



EU-RUSSIA CIVIL SOCIETY FORUM ГРАЖДАНСКИЙ ФОРУМ ЕС-РОССИЯ

Forum Strategy 2020-2025

(Approved on 27 March 2020)

Introduction

The civil society situation all over Europe has changed dramatically since the Forum's origins in 2011.

In Russia, the space for independent voices and actions has been closing up. The law on “foreign agents” affects the NGOs since its inception in 2012 and restricts their work. The 2015 law on “undesirable organisations” led to withdrawal of the majority of foreign donors from Russia and affected some of their international partners. In 2016, a set of legislative amendments (so-called ‘Yarovaya’ laws), curtailed basic rights and freedoms – as freedom of speech or religion and belief - further.

Violent suppression of peaceful assemblies and protests and persecution of their participants, restrictions of electoral rights, draft ‘sovereign Internet’ legislation, rise of hate speech rhetoric and disinformation along with other factors, as continuous crisis in the EU-Russia intergovernmental relations, contribute to the deterioration of the overall civil society situation in Russia.

Unfortunately, a similar trend also manifested itself in a number of EU member states. Restrictive, authoritarian tendencies have become more prominent in the political discourse in 2010s. Rise of right-wing populist movements throughout the European Union, anti-migrant and anti-LGBT+ rhetoric and anti-semitism – all this has led to growing stigmatisation and marginalisation of civil society groups and populations.

According to the 2019 State of Civil Society Report by CIVICUS, the space for civil society 'is now under serious attack in 111 of the world's countries – well over half – and only four per cent of the world's population live in countries where our fundamental freedoms are respected.'¹ Likewise, Freedom House in its 2018 Freedom in the World Report registered that ‘for the 12th consecutive year, [...] countries that suffered democratic setbacks outnumbered those that registered gains.’²

This phenomenon – coined ‘shrinking civic space’ - together with rise of the so called ‘uncivil society’ has also been observed in Europe. Negative developments – especially in Central and Eastern European/ V4 countries, Greece, Spain – are documented in CSF's own research: Annual Report on the

¹ See www.civicus.org/documents/reports-and-publications/SOCS/2019/state-of-civil-society-report-2019_executive-summary.pdf (p. 6)

² See https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/FH_FITW_Report_2018_Final_SinglePage.pdf (p. 1)

State of Civil Society in the EU and Russia³ and publications on the society situation in single EU member states⁴.

The prevailing social-economic model in which essential elements of society are run by ‘market forces’, does not always produce outcomes that are in the public interest. Coal mining and related felling of trees in Germany⁵ are examples in the EU. In 2016, “Reporters without Borders” saw a major threat to media independence in media oligarchs, not governments⁶.

New European challenges became more interconnected and complex – and they include not only the conditions in which civil society operates, but also such challenges as climate change and climate justice, migration and integration, sustainable development, data protection, security and misinformation.

On a positive note, both in the EU and Russia, the rise of informal and unregistered movements, a better consolidation of the civil society actors and a growing involvement of broader public groups combatting the negative trend should be emphasised.

The entire landscape of civil society has been changing. The late 2010s witnessed a new generation of activists coming of age and the rise of broad public movements with spread-out leadership. This shift is also associated with ‘transcending traditional sector boundaries’, as the World Economic Forum’s Future scenarios series puts it⁷, and a changing financial base of the civil society⁸, bigger role of individual and donors and sharing economy.

The success of the “Fridays for Future” movement, born out of a single-person protest of a Swedish student and soon joined across the world, is an example of such movement. In the same line, CIVICUS mentions protests against corruption in several Eastern European countries and against resumed fracking in the UK⁹.

The prominence of the environmental and climate agenda is likely to grow among matter of public interest – both on the national and international level.

