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Restoring dialogue as it drifts away.  
The EU-Russia Civil Society Forum initiative at  
the nadir of EU-Russia dialogue

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## Abstract

The abrupt developments in Ukraine constitute one of the most serious geopolitical crisis in the European continent since the collapse of the Soviet Union. The escalation of confrontations has emphasised the tensioned relationships between the European Union (EU) and the United States (US) with the Russian Federation, since Putin's third presidential term.

While diverging approaches and assertive stances are ditching progresses in the EU-Russia official dialogue, the conflict provokes reactive responses within societies either calling for prompt peaceful resolution or arousing sentiments of hostility, enmity and friction often rooted in old stereotypes. Along with institutional and governmental actors, civil society is called upon to cooperate in endeavours of de-escalation and in promotion of mutual understanding. At the nadir of EU-Russia relations, a case in point is the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum, a bottom-up initiative to which this paper devotes a thorough analysis from its genesis to the consistent potential.

## Keywords

EU-Russia dialogue, EU-Russia relations, Ukrainian Crisis, Civil Society

*\* This paper is updated as of February 2015.*

## The Ukrainian crisis at the forefront of EU-Russia relations

The EU's Eastern Neighbourhood turned out to be the battlefield where Putin's Russia ambivalent attitude contrasts with the EU and the US respective perspectives. After the decision of former Ukrainian President Yanukovich to abandon the Association Agreement with the EU, tens of thousands protested in Maidan Nezalezhnosti in Kyiv (November 2013), paving the way to the formation of a new government with Yanukovich leaving Ukraine.<sup>1</sup> As the scope of protests expanded and the unrest turned deadly in many Ukrainian cities (winter 2013-2014), pro-Russian protesters rallied in Crimea against the new Kyiv administration and demanded independence through a referendum (16 March), which rapidly led to the bloodless annexation of Crimea and Sevastopol to the Russian Federation (21 March 2014).<sup>2</sup> The situation has spiralled into violence in the Donbass region (Eastern Ukraine), where armed groups began to seize buildings (April 2014) and engaged in an ongoing fighting with governmental forces, causing hundreds of thousands of internally displaced people and thousands of casualties, including the 298 people on board of the MH17 Malaysia Airlines flight – which crashed over the conflict-hit region while on route from Amsterdam to Kuala Lumpur on July 17 2014.<sup>3</sup> However, independence was proclaimed in Donetsk and Luhansks referenda (11 May 2014) and separatists' current leaders

<sup>1</sup> OSCE Infographic, OSCE Responds to Crisis in & Around Ukraine.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* BBC News Europe, Ukrainian crisis timeline.

<sup>3</sup> The incident was allegedly caused by a Russian-supplied missile fired by separatists. OSCE Infographic, OSCE Responds to Crisis in & Around Ukraine; International Organisation for Migration, IOM's Assistance to Internally Displaced Persons in Ukraine, Monthly Report, November 2014; International Organisation for Migration, Mission in Ukraine, Maps of IOM's Assistance to Internally Displaced Persons in Ukraine, 22 January 2015; Emerson M., "First Anniversary of the Vilnius Summit Or, How Tolstoy might have portrayed the legacies of Yanukovich and Putin", CEPS Essays, N.18, November 2014, p.1; International Crisis Group, Crisis Watch, No.137, p.18, January 2015; BBC News, MH17 Malaysia plane crash in Ukraine: What we Know, 9 September 2014.

were elected with high turnout at the polls held on 2 November 2014, respectively not recognised and declared illegal by Kyiv and the West.<sup>4</sup> In June 2014 Petro Poroshenko was sworn in as new Ukrainian President and the Verkhovna Rada voted in a new government (2 December 2014) after pro-European parties “scored a resounding victory” in the parliamentary elections (26 October 2014).<sup>5</sup>

