



**Statement of the Steering Committee of the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum
On the adoption of legislation restricting freedom of assembly in Russia**

We are deeply concerned about adoption of amendments to legislation regulating the right to holding demonstrations in Russia. Approved in haste, the changes unreasonably restrict the fundamental right of freedom of peaceful assembly and introduce disproportionate and clearly excessive fines for minor offences. Provisions of the law do not correspond with the Russian Constitution, international obligations of the Russian Federation and contradict the principles of fairness and common sense. They distort the balance between individual rights and public interests and are formulated in such a way that gives broad grounds for abuse by executive and judicial authorities. Instead of bringing Russian legislation in line with international standards as recommended by the Council of Europe's Venice Commission just two months ago, Russian authorities have made a step in a different direction and have toughened the legal norms.

The haste with which the new law concerning realisation of constitutional rights has been adopted is striking, as well as the refusal to hold any public discussion of the draft amendments, especially taking into account the negative reaction of a significant part of Russian society. Allegations and evidence of vote rigging during recent elections in Russia brought hundreds of thousands of citizens to the streets across the country to peacefully express their opinions over the past six months. This has been an unprecedented show of ever greater vigour of Russia's civil society. In this situation the government should make sure the voice of the people is heard.

It is not true that these amendments bring Russian law in line with a common European practice, quite on the contrary. It is a common European practice that citizens challenging the government are guaranteed their constitutional right to express their views publicly and protest without hindrance from the authorities. The law in Europe is designed to protect these citizens' rights, not restrain them. Certain dubious provisions in laws in some countries can be found across the vastly diverse European continent, but these are exceptions worth rectifying, not accepting as the rule.

The Russian police treatment of peaceful demonstrations has been increasingly harsh. There is a serious risk that this attitude coupled with the new amendments will provoke radicalization of the protest movement. If this occurs, responsibility for possible escalation of civic conflicts will rest with the Russian government.

It is the role of governments to guarantee constitutional rights and listen to citizens, not to shut them up.

Moscow, Brussels, Berlin, Prague, Nizhny Novgorod, Warsaw, Helsinki, Voronezh

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