In Russia, more active cross-regional mobilisation around common causes has been notable, too. Citizens started effectively organising not just around individual cases in their localities, but more broadly – around common issues and rights. The 2019 protests against the construction of a landfill in Shies (North of Russia)¹⁰ and the campaigns around the Moscow City Council election¹¹ and campaigns

³ See <https://eu-russia-csf.org/project/state-of-civil-society>

⁴ See <https://eu-russia-csf.org/project/countries-cases>

⁵ See, for example, <https://www.dw.com/en/coal-protests-in-germany-climate-activists-storm-garzweiler-mine/a-49313892>, <https://www.dw.com/en/germany-thousands-protest-to-save-hambach-forest/a-46060826>

⁶ See <https://rsf.org/sites/default/files/2016-rsf-report-media-oligarchs-gpo-shopping.pdf>

⁷ See http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_FutureRoleCivilSociety_Report_2013.pdf

⁸ See www.hrfn.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/Mapping-the-Money-Takeaways-2.27.18.pdf

⁹ See www.civicus.org/documents/reports-and-publications/SOCS/2019/socs2019-year-in-review-part1_everyday-issues-bring-people-to-the-streets.pdf (pp. 36-38, 50-51)

¹⁰ See, for example, <https://bellona.org/news/russian-human-rights-issues/2019-06-russias-garbage-protests-raise-central-questions-about-the-right-to-a-clean-environment>

¹¹ See, for example, <https://amnesty.org.ru/r/2019-08-08-russia> or <https://freerussia.eu/en/2019/07/26/sign-the-petition-for-the-registration-of-independent-candidates-to-the-moscow-city-duma>

defending journalists¹² and activists¹³, exemplify this tendency. Also, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) framework started to root in practices of Russian NGOs¹⁴.

This new context requires a review and reset/ adjustments in the international institutions' practices. The European Union will have to handle transgressions of the rule of law, member state policies on asylum and migration, and compensate the neglect of the social aspects of the market economy.

Pan-European arrangements embodied by the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe and the Council of Europe have in the past twenty years increasingly come under strain, especially since the annexation of Crimea and the Russia-maintained war in eastern Ukraine. Advocating for fair and full implementation of the acquis of these organisations will have to be a priority for civil society.

A substantive discussion on how the international human rights instruments, rights and freedoms should be realised in practice is impossible without an active involvement of the civil society. It is only through dialogue that value-based solutions for such challenges can be found.

The EU-Russia Civil Society Forum is a unique as both an organisation, implementing actions and promoting certain topics, and a platform of member organisations and partners, open and flexible to their needs, and supporting their cooperation. The Forum may play a crucial role in bringing those issues to the mutual EU-Russia agenda and acting on these in its new cycle of development.

Methodology

Elaboration of the 2020-2025 EU-Russia Civil Society Forum's Strategy started in January 2019. An external consultant was brought in to moderate the process. Initial consultations were held with the Board to define the desired outcome and finalise methodology. A Planning Group (PG) was established to cooperate closely with the moderator, comprising six people on representing the Board and the Secretariat.

In February-March, a series of consultations with ca. 40 stakeholders of the Forum was conducted, including members, former members, donors and the Secretariat employees. This phase aimed at studying perceptions of the strong and weak points of the Forum, its needs, the roles it could fulfil. A memo on the consultations' findings and challenges for the Forum was presented to PG and a questionnaire put together to get additional input from members.

At the 2019 EU-Russia CSF's General Assembly in Bratislava in May 2019, two 2-hour sessions were devoted to strategic planning and members' interventions.

Based on the data analysis and further discussions at the Planning Group, a draft strategy was prepared and consulted with the full Board in July. After a round of consultations with all members in September-October 2019, the draft strategy was approved for the vote in late 2019.

¹² See www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-48600233

¹³ See, for example, www.youtube.com/watch?v=We5W--K7S-A or www.pytkam.net/ru/news/kampaniya-v-podderzhku-oyuba-titieva

¹⁴ See a handbook published by Finnish and Russian NGOs within a Forum Partnership Project 2018-2019 at https://ngokitchen.ru/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/READY_ENGLISH_Handbook-on-European-and-Russian-good-practises-promoting-sustainable-development-HYPERLINKIT.pdf

Logic of the strategy

The table presents logical connections between actions and goals in the strategy.