With highlights resembling the 2008 Russo-Georgian War, the Ukrainian crisis brought to the fore the Kremlin’s power strategy to assert its interests in the Neighbourhood. The use of soft-power tools to dissuade the neighbours from closer relations with the EU - by leveraging on the large Russian minorities, the shared historical, cultural and linguistic ties - as well as the coercive measures such as trade embargoes, gas price hikes, destabilisation of the East including military forces, alleged backing of Donbass separatists, and the annexation of Crimea.<sup>6</sup> On account of the gravity of the situation in Ukraine, with its tragic consequences on civilian population, and the possible implosion of neighbouring powder kegs, EU and US representatives repeatedly expressed their deep concerns on the conflict escalation. The “covert” war in the Donbass region inflamed international tensions with the EU and the US unanimously condemning Russia’s approach in the crisis.<sup>7</sup> The international endeavours to de-escalate tensions resulted in the Geneva Joint Statement (17 April), pledging full support for OSCE Special Monitoring Mission, the Berlin Declaration of Foreign Ministers (2 July), sending an OSCE Observer Mission to monitor the Ukraine-Russian border, and the Minsk Protocol (5 September) announcing a cease-fire and a security zone.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, clashes, albeit reduced,

4 International Crisis Group, Crisis Watch, N.135, p.17 November 2014.

5 Zinets N., Prentice A., “Ukraine Parliament votes in new government, fresh ceasefire hopes fade”, Reuters, 2 December 2014; OSCE Resources, Ukraine, Early Parliamentary Elections, 26 October 2014: Final Report, 19 December 2014.

6 Tafuro E. “Fatal attraction? Russia’s Soft Power in its Neighbourhood”, FRIDE Policy Brief N.181, May 2014, pp.1-2.

7 Emerson M., “First Anniversary of the Vilnius Summit Or, How Tolstoy might have portrayed the legacies of Yanukovich and Putin”, CEPS Essays, N.18, November 2014, p.1

8 The protocol on the results of consultations of the Trilateral Contact Group was signed in Minsk on 5 September 2014; the security zone is intended to be around the Ukrainian-Russian border. For details see OSCE Resources, Protocol on the results of consultations of the Trilateral Contact Group, 5 September 2014; OSCE Infographic, OSCE Responds to Crisis in & Around Ukraine; BBC News Europe, Ukrainian crisis timeline.

and frequent violations of the truce have been reported in Donetsk and Luhansk regions throughout autumn 2014 and at the beginning of 2015, causing more than one thousand victims and damages to primary infrastructures.<sup>9</sup> As winter is “injecting further uncertainty into an already volatile conflict”, in January 2015 a series of indiscriminate attacks by separatists resulted in over 38 casualties and 100 injured in Donetsk (22 January) and Mariupol (24 January), “accompanied by the announcements of further offensives” by pro-Russian separatists.<sup>10</sup> The relevant breakthrough in the peace process reached in Minsk at the summit of the Normandy Format (12 February 2015), establishing *inter alia* a ceasefire and withdrawal of heavy weapons, called for cautious optimism as it appears fragile and not definitive.<sup>11</sup>

In view of the fact that “Ukraine’s leadership has been replaced democratically in presidential and parliamentary elections”, Ukraine ratified its Association Agreement with the EU (September 16 2014), thus corroborating the landmark choice of signing the political provisions of the treaty (March 21 2014), shortly after the Crimean referendum.<sup>12</sup> As a response to EU sanctions introduced before and

9 International Crisis Group, Crisis Watch, N.135, p.17 November 2014; International Crisis Group, Crisis Watch, No.137, p.18, January 2015; OSCE Newsroom, Latest from OSCE Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine (SMM), 09 January 2015; Keane F., “Ukraine, Russia and the Ceasefire that Never Was”, BBC News, 02 December 2014.

10 International Crisis Group, “Eastern Ukraine: A Dangerous Winter”, European Report, N.235, 18 December 2014, p. i; European Union External Action, Statement by the Spokesperson on the Latest Developments Regarding the Situation in Eastern Ukraine, 23 January 2015; European Union External Action, Statement by High Representative Federica Mogherini on the attack on Mariupol, 24 January 2015; Prentice A., Polityuk P., “Pro-Russian Rebels Attack Key Port; Ukraine Says at least 30 Dead”, Reuters, 24 January 2015; Walker S., “Donetsk Bus Hit by Mortar as Ukrainian Forces Lose Control of Airport”, The Guardian, 22 January 2015; OSCE, Newsroom, OSCE Chief Monitor in Ukraine Condemns Mariupol Shelling as Reckless, Indiscriminate and Disgraceful Attack on Innocent Civilians, Including Women and Children, 24 January 2015.

