



EU-RUSSIA CIVIL SOCIETY FORUM ГРАЖДАНСКИЙ ФОРУМ ЕС-РОССИЯ

Bring back the Values of the Autumn of 1989

Statement of the Steering Committee of the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum on the 25th Anniversary of the Fall of the Berlin Wall

The fall of the Berlin Wall on 9 November 1989 - the most visible sign of the Cold War times “Iron Curtain” - was a historic event of enormous impact. It became a symbol for people demanding and retrieving their freedom. It was made possible by the democratic movements of millions of citizens in Hungary, Poland, the GDR, and other states in Central and Eastern Europe, who spoke out against repression, monopolised power, failed economics, and state control. It was prompted by the perestroika in the USSR under the General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev and his willingness to end imperialistic claims of the Soviets. Back then in the late 1980s, Gorbachev formulated a new vision for the USSR and Europe: construction of a common European house. It is a house where all nations live together peacefully, in a free and democratic way, conscious of their common history and committed to principles of ‘glasnost’ - or transparency and openness, including transparency of the borders.

Across the globe, Gorbachev enjoys great respect for this leadership in the 1980s. His actions not only led to unification of Europe, but also opened a window of opportunities for Russia and many post-Soviet countries – in the form of participation in common supranational institutions in Europe, adoption of the European Convention on Human Rights and access to the European Court of Human Rights. But by many Soviet citizens these achievements were seen as Gorbachev’s weakness, especially after the call for independence had reached USSR republics and the Soviet Union had fallen apart.

However, the wish for a common European space has united a lot of supporters in Russia and Europe until now. It is also one of the principles underlying the idea of the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum, with its 130 NGOs from 19 countries, and it retains an enormous potential today.

It is truly important to bring the “European house” model back as we observe several European countries deviating from those principles. The spread of xenophobic rhetoric in France, Great Britain, Hungary, Slovakia, the Czech Republic but also in the Netherlands, Germany, and other states endangers European cooperation. In Russia and even in Hungary, whose freedom movement of the 1980s contributed to the democratic progress, limitations of freedoms of assembly, association, and expression as well as repressions against opposition and independent media and non-governmental organisations are growing. In addition, the Russian government demonstratively revives nationalistic rhetoric and imperialistic ambitions towards its neighbours. One of the consequences of these changes is the current war conflict in Ukraine, which created new borders between the states and societies in Europe once again and antagonised people to an extent which seemed impossible already. The unity of Europe that the fall of the Berlin Wall gave way to suffered a heavy blow in 2014.

The anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall reminds us that peaceful coexistence in the European house – European neighbourhood based on respect for human rights and democratic principles - should be the value to build our common future upon. It is a time to think about persisting common problems – as, for instance, poor and at times even inhumane treatment of migrants and refugees in the EU and Russia. Our governments and societies should be reminded that regardless of their citizenship, people have a right to dignity, peace, violence-free environment and self-realisation.

One of the major achievements since 1989 is the development of a diverse and vibrant civil society in almost all the Central and Eastern European countries, and its growing professionalism and cross-border networking. We believe that the freedom of association and support for active citizens working together for public good is an indispensable condition for a future peaceful and productive cooperation in the European neighbourhood. Today, concerted efforts are needed from all of our societies to bring back the values and to resume this work started in 1989.

7 November 2014

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The EU-Russia Civil Society Forum was established in 2011 by non-governmental organisations as a permanent common platform. At the moment 134 NGOs from Russia and the European Union are member 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.

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

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