<p>Overall Goal:</p> <p>EU and Russian civil society cooperate for the good of Europe and the world, based on common values of pluralistic democracy, human rights, social justice and a sustainable future.</p>		
<p>Strategic Goal 1</p> <p>Civil society in Russia and EU is increasing outreach to protect and promote the common values.</p>	<p>Strategic Goal 2</p> <p>A broad spectrum of Civil Society Organisations from EU and Russia have an opportunity to meet, learn from and support one another, work together.</p>	<p>Strategic Goal 3</p> <p>Civil society in Russia and EU adapts to changing environment, develops/ enhances resilience and independence.</p>
<p>Strategic Actions</p> <p>1. CSF will advocate for common values and issues and stimulate civil society debate/ action on key challenges for the future of Europe and the world</p> <p>2. CSF will work to build bridges between EU and Russian societies through communication and education</p>	<p>Strategic Actions</p> <p>3. CSF will network EU and Russian civil society with the aim of undertaking joint actions.</p> <p>4. CSF will support and actively express solidarity with organisations and activists in peril</p>	<p>Strategic Actions</p> <p>5. CSF will develop capacity of its members to become more effective, resilient and independent</p>
<p>Organisational development of the Forum</p>		

Overall Goal of the CSF

EU and Russian civil society cooperate for the good of Europe and the world, based on common values of pluralistic democracy, human rights, **social justice and a sustainable future.**

Strategic Goals of the Forum

In order to contribute to the Overall Goal, in the next five years the Forum will strive to achieve the following three Strategic Goals:

1. **Civil society in Russia and EU is increasing outreach to protect and promote the common values.**
2. A broad spectrum of Civil Society Organisations from EU and Russia have opportunity to meet, learn from and support one another, work together.

3. Civil society in Russia and EU adapts to changing environment and develops resilience and independence.

Strategic Actions of the Forum

In order to achieve the Strategic Goals, the Forum will focus on implementing the following Strategic Actions. There are five Strategic Actions.

1. CSF will advocate for common values and issues and stimulate civil society debate and action on key challenges for the future of Europe and the world (impacts SG 1)

- a) *CSF will actively engage civil society in debate, exchange of ideas and planning actions in and between EU and Russia, related to key common challenges.*

Currently those challenges are recognised as: space for civil society; **sustainable development and climate change; inequality in society; digital inequality and rapid technological development; safeguarding democracy and human rights; and free media.**

To promote such exchange, CSF will **prioritise these topics in its activities**, bringing interested audiences from Russia and the EU together to discuss/ act on those issues.

- b) *CSF will continue to advocate for free, enabling environment for civil society in Russia and EU*

CSF will continue to develop its position of advocate, expert and representative of civil society on common challenges and issues of public interest topical to both Russia and the EU.

To this aim, CSF will continue to build relationships with policy- and decision-makers on the intergovernmental level, including, among others, the European Union and the Council of Europe, with particular focus on departments dealing with human rights and the promotion of democracy. It will also further develop relations with national governments and **establish links with local (self)government structures.**

CSF will also continue to cultivate relationships with media and expert groups (e.g. think tanks). It aims to become a **go-to platform for independent EU and Russian media** on EU-Russia relations.

In the EU, CSF will present situation of Russian civil society to the partners mentioned above, and actively speak on EU-Russia relations. **The Forum will join efforts to protect space for civil society in the EU.**

In Russia, recognising that its advocacy efforts in country have been less intense than in the EU, CSF will **actively seek opportunities for dialogue with Russian interlocutors**, even on small topical level with local governments and institutions, and when possible, on the national level.

CSF will wisely assess the particular issues it advocates, to ensure that it does no harm to its members and broader civil society.

- c) *CSF Advocacy with decision makers will prioritise the following topics:*

- Improving people-to-people contacts, e.g. through visa liberalisation (CSF will revive the visa project)

- Limiting climate change and protecting right to a healthy environment
- Facilitating free, enabling environment for civil society
- Promoting adherence to Council of Europe standards

CSF advocacy will also include solidarity with organisations and activists in peril, described in SA 4.

Midway through this strategic period, this list of topics will be reassessed and updated.

2. CSF will work to build bridges between EU and Russian societies through communication and education (impacts SG 1)

CSF recognises the need to involve broad societies, including general public, from Russia and the EU in dialogue and people-to-people exchange, so they can learn about each other, and build a common understanding of values and challenges.

With this in mind, CSF will promote the positive manifestations of EU civil society in Russia, and Russian civil society in Europe, and facilitate projects and exchanges where people from Russia and EU can meet, talk and get to know each other.

CSF will **actively pursue opportunities to work inside Russia** by contributing to projects, events, networking with local civil society.

