basis, rather than just meet once a year at a conference to share our problems and dream about a good life in a united prosperous Europe. Secondly, if we want to influence serious policy decisions, we need to have well-elaborated proposals and be capable to conduct negotiations professionally. Otherwise we will be not treated as a force to reckon with. We cannot get away only with critical statements and appeals with condemnation of violations, abuse and crimes; our level of competence should be

on a totally different level than most of activists are used to. At the same time we should not give up civic actions and public methods of struggle for our principles and demands. This will be not an easy balance; many of us will have to learn this art.

We should also be prepared to the fact that authorities on both sides will want to order us about. It is unlikely that they will just ignore the Forum or openly refuse to deal with us because we live in different times but they are quite good at overriding others by bureaucratic logic, co-opting with money or infiltrating with GONGOs and BONGOs subordinate to them. If worst comes to worse they can play with us in their favorite game, imitation, which they play so well in both Moscow and Brussels. We will have to break through this vicious circle without stopping conversation with not the most likeable interlocutors, a conversation that will have to be smart, not clamorous but tough, based on convictions, values and clear understanding of what we want to achieve.

In addition, situations may arise when we will address sensitive problems and at the same time touch upon someone's political, financial and other interests, we will encounter direct attacks against the Forum, attempts at discrediting it, "black PR" and similar hostile actions. Openness, sticking to procedures, wide distribution of information and public mobilisation to our side are some possible answers to such threats.

There are many other challenges which the newly born Forum may face. Responses to them will be found in the course of its development. They include choosing priorities relevant for the whole European continent, finding balance between experienced actors and newcomers to the field of international cooperation, maintaining equality between participants from Russia and the EU (as well as ensuring their activity at a similar level), engaging participants from small countries of Europe and Russian regions, striking reasonable balance between democratic procedures of the Forum with effectiveness in implementation of adopted decisions,

and much more. But “nothing ventured, nothing gained”, says Russian proverb, and since the Forum has set up ambitious goals at a high level, we will have to keep our word.

Already in this year the Forum will have to demonstrate that it is capable of not only talking but also doing something real. It would be good if each of the four groups develops joint positions on at least one important problem of the environment, human rights, social issues and democracy with concrete proposals for civil society and authorities alike.

Influencing the course of negotiations over a new EU-Russia partnership and cooperation agreement is one of the immediate systemic goals of the Forum. We want the new treaty to reflect priorities and concerns of civil society, namely those values that are enshrined in the Mission Statement of the Forum. This is not the case now; energy and military security and economy occupy top place among the governments’ interests in this dialogue. It

will be very difficult to influence this process as pragmatic interests of Realpolitik dominate actions of the states. In addition, the negotiation process has rather closed nature.

Similarly, issues of technological and economic interaction dominate in the implementation of the “Partnership for Modernisation” programme adopted last year while modernization of political, legal and social sphere with participation of civil society seem to be important only to NGOs.

Civic organisations have advantage of allowing themselves, unlike politicians, to be idealists and set themselves the tasks that appear unrealistic. If even in the Brezhnev times during signing of the Helsinki Accord of 1975 humanitarian agenda was recognised by the governments, even if only on paper, as equally important to military and economic “baskets”, why is it not possible today? As Andrey Sakharov who would turn 90 this year, used to say, “idealism is the best policy”. We agree with him, no doubt.

5. Meet the steering committee

The first Steering Committee of the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum was elected in Prague on 29.03.2011



Fraser Cameron

is Director of the EU-Russia Centre in Brussels. A former British diplomat and EU official, he has directed the EU-RC since its formation five years ago. The Centre seeks to stimulate interest in EU-Russia relations and raise awareness about the true state of affairs concerning democracy, human rights and the rule of law in Russia.

www.eu-russiacentre.org



Oksana Chelysheva

is a journalist and human rights defender. She worked as an editor at the Information Centre established by the Russian-Chechen Friendship Society until its ban in January 2007. Oksana is one of the authors of the research "International Tribunal for Chechnya. Legal perspectives of bringing people suspected of war crimes and crimes against humanity to individual responsibility". She currently serves as the editorial board of the Finnish-language Novaya gazeta digest.

