



**TO STRENGTHEN PARTNERSHIP AND COOPERATION BETWEEN RUSSIA
AND EUROPEAN UNION BASED ON VALUES OF LAW, DEMOCRACY AND CIVIC
PARTICIPATION**

Statement of EU-Russia Civil Society Forum

Saint Petersburg, 10 October, 2012

We, participants of the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum, are seriously concerned by recent negative trends in the relations between the Russian Federation and the European Union. Visible cooling down of relations between Russia and EU may have long-term consequences, including for civil society on both sides.

The third General Assembly of the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum, taking place in Russia for the first time, reconfirms our commitment to improving the relationship between the EU and Russia, declared at the foundation of the Forum. The goals of the Forum include furthermore promotion of common values, strengthening legal systems and common European institutions, as well as the development of integration of Russia and Europe. In the course of our joint work we have strengthened our understanding that human rights, social justice, rule of law, freedom from discrimination and xenophobia, pluralistic democracy, accountability of the government elected in free and fair elections, environmentally sustainable development and preservation of biodiversity are our common values.

On the one hand, we note long-term positive processes, assisting to the international and European integration of Russia such as Russia's accession to WTO and its acceptance of the trade conflict management mechanisms of this organization, as well as continued participation of Russia in the system of the European Convention on Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms and the European Court of Human Rights. We believe it is very important for Russia to strictly abide by its international obligations in this sphere.

At the same time, we observe a lack of progress on almost all key issues of interaction between EU and Russia including discussion of the new agreement on partnership and cooperation and achieving concrete results on such a very important topic for us as visa liberalisation, increasing differences in foreign policy and global issues as well as accumulation of economic conflicts.

The recent worsening of relations between the Russian Federation and European Union has a number of reasons, many of which are caused by changes occurring in Russia. In particular, we are extremely concerned with increasing pressure of the state on the Russian civil society, including a package of recently adopted laws which limit the space for activity of civil society organizations and violate fundamental freedoms of speech,

assembly and association. In this regard, the law on non-governmental organizations as foreign agents stands out the most, causing serious criticism both in Russia and abroad. Systemic problems in such areas as the rule of law, independence of the judiciary, freedom of the media, the electoral system, a high level of corruption cause legitimate concerns not only among an active segment of the Russian society demanding change but also among European citizens and politicians.

While the magnitude of social and political problems in the EU and Russia is incomparable, we are also worried about certain negative developments in EU member states. Participants of the mass protests against the austerity measures and cuts in the social guarantees often face cruel and disproportional treatment by the police. Intolerance and xenophobia are on the rise. European governments have become less receptive to the voice of civil society in times of economic and financial crisis.

We observe certain confusion on the side of the EU in regards to the processes happening in Russia. There is a lack of understanding on how to further develop dialogue and cooperation with Russia in Brussels and other European capitals. The necessity of maintaining constructive relations with Russia stands in contradiction with the declared commitment to democracy and human rights as a basis of these relations. In the EU there is also disappointment with the pace of Russia's modernization project and the lack of progress towards common values.

While in Russia the level of expertise on the EU and its member states increases, in the European Union as a whole the interest towards the Russian Federation is significantly decreasing, including at the level of awareness in universities, research centres, parliaments, governments and civil society organizations.

In addition to a decreasing interest towards Russia, fewer strategies and ideas are being developed in the EU political circles towards development of cooperation and improving interaction with the Russian Federation. As a result, just at the moment when civic activism significantly increases in Russia, EU programs aimed at supporting civil society in Russia and strengthening bilateral cooperation are not developing. We are concerned by this decrease of interest in the EU to the problems in Russia. Attention to the processes going on in its biggest and the most important neighbour should by definition be the most important foreign policy interest of the European Union.

At the same time, the Russian authorities increasingly overreact to the criticism from the EU in a way that increases the confrontational rhetoric instead of trying to find common ground. This results in worsening of Russia's image and reputation in Europe and decreasing of the level of mutual trust. It seems that Russia is drastically moving away from developing mutually beneficial cooperation with the EU. The EU's painful reaction to the criticism from Russia does not help to develop relations either.

The EU-Russia Civil Society Forum is convinced that the EU and Russia need each other. Objectively, both are interested in cooperation, especially during the times of global economic and political instability. We are convinced that active civil society and cooperation between people should play a key role in a successful development of the European region. Moreover, we believe that the relations between Russia and EU should not be determined only by politicians and diplomats. Therefore, development of

horizontal ties between civil societies of Russia and EU is now especially important. The civil society sector holds a potential to prevent further deterioration of relationships between Russia and the EU because in this sphere it is possible to develop cooperation less affected by the daily political agenda and therefore ensuring positive influence on the official level of relations.