

For a New Start in Civil Society Cooperation with Russia

- Position paper -

Summary

After a considerable reduction of EU assistance for civil-society structures in Russia in recent years, it is time to re-launch EU-Russian inter-societal cooperation. Several factors contribute to create a “window of opportunity” for a renewed effort to strengthen cooperation with Russia in the fields of rule of law, human rights and democracy building.

Most important elements shaping a more favourable political landscape are:

1. The new dynamic created by the EU's “Eastern Partnership” which calls for symmetrical responses in a new Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) with Russia
2. The political impact of the economic crisis, which has led to growing calls among Russian elites for an “internal modernisation” and new dialogue between state and society
3. President Medvedev's repeated calls for Russia's modernisation underlining an active role for civil society
4. Prospects for a broader “reset” of Russia's relation with the “West”
5. An improved climate for civic engagement in Russia in the wake of revised NGO legislation and President Medvedev's announcements
6. The competence and professionalism of Russia's young, but resilient NGO and civil society sector

Considering the favourable climate for strengthening inter-societal cooperation with Russia, it is vital for this cooperation to be rethought, restructured and made more effective.

Crucial points seem to be the following:

1. A critical reassessment of EU assistance programs for Russian civil society with an aim to shift from an assistance mentality to genuine partnership
2. A substantial increase of EU funding in the ENPI/EIDHR instruments targeted for third sector development in Russia, reflecting the relevance and potential of Russian civil society today
3. Provision of leaner, more transparent and more accessible EU instruments for the Russian civil society actors and their EU partner organisations
4. Creation of a joint EU-Russian Civil Society Forum comparable to the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum
5. Serious efforts for a road-map for a visa-free travel regime between the EU and Russia

Disengaging from Russia?

Almost 20 years after the collapse of the Soviet Union, it is time to take stock of EU engagement in Russia. Many factors have changed on both sides, while EU-Russian relations have become increasingly strained. Very simply put, Russia has become richer and more stable, but also more self-assertive and less oriented towards cooperation with Europe. For its part, the EU has been slow and inflexible to react to the systemic changes in Russia. Disappointed at the limited impact of civil society cooperation with Russia, the EU has responded to Russia's increasingly authoritarian course by consistently cutting its assistance programmes, including those tailored to support the development of rule of law, human rights and civil society in general. Russian civil society actors today have significantly less options for working within EU-supported projects or developing peer-to-peer partnerships with European counterparts than in the 1990s. The low level of funding for civil society actors in no way matches the importance of Russia as the EU's biggest neighbour, nor does it pay tribute to the renewed importance of Russian civil society for the modernisation agenda of the current Russian leadership.

A Window of Opportunity

Over the past 18 months, a series of political factors have converged to create a "window of opportunity" which calls for renewed efforts to boost civil society relations between the EU and Russia. Important changes in Russia and the international environment are shaping a more favourable political landscape in which EU-Russian cooperation in the fields of rule of law, human rights and democracy assumes new importance:

1. The "Eastern Partnership" – a new driving force. The EU's new "Eastern Partnership (EaP)", notably the "Civil Society Forum" launched in November 2009, creates a new dynamic emphasizing the importance of the post-Soviet region for the EU. Although Russia is not a part of the EaP, it is openly invited to cooperate on a project level. To avoid an increasing asymmetry between the EU relations with Russia and its other Eastern European neighbours, the EU should speed up negotiations to conclude a new Partnership and Cooperation agreement (PCA) with Russia including a similarly strong and explicit focus on civil society cooperation.
2. The political impact of the global economic crisis: The crisis, which has hit Russia worse than many other countries, has exposed numerous economic and social problems which remain unsolved, and have partly grown worse under the present "power vertical" (backward economy based on raw materials, inefficient governance affected by large-scale corruption, demography, health, poverty, infrastructure, etc.). This has initiated a

debate about an “inner modernisation” of Russia, in which the need for a new dialogue between the state and society is seen as a key factor. This critical debate, which started around the Institute for Contemporary Development (INSOR), is gradually expanding to a widening circle of experts, notably among the young liberal economic elites. So far, popular support for the ruling “tandem” remains high, but opinion polls show that this is largely based on a general political apathy and fear of instability. To turn this apathy into civic engagement is the biggest challenge faced by the current Russian leadership. However small the signs of a more pluralistic development are, this “window” opened by a critical reassessment of Russia’s political system creates new chances for inter-societal cooperation.