11 The Normandy Format refers to talks at the official level between the leaders of Ukraine, Russia, Germany and France and dates back the D-day commemoration in Normandy in July 2014. The “Package of Measures for the Implementation of the Minsk Agreements” (so-called Minsk II) was agreed in Minsk on February 2015 by Ukrainian President Poroshenko, Russian President Putin, German Chancellor Merkel and French President Holland. The Trilateral Contact Group met on 14 February 2015. OSCE Newsroom, Statement by the Trilateral Contact Group on Consultations held on 14 February 2015; Weaver M., Luhn A., “Ukraine Ceasefire agreed at Belarus talks”, The Guardian, 12 February 2015.

12 The Association Agreement was ratified by the Verkhovna Rada and the European Parliament on September 16 2014. BBC News Europe, Ukrainian crisis timeline; Emerson



over the summer 2014, targeted to Russian citizens and companies allegedly involved in the annexation of Crimea and in the backing of separatists in Eastern Ukraine, Russia has imposed import bans on a number of EU products; as a result, these set of measures are carrying severe economic effects and are exacerbating the downturn on both sides.<sup>13</sup> In September 2014, the European Parliament issued a resolution “On the situation in Ukraine and the state of play of EU-Russia relations”, asserting the need for the EU to “rethink its relations with Russia, abandon the strategic partnership concept and find a new, unified approach”.<sup>14</sup> In addition, the resolution underlined that “relations of partnership and cooperation with Russia should be re-established when Russia demonstrates compliance with international law, contributes actively and without ambiguities to a peaceful solution to the Ukrainian crisis, and fully respects the territorial integrity, independence and sovereignty of Ukraine, as well as of other countries of the Eastern Partnership and its neighbours”.<sup>15</sup> As far as gas supply is concerned, after the tentative EU-brokered gas deal between President Putin and President Poroshenko at ASEM Meeting in Milan (October 2014), the dispute was temporary solved with the “winter package protocol signed in Brussels” on October 30, securing gas supplies to Ukraine till March 2015.<sup>16</sup> Therefore, what appears to be in short supply is trust, as the G20 in Australia witnessed (November 2014) with President Putin leaving the Summit earlier, after he “faced fierce criticism” with regard to Russia’s role in the Ukrainian crisis.<sup>17</sup>

M., “First Anniversary of the Vilnius Summit Or, How Tolstoy might have portrayed the legacies of Yanukovich and Putin”, CEPS Essays, N.18, November 2014; Delegation of the European Union to Ukraine, EU-Ukraine Association Agreement; Emmott R., “What is Ukraine’s Association Agreement with the EU?”, Reuters, 27 June 2014.

13 EU-Russia Civil Society Forum, Policy and Advocacy Bulletin N.1/2014; The Guardian, “Russia Reacts to EU Sanctions with Further Western Trade Embargoes”, 11 September 2014; International Crisis Group, Crisis Watch, N.135, p.17 November 2014.

14 Resolution of the European Parliament on the Situation in Ukraine and the State of Play of EU-Russia Relations, 18 September 2014, 2014/2841(RSP); EU-Russia Civil Society Forum, Policy and Advocacy Bulletin N.1/2014.

15 *Ibid.*

16 The Economist, “Ukraine-Russia Gas Deal: Cold Self-Interest”, 31 October 2014; Rinke A., Anishchuk A., “Russia and Ukraine reach tentative gas deal in tough Milan Talks”, Reuters, 17 October 2014.

17 *Ibid.*; BBC News Australia, “G20 summit: Leaders Pledge to Grow their Economies by 2.1%”, 16 November 2014.

