



EU-RUSSIA CIVIL SOCIETY FORUM ГРАЖДАНСКИЙ ФОРУМ ЕС-РОССИЯ

Address by the Board of the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum to the Newly Elected Members of the European Parliament

The Board of the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum congratulates the Members of the European Parliament on their election. The Board calls on the new Parliament to use its powers to uphold human rights, rule of law and democracy both inside the European Union and in its relations with Russia.

Specifically, we would like to emphasise and suggest the following:

EU-Russia Relations

EU-Russia relations have reached a historic low. Keeping in mind the assessment of European Parliament that ‘under the present circumstances, Russia can no longer be considered a strategic partner’¹, we wish to emphasise that there are numerous ties connecting and directing them towards each other. Therefore an effort, coming from both sides, must be made in order to restore and enhance the relations by stressing the importance of, above all, values of human rights, democracy and the rule of law.

It is sad to observe that the Russian government has continued to produce controversies in both domestic politics and international relations, showing serious breaches of rule of law principles and weakening of democracy. Widespread production of fake news, accusations of interference in Western elections, as well as fears that similar undertakings would occur during the European elections, is seriously jeopardising already fragile trust in the international arena², which has been in a downward spiral since 2014.

Russian suppression of civil society organisations has continued, activists have been threatened and detained. Encroachment on the independent media and Internet has become increasingly concerning. Institutions show a high level of control by authorities. However, the recent arrest and subsequent release of investigative journalist Ivan Golunov showed that this kind of repression has its own limits – that civil society, media and the general public can respond, show solidarity and put pressure on the authorities.

The conflict in the East of Ukraine, obviously the turning point in the EU-Russia relations, remains in deadlock, leaving Ukrainian citizens hostage between the European Union and Russia. Citizens of Eastern Ukraine live under poor conditions with an uncertain future. We call on MEPs to use their

¹ See http://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-8-2019-0073_EN.html?redirect

² See also http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-19-2914_en.htm

powers and influence to enhance the process of negotiations and normalisation of life in Donbas by fully implementing the Minsk Agreements by both parties. Immediate end of hostilities, followed by release of all political and military prisoners is of the utmost importance, as a starting point for building trust.

And yet, there is still a profound need for EU-Russia interaction in different policy fields. People-to-people contacts, visa dialogue, education, youth exchange, the fight for preservation of the environment and biodiversity and against climate change, social development and cross-border cooperation are among the most important ones. The EU-Russia Civil Society Forum can help stimulate channels of communication to remain open to enable the exchange of ideas, expertise and good practices.

The EU-Russia civil society cooperation should be supported further, by strengthening existing programmes, such as EIDHR, "Civil Society Organisations as Actors of Governance and Development", Partnership Instrument, etc., because of the vital importance of this cooperation and support for the independent civil society in Russia. More exact priorities and suitable mechanisms of such a cooperation support can be also discussed with the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum, which has a deep understanding of the EU and Russian situation not only in the country capitals but also in the regions.

Internal EU Issues

For many years, the European Union has been recognised as a community upholding the values of socioeconomic security and protection, the rule of law and human rights. However, the dynamics of its political and institutional development is complex and will pose many new challenges for the MEPs during the new mandate.

The last five years have been characterised by a major setback of liberal democracy in Europe, as well as in the rest of the world. The concepts of illiberal democracy and hybrid regimes were given public prominence in describing the changing tides in European political realities. The rise of anti-democratic and anti-liberal movements is of a great concern, because these 'sovereigntist' rulers view the rule of law and human rights protections as threats to their interests, and not as opportunities to build sustainable and prosperous political communities. There has been a growing presence of hate speech, extremism and xenophobia throughout Europe. Systematic undermining of the tenets of the rule of law principle are recognisable through the degradation of judiciary, civil society, media and other independent institutions. Rule of law is not just an addition to European governance, but it is at the very core of its foundation. That is the reason why it has been regarded as a *community of law*.

The hesitation of the Commission and of the Council in activating the Article 7 procedure, exemplified in numerous expert and political debates (first in the case of Poland, then related to Hungary), has shown there is still plenty to be accomplished in conceptualising and refining the rule of law's protective mechanisms. Furthermore, it showed that the established level of rights is not to be taken for granted. It needs constant proactive engagement in strengthening control mechanisms of political power to protecting human rights. A prominent example is Croatia, the latest member to join the EU, with clear difficulties in upholding the rule of law³. However, there is a number of other cases, such as

³ See https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/justice_scoreboard_2019_en.pdf

in Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Malta, Romania and Slovakia, where the rule of law is under threat as well.

We as an international civil society community welcome and strongly encourage continuation of the work undertaken in developing mechanisms for human rights protection⁴. Special focus should be given to the implementation of the Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values Programme. It should be included in the Multiannual Financial Framework as advocated by the European civil society organisations in their proposals for a European Values Instrument (EVI). EVI is of substantial importance as a part of the Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values Programme, with the purpose of creating a fund for emergency cases and providing a timely reaction for human rights defenders throughout the EU, as well as other groups upholding democracy and human rights in the European community of values⁵. Also, legislation protecting journalists and whistleblowers should be further developed.

It is unacceptable that individual member states use EU funds for undermining the core European values, such as for corrupt deals and personal political interests. It is necessary to advocate for the creation of control mechanisms, which will halt the spending unfolding through illegal and non-transparent practices. In this respect, we fully support adopting regulations of the European Parliament and of the Council safeguarding the Union's budget in case of generalised deficiencies as regards the rule of law in member states⁶. These dynamics would be placed in the hands of the new Commission as the guarantor of the treaties and rule of law in the European Union.

Cooperation with the Forum

The EU-Russia Civil Society Forum and its 175 member and supporter organisations work to maintain and develop Europe as a continent, in which both the European Union and Russia peacefully and productively cooperate and adhere to jointly agreed standards, in particular those developed by the Council of Europe and the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe.

We invite the newly elected MEPs to actively cooperate with the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum and to use its expertise, contacts and recommendations. The Forum representatives from 20 EU member states and Russia will be happy to share their expertise in different frameworks and fora, as well as to invite the MEPs for its dialogue and public events.

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⁴ See overview in this briefing requested by the LIBE Committee at

[http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2019/621911/IPOL_BRI\(2019\)621911_EN.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2019/621911/IPOL_BRI(2019)621911_EN.pdf)

⁵ See <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20190109IPR23024/promoting-rule-of-law-and-fundamental-rights-in-the-eu>

⁶ See www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-8-2019-0349_EN.html

The EU-Russia Civil Society Forum was established in 2011 by non-governmental organisations as a permanent common platform. At the moment, 175 NGOs from Russia and the European Union are members or supporters of the Forum. It aims at development of cooperation of civil society organisations from Russia and EU and greater participation of NGOs in the EU-Russia dialogue. The Forum has been actively involved, inter alia, in the questions of facilitation of visa regime, development of civic participation, protection of the environment and human rights, dealing with history and civic education.

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