



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

### **New Moves of the Russian Ministry of Justice to Include Leading NGOs into the List of “Foreign Agents” Endanger Development of the EU-Russia Relations** Statement of the Steering Committee of the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum

New moves of the Ministry of Justice of the Russian Federation to include a group of leading Russian non-governmental organisations into the list of “foreign agents” – along with another series of restrictions in the Russian media field – diminish the possibilities for civil society to counter the decrease in co-operation between the partners and endanger constructive development of the EU-Russia relations at large.

On July 21, 2014, a new group of leading Russian NGOs has been added to the list of “foreign agents”. Two active members of the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum were affected by this move. “Public Verdict” Foundation’s right to defend itself in court has already been repeatedly violated in the course of a protracted trial. Human Rights Centre “Memorial” has had to undergo derogatory judicial procedures in the course of the last year as well. Further NGOs included are “Lawyers for Constitutional Rights and Freedoms”, the Kaliningrad Regional Public Organisation “Ecodefence-Women’s Council”, and the Interregional Association of Human Rights Public Unions “AGORA”. On the same day, the Vasileostrovsky Court in St. Petersburg labeled LGBT organisation “Vykhod” (Coming-Out) as a “foreign agent”, too. As of today, the list contains 11 entries in total; 4 of them are EU-Russia Civil Society Forum members. Apart from the mentioned ones, these are Moscow Member Centre of the National Association for the Protection of Voters’ Rights “Golos” and the Kostroma Centre for Civic Initiatives. Both organisations had already closed down or are in the process of self-closure to avoid criminal prosecution of their leaders for refusal to register as “foreign agents”. Several organisations labeled as “foreign agents” have been playing a crucial role in defending rights of citizens in the course of recent major trials like that on the events on Bolotnaya Square on May 6, 2012.

Meanwhile, moves are taken by the authorities to further step up pressure on independent NGOs. Earlier this month, the Ministry of Justice prepared an amended version of the Law “On Non-Governmental Organisations”, which has been available for the online public discussion at [http://regulation.gov.ru/project/16007.html?point=view\\_project&stage=2&stage\\_id=11012](http://regulation.gov.ru/project/16007.html?point=view_project&stage=2&stage_id=11012). In particular, the formulations for such notions as “foreign agents” and “political activities” became even vaguer, despite multiple addresses from the Russian NGOs and experts to make those clearer. For instance, in the new amendments the fact of receiving money from abroad and not necessarily work for the benefit of the donor should be sufficient for labeling such an NGO as a “foreign agent”, while political activities include not only “political actions targeted at influencing state authorities or public opinion” but also “other actions”.

Besides, the bill foresees that a “foreign agent” must be responsible not only for reporting on its activities on a quarterly basis but also provide information on every programme or document, which has been prepared using funds from abroad, within three days after its confirmation or signing of the financial agreement. According to the bill, any information from public authorities, organisations, and individuals indicating that an NGO may be suspected in being a “foreign agent” may be used as a ground for an extraordinary inspection by the Ministry of Justice.

Finally, the Ministry of Justice proposed amendments to the law on civil service, which would prohibit the officials at all levels – from the federal to the municipal one - to participate in any kind of contacts, meetings, and expert consultations with “foreign agents”.

Taking into account the latest development in the crackdown on independent NGOs in the Russian Federation, these amendments are likely to pass the governmental filter and to be forwarded to the State Duma in autumn, shouldn't an urgent reaction follow.

The Steering Committee of the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum calls on the Ministry of Justice of the Russian Federation and other relevant Russian authorities to stop crackdown on NGOs, substantially revise or, better, repeal the law on “foreign agents”, and engage in genuine dialogue with independent Russian civil society organisations.

We urge the European Union authorities, intergovernmental organisations, and the broad international community to address the violation of fundamental freedoms and the rule of law in the Russian Federation, undertake urgent actions for the improvement of the situation of the civil society organisations in Russia, and closer cooperate with and support the Russian civil society, which is an irreplaceable partner for all the parties in the times of the severe crisis in the EU-Russia relations.

July 23, 2014

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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 126 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.

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