www.finrosforum.fi



Yuri Dzhibladze

is a founder and president of the Center for the Development of Democracy and Human Rights in Moscow. The Center conducts public policy analysis, monitoring, and advocacy campaigns on freedom of association and assembly, security of human rights defenders, human rights in the army, links between corruption and human rights abuse, development of international human rights standards, interaction between NGOs and international organizations, etc. Yuri is a member of the Council on Development of Civil Society and Human Rights with the President of Russia and a coordinator of the Russian NGO Initiative Group for Dialogue with the EU on Human Rights.

www.demokratia.ru



Alexey Kozlov

is the President of "For environmental and social justice" foundation, as well as the expert of Moscow Helsinki Group. Founder and co-editor of web projects (www.resist.ru, www.article20.org). Mr. Kozlov is also the International Secretary of Civil Untied Green Alternative Movement (GROZA), member of experts' council of Ombudsman in RF, member of executive committee in European Greens Federation and member of the experts group of OSCE/ODIHR on a freedom to assembly.



Stefan Melle

is a journalist and Russia expert. Mr. Melle is the director of the non-governmental, non-profit organisation DRA (German-Russian Exchange) that contributes to a cross-European dialogue through its exchange programmes and implements projects to strengthen civil society on issues like environment, media, education, human rights, ethnic reconciliation and integration.

www.austausch.org



Danuta Przywara

is a sociologist who during the “Solidarity” period served as a mediator within the Mediation Commission of Mazowsze Region, Independent Trade Union “Solidarity”. Since 1982 she has been a member of the underground Helsinki Committee in Poland and co-author of some of its reports. In 1989 Danuta co-founded the Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights and in 2008 became its President.

www.humanrightshouse.org



Olga Sadovskaya

is a vice-chairperson of INGO “Committee Against Torture” and a lecturer of a course “International and European protection of human rights” at Nizhniy Novgorod State University. She joined Committee Against Torture in 2002 and works with torture issues since then. The organization was established in 2000 and is aimed at prevention of torture in Russia.

www.pytkam.net



Sergey Simak

is a founder and head of Samara Socio-Ecological Union. In 2007 he was elected co-chair of the International Socio-Ecological Union and the Russian national organization. Dr. Simak is also a Vice-Rector of Samara State Regional Academy, Director of the Institute of Applied Ecology, head of the Laboratory of General and Social Ecology. He is the member of the Council for the Development of Civil Society at the Plenipotentiary of RF President in Volga Federal District, the member of the Public Chamber of the Samara region, the Environmental Council of the Ministry of natural resources of Samara region.

www.seu.ru



Natalia Taubina

has been working in the field of human rights since 1992. First she was involved in the work of the Russian Research Center for Human Rights, since 1997 she has been a director of the Foundation for Civil Society and since 2004 serves a Director of the Public Verdict Foundation. The area of Ms. Taubina’s expertise is international human rights standards and mechanisms, human rights in the work of law enforcement bodies, NGO management, and evaluation. Ms. Taubina is a member of the Expert Council under the Ombudsman in the Russian Federation.

www.eng.publicverdict.ru



Rostislav Valvoda

has worked with Centre for Democracy & Human Rights of People in Need since 2007 focusing on Eastern European countries. People in Need is an independent, non-profit NGO based in Prague, one of the largest NGOs in Central and Eastern Europe. People in Need works in three areas: emergency relief and development aid; democracy assistance, human rights, independent media; and minority rights.

www.peopleinneed.cz

6. Statement of the steering committee “On attacks against civic activists in Khimki forest”

24 May 2011

The Steering Committee of EU-Russia Civil Society Forum express most serious concern in relation to continued acts of violence, attacks and threats against civic activists, defending the Khimki forest in the Moscow Region from illegal logging in the course of construction of Moscow – Saint Petersburg highway. According to reliable sources, numerous attacks against activists by private security staff of the construction company and groups of unknown people covering their faces with masks and wearing Nazi symbols on their clothes have been happening for several months with direct connivance by and sometimes with support from the law enforcement bodies. Lately this alarming situation has clearly deteriorated and requires resolute actions to stop violence, investigate all incidents of attacks and bringing perpetrators to justice.

