

THE RUSSIAN NGOs' POSITION ON THE EU-RUSSIA CIVIL SOCIETY FORUM¹

1. What is the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum?

The establishment of a EU-Russia Civil Society Forum should respond to a need expressed over the recent months by many European and Russian actors to strengthen the engagement between civil society groups in EU and Russia and to increase their joint impact on the political dialogue at the government level.² The Forum should serve as a venue to facilitate interactions between civil society institutions in the EU and Russia and could be used as a platform to develop a joint agenda, to agree and publicize the civil society's positions on pressing issues of social and political development, and also to support networking, exchanges, and implementation of joint initiatives and projects.

The forum should not be conceived as an institution; instead, it should be implemented as a longstanding mechanism, a framework for enhanced cooperation, an informal "meeting place" for joint action, and in the future, perhaps, a civil society mouthpiece of the united Europe.

2. Objectives of the Forum

The Forum may have **two parallel objectives**:

- 1) **Strengthen the civil society's influence on the EU-Russia political dialogue** and on a wide range of the EU-Russia intergovernmental interactions to increase visibility and impact of civil society's opinions, views and positions and to make sure that much more importance is given in this dialogue to human rights, rule of law and democracy, so that they are considered at least as important as the economy, trade and security issues. We believe that interactions between the EU and Russia should not be delegated entirely to the governments, but should also be the concern of societies. It may be expressed through joint positions adopted by civil society institutions in this new Forum and communicated to the broader public, governments and intergovernmental institutions. Such efforts have already been and continue to be undertaken by a relatively small number of civil society organizations, mostly by human rights groups. The Forum will strengthen these efforts by making the civil society voices better heard and perhaps by creating mechanisms whereby governments will be obligated to hear the positions, recommendations and demands of civil society organizations.

One important area of focus for the Forum should be the role of civil society in the EU-Russia negotiations on a new Partnership and Cooperation Agreement to update and replace the existing agreement signed in mid-1990s. It is our position that the EU-Russia relations should be based on the principles outlined in the Final Act of the 1975 Helsinki Conference – namely, the equality and interdependence of the "baskets" of economic cooperation, security and human rights/democracy. To achieve this, civil society institutions will perhaps need not only to influence the agenda and content of the current intergovernmental

¹ This position has emerged from Russian NGOs' consideration of proposals by our colleagues from the EU countries, internal discussions among Russian NGOs, our meetings with international colleagues and public debates held between April and June 2010. This position has been elaborated by the following Russian NGOs: the Center for the Development of Democracy and Human Rights; the International Youth Human Rights Movement; the Memorial Human Rights Center; the SOVA Center for Information and Analysis, the Human Rights Institute, the A. Sakharov Public Center and Museum; the Public Verdict Foundation; and the Social Partnership Foundation.

² See, in particular, *For a New Start in Civil Society Cooperation with Russia*, a position paper prepared by German NGOs Deutsch-Russischer Austausch (German-Russian Exchange) and Europäischer Austausch (European Exchange) and signed by a number of organizations in the EU countries, http://www.austausch.org/fileadmin/user_upload/pdf/EU-Russia-Position_Paper-2010.04.27..pdf

negotiations, but also to engage in a complex and lengthy process of updating the principles of the Helsinki Final Act to align them with today's realities. But even before this process begins, what we can do today, including through the Forum, is to influence the content and modalities of new EU-Russia "partnership for modernization" framework to insist that it provides a meaningful place for the rule of law and democracy and recognizes the role of civil society.

It will be the Forum's first line of activity driven from the bottom up to strengthen the civil society's influence on governments. However, the Civil Society Forum should be nonpartisan and avoid being a substitute to the engagement of political parties and movements at the European level.

Based on our prior experience and consistent with a pluralistic and horizontal nature of civil society, we find it appropriate that public statements or recommendations should be adopted and signed on behalf of individual organizations - members of the Forum, rather than on behalf of the "entire Forum"; however, such statements would indicate that they are signed by members of the Forum or adopted by a meeting of the Forum participants.

- 2) **Increased interaction between civil society institutions and broader societies across borders.** This second area of the Forum activity is designed to step up the horizontal process. There is not enough horizontal interaction between the EU and Russian societies. There are too few joint non-governmental projects and community-level initiatives, few joint common cultural projects, few broad-based discussions across borders, not enough professional, student, personal and other exchanges. Societies moving toward each other at the horizontal level will facilitate convergence of Europe and Russia, promote real rather than rhetorical consolidation of shared values, help Russia's integration into Europe, create a shared public space and support future establishment of a common European political, economic, cultural and social space. It would be beneficial to share the experience of civic participation at various levels and to step up cooperation around common interests based on domestic and international experience.

We are seriously concerned, however, that the existence of two parallel structures - the EU Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum (including, since late 2009, civil society institutions from the EU and Russia's western and southern neighbours - Belarus, Ukraine, Moldova, Azerbaijan, Georgia and Armenia) and the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum - may perpetuate the dividing lines in Europe and push NGOs towards modeling their interactions on the governments and governmental institutions, so that they avoid crossing the borderlines that divide the people and rely on geographically determined EU funding and support instruments. Under this arrangement, not only would civic institutions of the two major regions be artificially divided, but the entire civil societies of countries outside the EU, the Eastern Partnership or Russia - such as the Balkan countries and Switzerland - and NGOs of self-proclaimed unrecognized state entities would be excluded from the process. We are categorically against it since we are committed to a European civil society across borders and our vision includes progress towards a broader, united Europe. We - and our societies - did not fight for the fall of the Iron Curtain and the Wall twenty years ago just to accept new dividing barriers being created. It is important from the start to provide an interface between the EU-Russia Forum and the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum (preliminary agreement has been reached on exchange of observers) and ways to include NGOs from other countries and entities.

