



EU-RUSSIA CIVIL SOCIETY FORUM
ГРАЖДАНСКИЙ ФОРУМ ЕС-РОССИЯ

Policy Paper

Return the Right to be Conscious Agents of Change to Citizens and Civic Communities

To the Summit of the
European Union and the Russian Federation
21 December in Brussels

Working Group “Social Issues/Civic Participation”

EU-Russia Civil Society Forum
St. Petersburg, 10 October 2012

Return the Right to be Conscious Agents of Change to Citizens and Civic Communities

The world financial crisis, the latest European events and the "Arab Spring" show that European countries and Russia are being forced to carry out major changes in their social and economic lives. Accepting the need for change, we cannot allow our economies, social systems and societies to fall into chaos.

The experience of failed reforms, even where the need is clear for most of society, shows that the sole modernizer's ambition plays as a bad joke with the authorities. What they have created without consulting or involving the public meets resistance, is short-term and does not accomplish the stated goals. Time after time, the "window of opportunity" for change is being missed. What is more, the proposed changes, running solely as a top-down project keeps splitting the public, creating a space of "cold civil war", and any results produced at such a great price are not evaluated or used by citizens in full.

Today it is becoming apparent that the responsibility for the fate of European and Russian modernization has shifted from the state to society. It is vitally important to find a place for society, civic organizations and local communities in the modernization processes or in specific reforms. It is unproductive to divide all civic practices in terms of modernization into anti-state and pro-state practices. We, the citizens who invest in the future of our countries as much as state officials, must not tolerate this. In our opinion, the following examples must be supported and encouraged as useful social behaviours:

- Public enforcement of changes (external control for keeping the rules)
- Civic control of reform
- Public expertise of the causes, and mid-term and final results of any reform
- Practices of "grass roots" public reform order - its "social agenda".

The public is aware of the fact that the official language of modernization is not accessible for the average citizen or civic association. Any reform has to be explained; its results can be sustainable only if people understand why it is being carried out, what it means for the lives of ordinary people, and how to take advantage of it. Explaining measures in a simple and understandable way does not mean to manipulate the emotions and interests of the people and does not have any implication for government populism. Effective reforms need committed citizens – only then their implementation cannot be linked to “corrupting” these citizens.

Governments, in consultation with civil society, should translate the language of reforms from technical jargon into a language of civic policy, i.e. through public discussion on state documents like the Charters and Codes of Civil Rights that are applied to reforms, etc. Furthermore, it is required to develop “consumer interfaces” of modernization that are acceptable to ordinary citizens.

It is crucial to create a positive environment for the development of non-profit organisations and acknowledgment for self-organizing, self-help, civic initiatives. Accessibility to the minimal infrastructure for civil involvement should be guaranteed.

- It is crucial to minimize the costs for citizens to organise themselves. This means de-bureaucratisation of non-profit activities, reduction of administrative barriers to the registration of non-profit organizations, assuring that there is no duplication of information provided by NGOs to various state agencies and elimination of doubled-up competencies of government institutions bodies that control non-profit activities.
- The support for various types of civil self-organisation implies the establishment of an infrastructure for civil activities. Self-administration at the federal and local levels has to take the responsibility for guaranteeing a minimum of accessible infrastructure for civil initiatives and non-profit organizations. For

example, every city has to have a minimum number of premises for public discussions, meetings, press conferences, seminars, etc.

- Development of civic education in schools - a subject of civic organizations and local community's active involvement, together with ensuring an adequate level of budget financing.

The government should take responsibility for training a new generation of public officials who can productively and responsibly interact with community groups. Such consultations should be mandatory in administrative procedures and regulations.

Public authorities must learn to find partners for introducing change in social policy, who are not recruited from loyal or quasi-public organizations, and create conditions for participation in public dialogue of any groups that understand the need and the social usefulness of such changes.

At the forefront of the fate of the reform and modernization lies the readiness of the state and society to develop the growing points of "civic reformation", by which we understand responsible, independent and productive activities of citizens and their associations in the sphere of introducing real change. Therefore, it becomes critical to ensure grass roots support for modernization. Upcoming and current reforms must be based on real public order, secured with the support of the public.

It is vitally important to return the right to be conscious agents of change to citizens and civic communities.

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This publication has been supported by



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