



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

### **Brexit – Time to Re-Define the European Union**

#### **Statement of the Steering Committee of the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum**

The Steering Committee of the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum sees Brexit as a strong signal to find new solutions for current challenges and to re-define the European Union and national policies of the EU countries.

Respect towards another party, cooperation for mutual benefit, guaranteeing social justice and democracy are at the core of the European Union. Throughout the years, the Union has succeeded in bringing governments and civil societies together in cooperative efforts. The departure of a member state from the EU, if it does finally take place, is a loss to all the parties concerned.

Yet, the Brexit vote is a culmination of a series of other events over the last decade, which showed a growing dissatisfaction about EU policies among its citizens - rejection of the European Constitution in France and the Netherlands, protests against TTIP throughout Europe, and the referendum on the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement, to name only a few of them.

All the warnings mentioned above seem to have been in vain. While EU citizens were steadily expressing their discontent and many suffered increasing economic insecurity, those issues were not sufficiently addressed by the EU and national political institutions. As a result, such public sentiments were misused by populists, who persuaded broad strata of European society to support their views. This leads to the rise of far-right movements, xenophobia, and anti-migrant rhetoric.

The EU should urgently re-define and reform itself by developing its social policies and assisting member states and communities in the reception and integration of migrants. Better and more intelligent ways than referenda can be designed at European level to improve direct participation by citizens in shaping policies. The European Citizens Initiative<sup>1</sup>, a half-hearted effort to allow direct citizens' contributions to European politics, puts many formal and bureaucratic obstacles in the path of initiators and can, in the end, be dismissed too easily on political grounds.

At the same time, national and local politicians in all EU member states and societies should also take responsibility for solving complicated problems. Therefore, the Steering Committee of the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum appeals to all politicians involved in the negotiations between the UK and the EU, as well as into the search for broader solutions, to base their activities and rhetoric on the values of solidarity, respect for human rights, and democracy.

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<sup>1</sup> See <http://ec.europa.eu/citizens-initiative>

To achieve these promising goals, both the EU and its member states should work more closely with Europe-wide civil society at all levels of decision-making, as people-to-people contacts can thrive regardless of political or economic environment. The Steering Committee of the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum expresses its willingness to contribute to this important process<sup>2</sup>.

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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, 159 NGOs from Russia and the European Union are members 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. Since February 2014, the Secretariat of the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum has been based at the German-Russian Exchange in Berlin.

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<sup>2</sup> See also opinions on Brexit by members of the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum, eg, <http://www.solidar.org/Editorial-by-Conny-Reuter-SOLIDAR,2172.html> or <http://www.ecfr.eu/europeanpower/britain>