Confrontation around construction of the highway through the Khimki forest has developed for several years. According to many experts, the decision made about the route of the highway through the forest violates the Russian law on “On the transfer of land or land plots from one category to another”, according to which this transfer of the land of the forestal park would be permitted only when there were no other option for the placement of the highway. In this case, alternatives exist. Many local residents and environmental activists express their disagreement with the decision about his particular routing of the road which will lead to the destruction of the valuable forestal park. By peaceful protests they are trying to draw attention to the problem and stop the logging, conducted without permissions required by the law.

Khimki forest defenders have long been a target of criminal attacks. During the last few years dozens of activists and journalists have been a subject of brutal attacks, illegal shadowing, threats and beatings. As a result, two people became handicapped, one died, and a few sustained serious injuries.

The law enforcement authorities, instead of investigating the attacks and protecting the civic activists from criminal assault in the course of their peaceful and legitimate activity to protect the right for healthy and favorable environment, regularly engage in acts of violence against the defenders of the forest, in essence acting in solidarity with the bandits. During the last year the riot police officers repeatedly brutally and cruelly applied ungrounded and disproportionate force while illegally detaining activists during peaceful protest actions, in an ecological camp and even after a press-conference. Most recently riot police again conducted several attacks against environmental activists, having violently and illegally detained and brutally beaten many Khimki forest defenders. According to testimonies from witnesses and victims, police officers were joined in their beating of environmentalists by private security guards of “Vityaz” security company as well as unidentified criminal types.

At the same time, crimes massively committed against the forest defenders remain uninvestigated for several years. The urban district of Khimki has become a territory in which civil activists

every day have to fear for their lives and liberty, the safety of their children and loved ones. In essence, the police do not protect civic activists and their families from the criminals but prevents their legitimate civic activities.

The Steering Committee of EU-Russia Civil Society Forum strongly condemns systematic illegal violence from the criminal elements against civic activists engaged in defense of the Khimki forest as well as against journalists covering this important for the society situation. Impunity for these actions, lack of effective investigation, and complicity of the law enforcement bodies with the criminal acts of aggression as well as cruel treatment, illegal detention, and beating of activists by the police cause our sincere indignation. This intolerable situation has to be stopped.

We call on the Russian authorities to take resolute and effective action to protect civil society in Khimki, promptly and effectively investigate all crimes committed against the activists, and bring perpetrators to justice. The government has a duty to protect peaceful and legitimate activity of civic activists according to its international human rights obligations.

In addition to that, we call on the Russian authorities to pay the outmost attention to claims about violations of environmental legislation and corruption interests in the course of taking decisions about construction of the Moscow-St Petersburg highway. This allegations raise legitimate concerns among many Russian citizens and experts. Public interests require conducting as many expert assessments as necessary to provide answers to all questions the public is concerned about.

We call on the authorities in the European Union and France, where the company Vinci participating in the project of construction of the highway is registered, to give legal and moral assessment of the developments around the Khimki forest and the role of representatives of European business in them.

7. Working groups

The working groups are a core element of the forum.

Human Rights and the Rule of Law

This Working Group should offer a platform for discussion in which NGOs can examine both the difficulties that they face vis-a-vis their governments and ways (best practices) to tackle them.

Main topics:

- Threats to security of human rights defenders and civic activists and victims of authorities' abuse in outstanding cases of criminal prosecution;
- Interaction with government bodies of EU and Russia, in particular for influencing intergovernmental dialogue on human rights;
- Access to justice and execution of justice;
- Public control over the work of the police, the penitentiary system and other "power agencies";
- Racism and xenophobia;
- Freedoms of assembly, expression and association;
- Monitoring the human rights situation in the European "hot spots", such as Belarus and unrecognized states.

