



EU-RUSSIA CIVIL SOCIETY FORUM ГРАЖДАНСКИЙ ФОРУМ ЕС-РОССИЯ

The European Union Should Remain Free of Authoritarianism Statement of the Steering Committee of the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum

On the day of President Vladimir Putin's visit to Budapest, the Steering Committee of the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum reiterates¹ its serious concerns about shrinking space for fundamental rights and freedoms in Hungary and continued pressure exerted on Hungarian civil society organisations. Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán will host President Putin on 17 February 2015 to discuss bilateral, geopolitical, and energy issues.

The Steering Committee of the EU-Russia-Civil Society Forum urges the governments of Hungary and Russia to stop the pressure on civil society and freedom of expression and provide equal opportunities to unhindered participation of citizens in the development of their countries. Moreover, we call on relevant European Union authorities and the international community to react to these disturbing developments within and beyond the EU and to more actively contribute to ensuring a safe environment for civic engagement in Europe.

Controversial legislative and policy measures taken by Hungarian government in the last several years demonstrate evolution of the political system in this European Union member state towards "illiberal democracy". It includes tightened control of the media, restrictive amendments of electoral legislation, and increasing administrative pressure on independent non-governmental organisations. In 2011, a controversial media law adopted by the Hungarian Parliament was later amended only after strongest criticism by the European Union. Nevertheless, a number of further steps by the government, including attempts to shut down independent channels like Klubrádió, dismissals of Gergő Sálings, editor-in-chief of "Origo", the most popular Internet portal in Hungary, and other journalists from its editorial office, or discredit to "Átlátszó", a prominent NGO running an investigative journalism news portal, and of the Roma Press Center are all clear signals of a serious threat to the media freedom in Hungary.

Similarities between Russian government's measures restricting freedoms of association and expression with the latest developments in Hungary are alarming. The crackdown on Hungarian NGOs, including adoption of a list of "problematic civic organisations", unannounced financial inspections of NGOs, and the hostile rhetoric by government officials attacking NGOs undoubtedly remind of the pressure experienced by Russian civil society organisations. Unacceptable accusations of Hungarian grant-making NGOs, such as Autonómia, DemNet, Kárpátok, and Ökotárs, in receiving foreign funding for the so-called "oppositional activities" and suspension of the tax numbers of these organisations constitute a systemic violation of freedom of association.

¹ See Statement of the Steering Committee "The Pressure on NGOs in Hungary Undermines the Rule of Law in the European Union" from 16 September 2014, <http://eu-russia-csf.org/fileadmin/Statements/StatementHungary15.09.2014.pdf>

The case of Ökotárs, the largest Hungarian foundation, and its partners mentioned above is emblematic. Ökotárs manages distribution of grants from Norway's Civil Fund in Hungary, aimed at supporting civil society projects of local NGOs. In September 2014, the Hungarian National Investigation Bureau conducted an inspection at the Ökotárs' offices, its partner organisations, and the private home of its head. On 23 January 2015, the Central Buda District Court ruled that the police raid at Ökotárs was unlawful.

Hostile rhetoric against NGOs, negative “labeling” of civil society groups and spreading of aggressive investigations into their legitimate and lawful activities endanger democracy and fundamental freedoms in Hungary. Moreover, we are worried that these repressive practices copy-pasted from Russia may find their way into other European countries, including EU member states. In particular, we are very concerned by several cases of defaming NGOs, critical of the government in Bulgaria. To our great alarm, governments of other countries in larger Europe beyond the EU and Russia, such as Serbia, Belarus, Azerbaijan, and Georgia, have been also increasing pressure on civil society.

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The EU-Russia Civil Society Forum was established in 2011 by non-governmental organisations as a permanent common platform of dialogue and cooperation. At the moment, 145 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, working with historical past, and civic education.

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

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