3. CSF will network EU and Russian civil society with the aim of undertaking joint actions. (impacts SG 2)

a) *CSF will work to draw in relevant new civil society partners/ communities from EU and Russia.*

CSF will **define who potential new civil society partners/ communities are** and what makes them/ their contribution relevant to the Forum and **establish the topics appealing** to both parties' interests.

In the EU, CSF will present and promote Russian experience in selected areas as relevant to EU organisations, and **establish links with topical EU civil society platforms** to gain access to broader group of organisations.

Both in Russia and in the EU, CSF will reach out to the present-day **active civil society** from Russia (considering the civil society circles to include not just NGOs but informal movements, activists, think tanks, etc.).

To ensure continuing relevance and value contribution, CSF will **develop a model of rotating and bringing in new participants of CSF events/ activities in a relevant share**. For CSF member organisations, this will be based on their being active within CSF framework and the CSF developing mechanisms to fund participation based on the level of activity and its outcomes.

b) *CSF will continue to develop space for networking and cooperation for civil society from the EU and Russia.*

CSF will organise events and projects, where civil society communities might become involved and network. **It will also further develop the system of smaller, focused platforms of**

cooperation, both through already existing and new mechanisms: working groups, conferences, task forces and others.

Beside physical meetings, CSF will expand the use of new technologies and pioneer **new, electronic formats of networking and cooperation** (webinars, e-conferences, e-voting, other e-solutions).

CSF will improve communication and cooperation through its website, including the establishment of database of who is doing what among CSF participants and partners, and of experts and trainers from these organisations.

c) *CSF will continue developing a clear and transparent system of support and sub-granting for joint EU-Russia civil society projects/ activities.*

Forum would seek to add new competitive mechanisms/ calls for applications to its existing models of regranting/ support.

4. CSF will support and actively express solidarity with organisations and activists in peril (impacts SG 2)

CSF recognises that civil society organisations and activists suffer unjust persecution for their actions and expressed views and will continue to express solidarity with them.

With that aim, CSF will continue to support member organisations and activists in peril through advocacy and public campaigns. This will include: direct advocacy with international institutions and decision makers (in correlation with SA1), mobilising public support (public actions, media work, campaign materials) and issuing statements ‘in defense’.

CSF will also **further develop trial monitoring** to become a full-fledged institutional programme.

CSF understands that in certain cases expressions of solidarity can negatively affect the victims, and, therefore, it will base support on stated need of such organisations and activists and assess the situation case by case to minimise harm.

5. CSF will develop capacity of its members to become more effective, resilient and independent (impacts SG 3)

CSF recognises the need to develop the competence of members. Therefore, it will develop and provide trainings, organise **a system of mutual help and advice among members, and/ or provide targeted expert advice.**

CSF will increasingly use new technology (e-learning tools) to facilitate the capacity development.

While continuing to provide information about funding opportunities and platform for donors’ interaction, CSF will support members in learning to diversify sources of income **and build sustainable organisational models.** To this end, CSF will research existing models and alternative sources of funding and share the best practices.

CSF will also work to **increase the digital security capacity of members** by building partnerships with expert groups and organisations working on using new technology for civil society security. Resources

and knowledge obtained on this topic will be made available; digital security advice will be easily accessible on CSF website through blog posts, short videos, e-courses, etc.

Organisational Development of the Forum

Organisational development of the Forum is geared towards growing the Forum's capacity as an international institution influencing the EU-Russia civil society and the global civil society agenda.

Current organisational model allows CSF to double its budget over the next five years. Strategically, CSF aims at strengthening its development efforts while retaining operational flexibility in programming within the new cycle of development.

Membership-wise, CSF will not seek growth in numbers at all cost, but strive to increase quality of engagement of current and future member organisations.

In order to effectively and efficiently achieve goals and implement the strategic actions, CSF will:

- a) diversify sources of income and aim to build a sustainable organisational model, as well as build financial reserves. To achieve that, commercial activity, services, membership fees and pursuing different, including non-traditional, types of donors and other solutions will be considered.
- b) Stimulate participation of member organisations in taking responsibility for implementation of parts of the Forum's programmes; growth of the Secretariat will be limited and ways for insourcing will be developed (seeking more involvement of member organisations in implementation of actions). This will be based on developing a fair selection process of such member organisations.

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