



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

17 March 2014

### **Statement of the Steering Committee of EU-Russia Civil Society Forum on the international crisis around the situation in Ukraine**

We are extremely concerned about negative consequences of the actions of the Russian government for human rights of Ukraine's citizens and peaceful transition of this country to democracy as well as for the international law. The independence and sovereignty of one European nation has been trampled upon. Ukraine was invaded by Russian troops who oversaw a quickly stitched-up "referendum" to separate Crimea from Ukraine – both in breach of international law and in defiance of the right of citizens to peacefully decide on any changes in borders.

Legislative procedures are in full progress in the Russian Federation to allow de-facto annexation of Crimea. Alarmingly, international observers of OSCE were blocked from entry to the peninsula with a threat of violence. Foreign and Ukrainian journalists covering the events in Crimea have been repeatedly threatened and blocked from access to buildings, including the polling stations. The reasons given for invasion by the Kremlin ("defence of Russians") do not stand as there have been no verified reports of attacks or threats. Moreover, according to independent monitoring groups, pro-Russian violent provocations have taken place in a number of Ukrainian cities in the East and the South of the country, which can potentially serve as justification for expansion of the invasion.

Equally importantly, actions of the Russian government have a devastating effect on Russia itself. De-facto annexation of Crimea and a threat of a full-scale military invasion into other regions of Ukraine, Russia's outright confrontation with the international community and unprecedented hostile, nationalistic, and imperialistic propaganda in the Russian media justifying these actions have already dealt a major blow to all fundamental freedoms.

This includes, first and foremost, freedom of expression where a number of important remaining independent media have been de-facto destroyed in the last few weeks or blocked from access to their TV or internet audience, and a number of new restrictive laws have been adopted by or introduced to the State Duma. Freedom of peaceful assembly has faced new restrictions when over 1200 participants of protests in the end of February – beginning of March in Moscow were brutally detained by the police and tried in courts for alleged and fabricated violations. Demonstrations in support of peace and Ukraine's sovereignty on the eve of the Crimean referendum were banned in a number of Russian regions.

Freedom of association is fragile as the prospects of further application of the "foreign agents" law depend on the decision of the Constitutional Court due to be announced in early April and a number of leading human rights NGOs await continuation of their trials in mid-April. Independence of the judiciary and the right to a fair trial are under unprecedented pressure, manifested by the flawed trial leading to the delivery of guilty verdicts with real prison terms to the "prisoners of Bolotnaya",

the placing of opposition leader Alexey Navalny under house arrest, conviction of environmental activist Evgeny Vitishko to three years in a colony, the arrest and opening of a criminal case against anti-torture activist Roman Khabarov, the continued politically motivated trial of Mikhail Savva, and rubber-stamping of the guilty verdicts by courts in the cases of hundreds of participants of protest actions in the absence of any evidence of violations. Moreover, recent cases of physical attacks against civic activists by pro-government mobsters in Nizhny Novgorod, Sochi, Samara and Petrozavodsk and instances of activists in Petrozavodsk forcibly taken to forests, heavily beaten and threatened with murder for their activism open a prospect of spreading of dangerous practices of enforced disappearances and torture of activists, similar to what was observed just recently in Ukraine and earlier in Belarus. Clearly, fundamental rights and freedoms are falling victim of international confrontation and the war hysteria.

In fact, many observers believe that a change of the political course inside Russia is likely to be one of the goals of the Russian government's decision to commit aggression into Ukraine and engage in confrontation with the West. Russian authorities seem to have opted not only for departure from the international law and their international obligations but also from what little had remained from democratic institutions and rule of law inside Russia. Worsening economic situation and the growing discontent by the Russian public about corruption, poor governance, abuse by the law enforcement agencies and stagnating economy have apparently made the Russian leadership feel concerned about Maidan in Ukraine becoming an appealing model for the Russian public. What we see these days in Russia is always happening in the time of acute international confrontation and a threat of a war: chauvinistic hysteria, aggressive propaganda and calling critical voices "enemies of the nation". Those who just days ago were considered "an opposition" or a "dissent" are becoming "traitors", in the words of propagandists on television, in the internet, the State Duma and regional parliaments.

Unfortunately, the price that Russia and the Russian people may have to pay for the choice of their leaders is very high. Confrontation with European countries and the entire international community will likely lead to the severance of economic, political and other ties. Economic and social consequences of such self-inflicted isolation of Russia may hit the Russian people hard. Prospects of economic growth are becoming illusory. Even limited achievements in building democratic institutions, rule of law and civil society in Russia may soon be scrapped. Moreover, a threat of a real, full-blown war with Ukraine has not been averted. If it happens, consequences for Russia, Ukraine and Europe will be truly catastrophic.

We call on the Russian government to act with a full sense of responsibility, abandon its aggressive course and fully respect its international obligations.

We call on the international community to take urgent steps to prevent further development of events in a dangerous direction. We believe that the international community, when choosing particular measures in response to actions by the Russian government, should base its steps on the following grounds: it is important to be aware of the difference between Russian citizens and Russian government and choose sanctions in a way that specifically target individuals and institutions responsible for undermining sovereignty of Ukraine and the breach of international law, rather than the Russian public.

We support sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine and hope it will be able to build a peaceful, stable and prosperous European democracy. The role of civil society in the transition period in Ukraine is of key significance, and we are ready to provide our support and assistance to our Ukrainian colleagues.

We stand in solidarity with those Russians who courageously raise their voice against the war and

continue to work in increasingly difficult circumstances for democracy, human rights, rule of law and international cooperation. We are greatly inspired by anti-war actions that are taking place in Russia these days, from large demonstrations with dozens of thousands of participants in Moscow to individual pickets in the Russian provinces.

We believe it is of utmost importance in these challenging circumstances to build a counterbalance of active and democratic-minded citizens across borders against hegemonial conflicts and the threat of war, to stand united for peace, international law and human rights. On our part, we will intensify cooperation between our member organisations and broader civil society in EU and Russia. Equally importantly, we will focus on building closer relations of EU and Russian civil society organisations with partners in Ukraine and the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum. We believe it is of utmost importance that the international community continues to support civil society cooperation and people-to-people contacts, including further facilitation of the visa regime for ordinary people.

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