

# EU-RUSSIA CIVIL SOCIETY FORUM ГРАЖДАНСКИЙ ФОРУМ ЕС-РОССИЯ

## **Appeal to the European Commission on policies relating to civil society in Russia and in the European Union**

**28 October 2014**

Your Excellency Mr Jean-Claude Juncker, President-elect of the European Commission,

Dear Members of the European Commission,

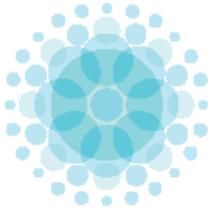
The Steering Committee of the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum congratulates you on your appointment as members of the European Commission. On this occasion, we want to address you on several issues of great relevance to civil society in Russia and in the European Union and ask for a number of concrete steps. For ease of reference, our conclusions and proposals are included in separate sentences in italic letters.

Developing Europe as a continent, in which the European Union and Russia peacefully and productively cooperate and both adhere to jointly agreed standards, should have a central place in the policies of the European Union. We refer in particular to standards developed by the Council of Europe and the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe. Human rights and rule of law need great attention in the internal policies of the European Union as well as in its relations with Russia.

More generally, tremendous efforts are needed to move Europe and the world towards a just and sustainable economic, social, and environmental model.

### Relations with Russia

The continuing steps of the Russian government to suppress and stigmatise civil society activities, which it sees as critical towards its policies, are clearly in breach of international and European standards. These steps have hit hard a large number of Russian NGOs, including member organisations of our Forum, through paralysing inspections, long and time-consuming court cases, and government actions to put a derogatory label of “foreign agents” on them. Several of our member organisations have closed down to avoid being convicted in court. The scope of activities of many organisations has diminished. Along with freedom of association, a range of other fundamental rights and freedoms has been under assault in Russia lately, including freedom of peaceful assembly and freedom of expression.



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*We urge the European Union to continue pushing for full implementation of international standards by the Russian Federation.*

In light of the assault on fundamental rights and freedoms in Russia, increasing pressure on civil society and growing anti-Western propaganda in the government-controlled media promoting “traditional values” as an alternative to universal human rights, the role of civil society in the promotion of rule of law, international human rights norms and democratic values becomes even more crucial in Russia. Therefore, European Union support for the promotion of these values and standards in the Russian society should be enhanced. Urgent steps are required to redress the limitations in the existing funding schemes (EIDHR and Support to Non-State Actors). The current level of EU support to civil society in Russia appears to us inadequate, compared to such support to civil society in other countries of the post-Soviet region and especially in the context of challenges faced by the Russian society and the influence Russia has on the whole region.

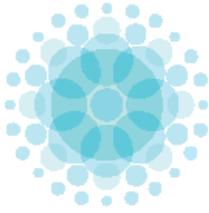
*Given the increasing importance of civil society’s role in promotion of rule of law, international human rights norms and democratic values in Russia and departure of a number of international donors from this country, the current level of EU funding for Russian civil society is not adequate to the needs: an increase of funding from today € 5 million annually to at least € 20 million for Russian human rights, democracy promotion, environmental, anti-corruption, social research, and socially oriented NGOs seems adequate and necessary.*

*Given new legal and political restrictions on foreign funding of NGOs in Russia, the EU should apply flexible and innovative tools of support, including those through partner organisations in Europe.*

The current tensions between Russia and the European Union have been largely caused by the Russian government’s lack of adherence to international and European principles and mechanisms of law and common security in responding to developments in Ukraine by violating that country’s sovereignty and territorial integrity and providing military and material support to armed insurgents. The Russian government should redress these policies. Yet contacts between citizens from the EU and Russia should not suffer from the deteriorated relations. On the contrary, intensification of people-to-people exchanges would contribute to moving Russian society closer to European values and overcoming anti-EU propaganda in the media.

*We request the Commission to stimulate the easing and facilitation of visa procedures for Russian citizens taking part in academic, cultural, or civil society exchanges with the EU countries, including by unilateral steps from the side of the European Union, which would be necessary when signing a new visa facilitation agreement with Russia is not feasible.*

*Academic cooperation should not be suspended but rather extended and expanded, with emphasis on humanities and social sciences. Programmes involving representatives of the EU civil society, think*



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*tanks, academia, and professional bodies in joint events and projects with their counterparts in Russia should be greatly expanded.*

*Development of and funding for such programmes should not depend on achieving formal agreement between the authorities on both sides.*

When it comes to economic relations, these relations should not enhance or contribute to violations of human rights, social, or environmental standards. We are concerned that due diligence is not always exercised, let alone enforced, in economic relations between Russia and the European Union. (A similar remark can, by the way, be made about business relations inside the European Union itself.)

*Steps should be taken to make state of the art standards of corporate social and environmental responsibility the norm and to promote social entrepreneurship. This applies to companies headquartered in the EU in dealings with Russia as well as to Russian companies operating in the EU.*

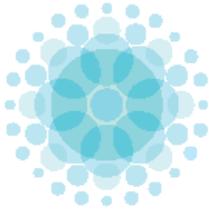
### Internal European Union policies

While space for civil society to independently assess governmental policies and organise for change is under serious threat in Russia, it does not seem to be secure in all European Union countries either. Recent incidents in several countries show how tempting it is for governments to try to use administrative means to harass critical NGOs; in one case, Hungary, even specific steps to take control of foreign funding of NGOs remind of the policies of the Russian Federation. These developments require an unambiguous rebuke.

Critical NGOs are of paramount importance in preserving and stimulating the rule of law, human rights protection, and democracy. The European Union as a community of values needs stronger mechanisms to uphold these standards. The problematic record of a number of EU member states in the implementation of judgments of the European Court of Human Rights shows that the EU cannot just assume that compliance with Council of Europe standards is fully part of each member states' policies.

*Mechanisms should be strengthened to enforce continued compliance of member states with the standards for EU membership (Copenhagen criteria).*

*Moves towards stigmatising and harassing NGOs for their critical positions towards governments and on the grounds of the foreign origins of their funding should meet with a forceful response from EU institutions including the Commission. We are particularly concerned about recent developments in Hungary where an attack against NGOs on the ground of their foreign funding very much resembles the harassment against independent civic organisations in Russia.*



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*Similarly, stopping harassment of independent NGOs for their critical positions towards governments and on the grounds of the foreign origins of their funding should be made a clear condition for countries striving for accession to the EU such as Serbia or Macedonia or those who have signed an association agreement with the EU such as some countries participating in the EU Eastern Partnership.*

Finally, we want to flag the fight for a sustainable environment and against climate change as an issue of overriding importance. A crash programme is needed with a massive improvement in energy efficiency and a transition to non-fossil energy. At the same time, such steps will lead to a less one-sided economic relationship with Russia, which will be beneficial for the economies and societies on both sides. This requires major changes, in which civil society can play an important role both in Russia and in the European Union.

*Large-scale mobilisation of resources and people should be planned for a transition to a non-fossil energy model for the European Union area (and for Europe and the world at large).*

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**The EU-Russia Civil Society Forum** was established in 2011 as a permanent common platform of non-governmental organisations. It aims at cooperation and coordination of at the moment 133 member organisations from Russia and the European Union as well as greater participation of NGOs in the EU-Russia dialogue. It has been actively involved inter alia in the questions of visa regulation, development of social, environmental and human rights standards, dealing with history, and civic participation.

### **EU-RUSSIA CIVIL SOCIETY FORUM / ГРАЖДАНСКИЙ ФОРУМ ЕС-РОССИЯ**

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