



EU-RUSSIA CIVIL SOCIETY FORUM ГРАЖДАНСКИЙ ФОРУМ ЕС-РОССИЯ

Do Not Leave Russians Behind! The Alarming Situation of Independent Civil Society Actors and Media Outlets Inside of Russia **Statement by the Board of the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum**

More than one month into the war in Ukraine, the devastating situation of Russian civil society and independent media has been even further deteriorated. They are experiencing persecution and censorship, which can only be equalled to those under martial law conditions.

The Board of the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum calls for all diplomatic ways to be used to end the Russian aggression and to restore peace in Ukraine and Europe. The humanitarian catastrophe in Ukraine with the siege of Mariupol as the most prominent example needs an immediate reaction, including scaling up humanitarian aid and corridors for civilians in Ukraine, as well as all kinds of support to refugees fleeing the war.

Simultaneously, we confirm our support for Russian civil society, and we would like to alert the international community about the alarming events inside of Russia that have been underreported these days.

Since 24 February 2022, the start of the so-called “special military operation” in Ukraine, over 15,000 people have been detained at anti-war protests across Russia¹. In multiple regions, any public expression concerning the war in Ukraine, regardless of whether the person is for or against the actions of Russian authorities, is prohibited. COVID-19 restrictions are frequently used as an argument, despite the fact that they have already been lifted in many of these regions.

A new bunch of repressive legislative bills has been rapidly signed into law, including one on discreditation of the armed forces of the Russian Federation². Now anyone who spreads information opposing the official point of view of the Russian military, might get a fine between 50,000 and 500,000 roubles (between around 500 and 5,000 euros) or up to 5 years in prison in case of a repeated violation of the legislation. This applies to any anti-war rhetoric, including calling the war ‘war’ instead of ‘special military operation.’

Moreover, any ‘fakes,’ a term largely left undefined, about the Russian armed forces being spread in public might lead to a fine between 700,000 and 5,000,000 roubles (7,000-50,000 euros) and up to 15 years in prison³. This new article in the Russian Criminal Code has already led to a massive attack on independent Russian media outlets and websites of civil society organisations.

According to data provided by the NGO “Roskomsvoboda”, 811 websites and IP addresses have been blocked in one month⁴, including such prominent ones as “Bumaga”, “Caucasian Knot”, “Current Time”, “Euronews”, “Meduza”, TV Rain, etc. Some media outlets, like the Radio Station “Echo of Moscow”, have been shut down. Many journalists and dozens of civil society organisations decided to relocate their services outside of Russia. Even those who initially agreed to work under restrictive

¹ See the current count at <https://ovdinfo.org> (in Russian)

² See e.g. www.hrw.org/news/2022/03/07/russia-criminalizes-independent-war-reporting-anti-war-protests

³ See e.g. www.amnesty.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/EUR4653452022ENGLISH.pdf

⁴ See the latest report by the NGO “Agora” at https://drive.google.com/file/d/1vCb_QdGscBkLUtYQpNxl5Q711XNisbnr/view (in Russian)

conditions – for the sake of granting access to alternative information – could not continue to operate normally. The latest case is that of “Novaya Gazeta”⁵, whose editor-in-chief, Dmitri Muratov, won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2021. On 28 March 2022, “Novaya Gazeta” announced suspension of release of any further publications ‘until the end of the “special operation in Ukraine”.’

The Russian authorities are moving fast towards a so-called ‘sovereign Internet.’ Not only are many VPN services, also due to the recent sanctions, unavailable in Russia, major social networks, including Facebook and Instagram, have been blocked in Russia on the grounds of alleged ‘extremist’ activities⁶.

On top of that, Russia has been withdrawing or excluded from international institutions and conventions, including the Council of Europe⁷. This might also add to Russia’s drifting further away from any rule of law norms and limiting the means human rights defenders have at their disposal.

The Board of the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum firmly believes that anti-war initiatives and actions of Russian civil society, which still attract millions of people⁸, should not be neglected. We call on the European Union and EU member states to stand by the fifth Guiding Principle of the EU’s Russia Policy – supporting people-to-people contacts. All anti-war voices and independent media outlets, inside and outside of Russia, should be able to count on our firm support.

While we have been experiencing a massive exodus of Russian citizens, also representatives of independent civil society and media outlets, – for many of them, the only way to continue their work, we expect the establishment of a fast-track procedure for humanitarian visas for them and their family members, relocation assistance and, prospectively, the introduction of a comprehensive framework for the EU human rights visa. No civil society activist from Russia shall be left alone, and every person at risk of persecution, who had to leave the country, shall count on our solidarity and support.

1 April 2022

Contacts:

Nina Berezner, Board Member of the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum/ DestinationEst (Paris, France), nina.berezner@gmail.com

Elena Shakhova, Board Member of the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum/ Citizens’ Watch (St. Petersburg, Russia), evshakhova@gmail.com

The **EU-Russia Civil Society Forum** was established in 2011 by non-governmental organisations as a permanent common platform. At the moment, 185 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.

⁵ See e.g. www.euractiv.com/section/digital/news/russian-independent-newspaper-novaya-gazeta-suspends-publication

⁶ See e.g. www.euronews.com/next/2022/03/21/ukraine-war-facebook-temporarily-allows-posts-calling-for-violence-against-russians-or-put

⁷ See www.coe.int/en/web/portal/-/the-russian-federation-is-excluded-from-the-council-of-europe

⁸ See e.g. the petition started by the prominent human rights defender Lev Ponomarev at <https://www.change.org/p/%D0%BE%D1%81%D1%82%D0%B0%D0%BD%D0%BE%D0%B2%D0%B8%D1%82%D1%8C-%D0%B2%D0%BE%D0%B9%D0%BD%D1%83-%D1%81-%D1%83%D0%BA%D1%80%D0%B0%D0%B8%D0%BD%D0%BE%D0%B9-2ce0a2d7-b957-4e23-981a-c67a26e2b0b7> and an aggregator of anti-war petitions at <https://voiny.net> (both links in Russian)