During an official visit in Turkey at the beginning of December 2014, President Putin announced both relevant economic and energetic agreements with President Erdoğan and Russia’s decision to abandon the South Stream Pipeline, “blaming the European Union for stalling the project”.<sup>18</sup> Behind such matter lie the problematics around the pipe construction, recently halted in Bulgaria by the EU on the grounds of irregularities on public tenders, and more glaringly, the dispute over the Ukrainian crisis.<sup>19</sup>

The upheaval in Ukraine curtly unveiled the extent of deterioration of the EU-Russia relationship, a descending trend which steadily declined since Putin’s third confirmation as Russian President in 2012 and reached the lowest point with the Ukrainian crisis.<sup>20</sup> As often witnessed at biannual Summits, which are currently on hold given the strained situation, EU-Russia dynamics have experienced a seesaw pace since the demise of the Soviet Union. Enthusiastic times of great expectations, imprinted by imposing initiatives such as the Common Spaces (2005) and the Partnership for Modernisation (2010), have alternated with tense periods heightened by unpredictable and antagonistic attitudes. Namely, the swelling differences in their agenda relate to, *inter alia*, the divergent approach to the Neighbourhood and in the inability to assent to the craved agreement replacing the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA, 1994). After Custom Union (2010), the treaty signed on 29 May 2014 between Russia, Kazakhstan and Belarus, forming the Eurasian Economic Union, speak out Russia’s integration interests in creating an economic (and political) new Eastern pivot.<sup>21</sup> Although the impacts of the Union are still vague, Kremlin’s promotion of this regional integration model, together with the development of its own narrative, not only openly counters the

18 Walker S., “Putin blames EU as Russia abandons plans for South Stream gas pipeline”, The Guardian, 1 December 2014.

19 *Ibid.*; Tacconi M., “Russia-Turchia: l’alternativa a South Stream”, Osservatorio Balcani e Caucaso, 4 December 2014.

20 Casula P., “The Road to Crimea: Putin’s Foreign Policy Between Reason of State, Sovereignty and Bio-Politics”, Russian Analytical Digest, N. 148, May 2014, p.2.

21 Popescu N., “First Lessons from the Ukrainian Crisis”, European Union Institute for Security Studies, Issue Alert, N.41, October 2014, pp.1-2; Nurshayeva R., Anishchuk A., “Ukraine’s empty seat at table darkens party for Putin’s new ex-Soviet bloc”, Reuters, 29 May 2014; Tafuro E., “Fatal attraction? Russia’s Soft Power in its Neighbourhood”, FRIDE Policy Brief N.181, May 2014, pp.2-3.

EU's approach, but also undermines the implementation of joint initiatives already in place.<sup>22</sup> Thereby, the Ukrainian crisis has amplified the scale of a downward trend in EU-Russia relations, in which the strategic partnership logic is crumbling on unstable grounds.

The current adverse juncture, associated with peculiar domestic circumstances along with lack of confidence between the parties, has significantly affected the climate within societies across Europe. On the one hand, in the aftermath of the parliamentary elections (May 2014) and with the recent changes in the presidency of its key Institutions (Autumn 2014), the EU and the member states are still absorbed by the consequences of the economic crisis- growing social inequalities, rise of populism and discriminatory trends.<sup>23</sup> On the other hand, the unprecedented pressure exerted on Russia's emerging civil society, the Kremlin's restrictive stance curtailing fundamental rights and freedoms by means of enacted decrees and laws, have had considerable effects on the increasingly active Russian civic sector.<sup>24</sup> On top of that, the unrelentingly biased and divisive media coverage of several outlets about the Ukrainian crisis have contributed to polarise societies across Europe, either depicting "a monolithic and fictitious picture of Ukraine threatened by fascist hordes" (Russian media), or have "almost routinely [...] downplayed the Russian side of the story" (Western media).<sup>25</sup>

22 Popescu N., "First Lessons from the Ukrainian Crisis, European Union Institute for Security Studies, Issue Alert, N.41, October 2014, pp.1-2; Popescu N., "Eurasian Union: the Real, the Imaginary and the Likely", European Union Institute for Security Studies, Chaillot Paper, N.132, September 2014; Tafuro E., "Fatal attraction? Russia's Soft Power in its Neighbourhood", FRIDE Policy Brief N.181, May 2014, pp.2-3.

23 EU-Russia Civil Society Forum Statement adopted at the Fourth General Assembly in The Hague on October 6 2013, "EU-Russia Civil Society Forum: Connecting Cooperation with Solidarity".