You will find a list of members of the working group and contacts of the coordinators, as well as the report from the Prague meeting of the Working Group on the [website](#).

The Environment

Main purpose of this Working Group is to facilitate Russia and EU's transfer to sustainable development and biodiversity.

Main topics:

- Climate change and adaptation;
- Biodiversity;
- Environment and human health;
- Natural resources and waste;
- Environmental human rights.

You will find a list of members of the working group and contacts of the coordinators, as well as the report from the Prague meeting of the Working Group on the [website](#).

Social Issues and Civic Participation

Main purpose of this Working Group is to enhance cooperation between authorities and people and ensure that civil society has its say in setting up social standards. The two main ways through which it can be done are: sharing know-how on civic participation on all levels and information technology enhancing communication and knowledge sharing.

Main topics:

- Best practices in community development, civic participation, and education for the youth;
- Participation and measurable impact of civil society on policy making;
- Community development and civic participation by governments;
- Standards for civic participation and public dialogue;
- Enhanced use of information technology, including knowledge-exchange and communication tools.

You will find a list of members of the working group and contacts of the coordinators, as well as the report from the Prague meeting of the Working Group on the [website](#).

Democratic Structures and Processes

The main purpose of this Working Group is to ensure there are such permanent mechanisms of democratic praxis like accountability of government, effective civilian control e.g. of police and security forces and election monitoring to the population in both the EU and Russia.

Main topics:

- Analysis of election law in EU and Russia, working out recommendations for its improvement;
- Long-term and short-term observation of elections;
- Exchange and dissemination of information regarding violations committed during elections and pressure put on NGOs and civil rights activists involved in independent election observation;
- Organization of international conferences, seminars, round tables, web-based seminars and other events devoted to election process issues;
- Working to tackle corruption in the government agencies in Russia and EU;
- Enhancing public control over the police and security forces.

You will find a list of members of the working group and contacts of the coordinators, as well as the report from the Prague meeting of the Working Group on the [website](#).

8. News from members & Upcoming events

18-21 June 2011

History, Policy and Prospects of Russian Modernization: International conference (Barnaul, Gorno-Altaysk)

16.05.2011: Third Lemkin Debate was held at the Warsaw University library

This Debate was entitled Ethics and responsibility of the super-powers practices: cases of the CIA secret detention centres and human rights abuses in the Russian Federation, was hosted jointly by the Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights and the Foundation of Professor Bronislaw Geremek.

06.05.2011: Russian human rights activist deported from Belarus

A Russian human rights activist Yuri Dzhibladze detained in Minsk along with 4 more Russian citizens. Later Russian human rights activists were released.

13.04.2011: Meeting between Thomas Hammarberg and representatives of Russian human rights NGO

Restrictions of the freedom of assembly in Russia were discussed during the meeting of the Commissioner for human rights of the

Council of Europe Thomas Hammarberg with the representatives of Human Rights Institute, For Human Rights Movement, Center of Development of Democracy and Human Rights, GROZA movement (Members of EU-Russia Civil Society Forum). GROZA movement passed to the commissioner a report "Freedom of Assembly in Russia, 2010", plus the recommendations of Russian human rights organizations.

13.04.2011: Study "EU human rights policy towards Russia" published

Conducted for the European Parliament Sub-Committee on human rights, this study assesses the state of play in EU efforts to advance human rights in Russia based on extensive consultations with Russian civil society groups.

22.03.2011: EU-Russia Centre Report on "The Electoral System of the Russian Federation"

This report, prepared at the request of the European Parliament, examines the development of the electoral system in Russia, with a particular emphasis on the evolution of political parties, after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991.

9. Join the forum

The EU-Russia Civil Society Forum invites civil society actors to join its work. If you are interested in becoming a member of the Forum, please read its membership criteria described in the Charter first, fill in the application form and send it to info@eu-russia-csf.org. You will find the [Charter](#) and the [application form](#) on the website of the Forum.

Imprint

This Newsletter is published on regular basis by the Steering Committee of the [EU-Russia Civil Society Forum](#), an open platform for cooperation between civil society actors in Russia and the European Union.

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