We can also see **additional objectives** for the Forum to address:

- 1) The very existence of the Forum and its demonstrated impact may **enhance the legitimacy of NGOs and their international cooperation in the eyes of governments** and contribute to better protection of civil society organizations and activists from pressure and persecution.
- 2) The Forum may encourage governments to adopt long-overdue steps **towards a simplified visa regime and eventually towards complete abolition of visas**. Such steps may include, for example, massive

simplification of visa requirements and free visas for members of NGOs and for an increasing range of different categories of people; a simplified procedure for the issuance of long-term multiple-entry visas, and advocacy for the adoption of EU-Russia "roadmap" towards full abolition of visas instead of just talking about it.

- 3) The Forum could also **contribute to the design and implementation of financial instruments used by EU to support civil society initiatives** and joint NGO projects. The current dissatisfaction with the existing mechanisms is well known, despite the EU's serious attempts to reform them. We believe that such instruments should be made more accessible, transparent, flexible, with smaller amounts available for individual projects, but substantially larger total allocations. Given the increasing role of civil society in Russia's development and the growing cooperation between civil society institutions in the EU and Russia, the funds allocated today are clearly not sufficient. If new joint projects are conceived as a result of the Forum, their implementation may be impossible due to lack of resources.

One possible approach to more efficient project funding could be to delegate competitive distribution of funds to an independent operator to increase transparency, reduce costs and avoid dependence (or perceived dependence) on government. The experience of delegating the distribution of funds to an independent operator already exists: for example, a successful grant scheme to support joint projects between UK and Russian NGOs was financed by the UK DFID and administered by CAF as an independent operator, earning highly positive feedback from NGOs.

3. Operating Principles of the Forum

- 1) **The establishment and activities of the Forum should be initiated "from the bottom up" by civil society institutions** and by active and concerned citizens, rather than "from the top down" (by any government). It is essential to avoid bureaucratic imitation of effort, such as meetings for the sake of meetings and formalistic activities allowing bureaucrats or grant recipients to report that their "engagement with civil society has been taken to a new level." Accordingly, the Forum's secretariat (should it be necessary) should not be based in either European or Russian government structures. It would not be appropriate to push for the creation (and presentation) of the Forum before a number of active and interested NGOs agree on its objectives, principles and format.
- 2) **Criteria and mechanisms of participation should be as transparent, clear and justified as possible.** Decisions should be taken collectively by an authorized group. There should be awareness of a real danger that government-controlled GONGOs may try to become part of the Forum.
- 3) **Coordination should be exercised by a collective body** (Steering Committee?) including representatives of NGOs from several countries with experience, skills and interest in international cooperation and trusted by NGOs in their countries. Procedures underlying the establishment of this body and the nomination (as well as rotation and removal) of its members require further discussion. **The Forum secretariat should consist of hired employees** who do not have authority to make substantive decisions and carry out the decisions of the coordinating body.
- 4) **The Forum participants should be able to interact directly and regularly with officials from the EU and Russia** and present their proposals and recommendations directly to such officials. Possible forms of their interaction with the authorities may include the following: representatives delegated by the Forum may meet with officials, attend official meetings between the EU and Russia as observers (this possibility has been agreed for the EU Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum), or government representatives from the EU and Russia may attend special sessions of the Civil Society Forum and hear recommendations and positions of the Forum participants. Governments may appoint permanent representatives to interface with the Civil Society Forum.

- 5) **The Forum's activity should not be limited to meeting once a year; instead, there should be a multitude of parallel interactions in interest-based/thematic working groups.** The larger a meeting the more difficult it is to have an open discussion, to exchange views, to achieve practical results and to agree on shared positions.
- 6) **It is important to broaden the interactions and participation in the Forum by involving, in addition to organizations that traditionally cooperate successfully,** such as human rights groups, other types of organizations with social, environmental, cultural and other causes and expand the number of participants from those EU countries that do not have an extensive history of cooperation with Russia.

Forms of Activity in the Forum

- 1) General conferences (once a year?);
- 2) Meetings of the Steering Committee (including online virtual meetings and getting together a day before the annual general conference and immediately after the conference to take stock);
- 3) Continuous interaction in thematic working groups in between annual conferences with a possibility of convening smaller focused meetings (e.g. on the freedom of assembly, "upgrade" of the Helsinki principles and efforts to influence the new EU-Russia cooperation agreement, the new media, the NGO law, innovation in social work, integration of immigrants, counteraction to xenophobia and racism, ecology and sustainable development, balance between anti-terrorism and human rights, addressing the historical memory and the shared past, pan-European cultural initiatives, youth exchanges, etc.).
- 4) Adoption of public statements by the Forum members (through virtual as well as physical meetings);
- 5) Meetings with representatives of governments;
- 6) Implementation of joint projects;
- 7) Exchange programs and internships (NGOs, youth, professionals, etc.).

Next Steps

In the near future, we would need to convene a meeting of interested NGOs from 8-10 countries ("Initiative Group to set up the Forum") to discuss the objectives, principles and formats of activity of the Forum. It would be preferable to hold this meeting, for example, in Warsaw, Prague or Berlin, rather than in Moscow or in Brussels. A good time for the meeting would be September. Before and during the meeting we will need to agree on the objectives, principles and formats of the Forum's activity, to adopt and widely publicize a new document describing the Forum, and also to schedule the first large meeting of the Forum at the end of 2010 - beginning of 2011.