24 Legislation restricting the Right of Assembly (N.65-FZ, May 2012); bill introducing new restrictions on Internet content (N. 139-FZ, July 2012); law regarding the "Regulation of Activities of Non-commercial Organisations Performing the Functions of Foreign Agents" (N. 121-FZ, November 2012); law on Treason (N.190-FZ, October 2012); law introducing ban on adoption of Russian children by US citizens (No. 272-FZ, December 2012). Human Rights Watch, "Laws of Attrition. Crackdown on Russia's Civil Society after Putin's Return to the Presidency", April 2014, pp.12, 37, 42, 46, 54. Concerns expressed by former EU High Representative Catherine Ashton (or spokespersons) in a number of statements: A 263/12, 12/06/2012; A 319/2012, 10/07/2012; A 370/12, 17/08/2012; A 403/12, 11/09/2012; A 473/2012, 25/10/2012. Similarly, the Forum's Steering Committee issued several statements that are available on its website.

25 The Guardian, "Is western media coverage of the Ukraine crisis anti-Russian?", New

Within this complex scenario, the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum (hereafter the Forum or CSF) strives to do its share to develop cooperation among non-governmental actors from the EU and Russia through joint projects, regular meetings and greater participation in the EU-Russia dialogue; it is devoted "to stand up for improved conditions of NGOs work" – as several Forum's members from both sides are under pressure as well as "vilified in mainstream media outlets".<sup>26</sup> Established in 2011, the Forum is a permanent platform for cooperation and coordination of currently 140 civil society organisations – of which 77 are from Russia, 51 from EU countries and 12 international – that are active, *inter alia*, in development of civic participation and education, in visa regime facilitation, in protection of the environment and human rights, in monitoring democratic processes and in historical memory.<sup>27</sup> The distinctive characteristics that depict the Forum are its grass-roots nature, the peculiar resoluteness and unwavering attitude in seeking to guarantee the independence of the platform and to balance the EU and Russian components within its structure. Alike, the latter trait regards the definition of internal and external strategies, policy and advocacy work, the planning and implementation of projects, the creation of networking opportunities. Accordingly, the commitment to pursue one of its missions – *i.e.* to promote the consolidation of shared values and common positions – makes it a byword initiative endeavouring to restore a dialogue that is drifting away.<sup>28</sup>

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East Network, 4 August 2014.

26 EU-Russia Civil Society Forum, Policy and Advocacy Bulletin N.1/2014, pp.6-7; Charter and Mission Statement of the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum adopted at the Forum's Founding Meeting in Prague on 29 March 2011; Statement of the Steering Committee of the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum, "Bring back the Values of the Autumn of 1989", 7 November 2014.

27 *Ibid.*; EU-Russia Civil Society Forum, Members. As of January 2015, Forum's member organisations are 140.

28 *Ibid.* Charter and Mission Statement of the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum adopted at the Forum's Founding Meeting in Prague on 29 March 2011.

## A grass-roots initiative amid stagnation: the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum explained

The Ukrainian confrontation has exacerbated sentiments of hostility and friction across societies that are ascribable to post-Soviet complexities and often trace back old fears and stereotypes.<sup>29</sup> To counter these detrimental tendencies, civil society is called upon to contribute in incisive actions advocating exchange and mutual understanding along with institutional and governmental actors. During the trilateral round-table “Civil Society Ukraine-Russia-EU” (May 2014), representatives from Ukraine, the EU-Russia and the Eastern Partnership (EaP) Civil Society Forums discussed possible inputs of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to conflict resolution in Ukraine, while both Forums established a “Contact Group” to work on issues of common concern - serving as a joint information and monitoring network.<sup>30</sup> Consequently, representatives of the EU-Russia and the EaP CSFs participated as observer at the respective annual Assemblies of their Forums, both held in November 2014.<sup>31</sup> As follow-up of the May

29 EU-Russia Civil Society Forum, Newsletter N.9/2014.

30 The discussion “Civil Society Ukraine-Russia-EU” was held at the Robert Bosch Stiftung Representation in Berlin on 20 May 2014, organised by both the EU-Russia and the EaP CSF and supported by the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs. EU-Russia Civil Society Forum, Newsletter N.9/2014; EU-Russia Civil Society Forum, First Meeting “Round Table Civil Society Ukraine-Russia-EU”, 20 May 2014. The Steering Committees of both Forums officially decided for closer cooperation at a meeting in the framework of a conference celebrating the 5th anniversary of the Eastern Partnership Programme held in Prague on 23-25 April 2014 (see Newsletter N.8/2014).

