



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

### **International community should urgently provide more humanitarian aid for people in the Donbass region affected by the conflict in Eastern Ukraine**

#### **Statement of the Steering Committee of EU-Russia Civil Society Forum and the NGO “European Exchange”**

This winter puts millions of people affected by the conflict in Eastern Ukraine in an imminent danger of an overwhelming humanitarian crisis. First and foremost, the humanitarian crisis may have a dire impact on lives of the population of the parts of the Donbass Region in Eastern Ukraine which are controlled by insurgents in the self-proclaimed Donetsk and Luhansk republics. The Steering Committee of the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum and the NGO “European Exchange” therefore appeal to the international community and all parties of the conflict to ensure fast and extensive delivery of humanitarian aid to the communities affected by the conflict in the territory of the Donbass Region. This aid should be delivered through politically neutral international organisations and channels which have trust of all parties in the conflict.

In the immediate term, the threat of a deep humanitarian crisis especially concerns the territories controlled by the insurgents in the self-proclaimed Donetsk and Luhansk republics in Eastern Ukraine. This was a common understanding shown in the reports of human rights defenders from Russia, Ukraine, and the EU who have undertaken several monitoring missions to the region since October 2014. Groups such as the Kharkiv Human Rights Protection Group, the Human Rights Centre “Memorial”, the Civic Assistance Committee, and Human Rights Watch presented their observations from the monitoring missions on 16 December 2014 in the German Bundestag (Berlin) at the round table co-organised by the “European Exchange” and the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum.

Human rights defenders have documented suffering of the affected population from starvation, mostly in smaller towns and villages, which are located next to the frontline and cannot be supplied due to the difficult security situation. The crisis is to worsen in the winter time: in many cities and settlements there is no regular supply of electricity, heating, food, and medicines. Civilians continue to die and suffer heavy wounds from shelling; infrastructure is severely damaged from shelling.

The pro-Russian armed separatists on these territories have not provided a working administration structure. Unstable public order, the lack of basic public services, and the suspension of state transfers by the government of Ukraine to pensioners and other socially vulnerable groups have put

many more lives at risk, especially of people with special needs and persons confined in specialised closed institutions. The situation within the East Ukrainian territories controlled by the government of Ukraine is better, since international and Ukrainian charities are already active there.

Situation of hundreds of thousands of internally displaced persons who have fled the conflict zone to other regions of Ukraine as well as to the Russian Federation and other countries is also a matter of serious concern. A Ukrainian law on assistance to internally displaced persons adopted in November 2014 is a step in the right direction. However, it lacks implementation mechanisms. Difficult situation of hundreds of thousands of IDPs across Ukraine requires effective implementation of the new law without further delay.

Observers criticise relatively weak presence of international humanitarian organisations in the Donbass Region. Security is usually cited as the main obstacle to a stronger humanitarian engagement, as the armed fighting in the region persists. However, the current situation in Eastern Ukraine is not unique compared to other war-inflicted regions of the world, where the civilian population also suffers from the armed fighting and the security situation is dire but where international humanitarian organisations work extensively.

International humanitarian aid should be provided through close cooperation with local, national and international civil society organisations. It is crucial that humanitarian aid is delivered in a politically neutral way neither undermining Ukraine's territorial integrity nor serving political interests of individual parties of the conflict. By no means should humanitarian aid be used to conceal supplies of arms to the parties of the conflict.

International organisations planning to start working in Eastern Ukraine should rely on the experience of the East European humanitarian and refugee assistance organisations and local civil society groups in order to quickly adapt their support strategies to the local conditions and needs.

The international community, including intergovernmental organisations, governments, and civil society actors, should act on the humanitarian situation in Eastern Ukraine without delay and with full understanding of the urgency of the situation.

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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 140 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.