3. “Go Russia!”: Russia now has a President who consistently highlights the importance of civil society as a vital element for Russia’s modernisation. In a clear departure from increasingly hostile undertones on NGO activities in recent years, the President now labels civil society as “the other face of the state” and sees innovation, entrepreneurship and civic development linked to individual engagement rather than the state policy. In his dramatic appeal, entitled “Go Russia!”, the President recently called on the Russian people to support his modernisation agenda by assuming personal responsibility. The Presidential web-site has received more than 15 thousand opinions and articles in response to the “Go Russia!” article by Medvedev. While experts still question the President’s political will to enforce his agenda, the EU should take his official statements at face value and define ways to respond to their main message – the modernisation of Russia through its own people.
4. A wider international “reset”. A possible restart in EU-Russian relations is also boosted by recent improvements in the broader political climate between Russia and the “West”. On the one hand, the economic crisis has heightened awareness that Russia remains dependent on cooperation with post-industrial economies and investment from abroad. At the same time, the conciliatory “reset” line of the Obama administration has opened prospects for a warming in US-Russian relations. While it is clear that Russia’s basic foreign policy remains unchanged, President Medvedev has openly called for a new “rapprochement and interpenetration” with Russia’s international partners. This is echoed by appeals of PM Putin for renewed Western economic engagement in Russia. At the same time, encouraging new approaches could emerge in US-Russian civil society relations following the “Civil Society Summit” in Moscow in July 2009. The EU must keep abreast of these developments and retain a leading role in this field.

5. Revised NGO legislation: Although political conditions for civil activity remain ambivalent, a series of concrete steps initiated by President Medvedev have a potential to strengthen the work of Russia's NGO sector. Generally, the climate for public activity continues to suffer from a climate of fear and impunity, following a series of spectacular political murders in 2009. On the other hand, there has been a series of encouraging signals initiated by the Russian President. These include the reconstitution of the Presidential "Council for the Development of Civil Society and Human Rights" presided by Ella Pamfilova and made up by many prominent critics of the government, the reinstatement of Vladimir Lukin as the human rights ombudsman and the revision of NGO legislation. Following adoption of a first package of amendments to the NGO law, easing onerous registration, reporting and control regulations, the "Pamfilova council" is now preparing a draft law to improve financial and tax provisions for Russian NGOs while aiming to completely reform Russian NGO legislation by the end of 2010 – new developments the EU must be ready to use.

6. The resilience of Russia's young NGO sector: Having survived an increasingly "uncivil" and hostile climate since 2006, Russia's young, vibrant non-government sector is facing an ambivalent situation. On the one hand, Russian NGOs are today visibly more marginalised than in the 1990s, although less than 10% live on Western assistance. On the other hand, they are threatened by dramatic financial cut-backs in the wake of the economic crisis and withdrawal of many Western donors intimidated by Putin's hostility to Western funding in 2006-2008. At the same time, the economic crisis also opens up new chances for Russian NGOs to prove their "added value" and emerge in a strengthened position. Together with the small new landscape of philanthropic foundations, the 230,000 non-government organisations form a competent "island" of non-state activity which can provide the base for a "third sector" vital for Russia's development. The EU should offer Russia a partnership in preserving and developing this precious treasure.

Recommendations

1. New impulses for EU civil society cooperation with Russia should be based on a conscious “policy shift” in bilateral attitudes: The logic of “help”, “transfer of know-how” and “assistance” of the early 1990s needs to be adapted to the realities of today’s more self-assertive Russia. The existing “assistance” approach should make way to a policy aiming at **genuine partnership** based on mutual interests. New EU strategies must aim at promoting more professional, reciprocal and peer-to-peer agendas with Russian NGO partners.
2. To respond to the new “window of opportunity” for civil society cooperation with Russia, the EU should substantially **increase funding** for third sector development in Russia. Financial means should at least be brought back to the level of the late phase of the TACIS programme. The **ENPI** and the **EIDHR** programmes, as well as potentially new civil society programmes for Russia, must reflect the importance of Russian civil society development for European stability and democratic development. In defining the annual Action Plans for Russia within the ENPI programme, the EU must be flexible on the range of projects proposed, but firm on the NGO nature of the recipients.

Better funding is even more vital for the EIDHR, the EU’s worldwide program for the support of human rights and fundamental freedoms. In 2008, 1,2m € were earmarked for Russia under EIDHR, the same amount as for Croatia or Bosnia-Herzegovina. This does not reflect the importance of human rights in Russia and their relevance for freedom and security in Europe. As a programme independent of official endorsement of national authorities, EIDHR has great potential to provide effective support for Russia’s human and civil rights sector. In view of current developments, Russia should become a priority target in the EIDHR’s upcoming programme planning.

3. After years of streamlining its financial programmes into ever bigger, but increasingly complex and often non-transparent modules, the EU must reverse to provide **smaller, more transparent and more accessible grants** for Russian civil society actors. Administrative regulations and requirements from applicants should be simplified and adapted to the needs and realities of Russian (notably regional) civil society actors. Administrative resources in the EC Delegation in Moscow should be accordingly reinforced. Twinning programs strengthening civil society networks between Russia and EU should be given priority.

4. The EU and Russia should move to create a joint **EU-Russian Civil Society Forum**. As Russia's most important foreign trade partner and a key security interlocutor, the EU needs a platform to discuss and monitor EU-Russia cooperation on a broader, inter-societal level. A joint EU-Russian Forum, bringing together non-state actors is overdue and would - with EU assistance - provide a regular forum for dialogue as well as an institutional framework to coordinate all issues listed above.
5. The negotiations of the new PCA Agreement should open up a clear perspective for improvements in **visa-free travel for non-government actors** between the EU and Russia. The existing visa-facilitation agreement needs to be adapted to strengthen the inclusion of Russian and European NGO representatives. Active participants of inter-societal cooperation, from programme managers to participants of exchange programmes or young volunteers from the civil society networks ultimately ensure the rapprochement between Russia and Europe to which official politics are committed.

Signatures (by March 23, 2010)

- **Association of Local Democracy Agencies** (Antonella Valmorbida) – Brussels
- **Bertelsmann Foundation** (Cornelius Ochmann) - Berlin
- **Coordinator for German-Russian Inter-societal Cooperation**, (Andreas Schockenhoff, MdB) - Foreign Office, Berlin
- **EU-Russia-Centre** (Fraser Cameron) – Brussels
- **European Exchange** (Stefanie Schiffer) - Berlin
- **German Russian Exchange** (Stefan Melle) - Berlin
- **Grupa Zagranica** (Wojciech Tworkowski) - Warsaw
- **Heinrich-Boell-Foundation** (Walter Kaufmann) - Berlin
- **Robert Bosch Foundation** (Otilie Bälz) - Stuttgart
- **Slovak Foreign Policy Association** (Aleksandr Duleba) – Bratislava

The initiators welcome any other organisations, institutions and individuals to sign the paper.

For further information please contact:

Deutsch-Russischer Austausch (German-Russian Exchange), Berlin – www.austausch.org

- Stefan Melle (stefan.melle@austausch.org)

Europäischer Austausch (European Exchange), Berlin – www.european-exchange.org

- Stefanie Schiffer (schiffer@european-exchange.org)