31 The EaP CSF Annual Assembly was held in Batumi (Georgia) on 20-21 November while the EU-Russia CSF General Assembly in Tallinn (Estonia) on 27-29 November 2014. For the EU-Russia CSF, Barbara von Ow-Freytag (Coordinator of the “Contact Group EU-Russia CSF – EaP CSF”) and Ksenia Vakhrusheva (Environmental Rights Centre Bellona and Steering Committee member) participated at the Batumi Assembly. For the EaP CSF, two former Steering Committee members, Jan Pieklo and Kristina Vaiciūnaitė, participated at the Tallinn Assembly. EU-Russia Civil Society Forum, Observers; EU-Russia Civil Society Forum, From Brussels to Batumi: Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum Celebrated its 5<sup>th</sup> Anniversary”; EU-Russia Civil Society Forum, Newsletter N.16/2014.

discussion, two round-tables were held in Berlin on 16-17 December 2014: “Murders, Disappearances, Torture: Human Rights in the Times of War”, held at the Bundestag, focused on the situation of Ukrainian refugees in Russia and on violations of human rights in Eastern Ukraine and Crimea; “Between Propaganda and Counter-Propaganda: Defending Quality Journalism”, held at the Heinrich Böll Foundation, discussed the role of media and the need to “develop new strategies for a non-propagandistic information space in a wider Europe”.<sup>32</sup>

Initiatives as the “Contact Group”, round-table as the “Civil Society Ukraine-Russia-EU”, and the annual General Assemblies are among the instruments through which the EU-Russia CSF directs its commitment to promote people-to-people contacts between Russian and EU’s civil society advocates, encouraging discussions on European and international issues - particularly in the spheres of human rights and rule of law, the environment, civic participation and social issues, monitoring of democratic structures and processes, citizenship education, and historical memory.<sup>33</sup> Being a grass-roots initiative, the Forum’s highest decision making body is the General Assembly, which brings together its members and a considerable number of supporters at least once a year.<sup>34</sup> General Assemblies constitute an increasingly relevant platform where to discuss societal developments as well as EU-Russia dynamics, report for activities implemented, work in plenary sessions and within Working Groups, develop strategies in short- and medium-term perspectives.<sup>35</sup> The Forum’s V General Assembly gathered over 120 civil society actors in Tallinn (27-29 November 2014) to discuss the overarching commitment to democratic values and procedures and it was opened by the keynote

32 *Ibid.* Both discussions were co-organised by the Forum, the European Exchange and other organisations with the support of the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Newsletter N.16/2014.

33 Charter and Mission Statement of the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum adopted at the Forum’s Founding Meeting in Prague on 29 March 2011.

34 Charter of the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum.

35 *Ibid.*; EU-Russia Civil Society Forum, Structure. Apart from the Prague Founding Meeting, the Forum organised General Assemblies in Warsaw (December 2011), St. Petersburg (October 2012), The Hague (October 2013), Tallinn (November 2014). Detailed information is available on the dedicated section on the Forum’s website.



speech of the Estonian President Hendrik Ilves.<sup>36</sup> Anticipated by many side events organised by Forum's members, the Assembly discussed in plenary and in Working Groups, *inter alia*, the impacts of the Ukrainian conflicts and of the deteriorating EU-Russia relations on civil society, the problems and prospects in continuing mutual cooperation and solidarity activities at the present challenging times.<sup>37</sup> Moreover, the Forum's strategy and internal development were addressed together with the "presentation of cross-topical projects on visa facilitation and liberalisation, policy and advocacy, and trans-border corruption" as well as the new Steering Committee was elected.<sup>38</sup>

The Forum's advisory and highest decision making body between the Assemblies is the Steering Committee, composed of 10 representatives from the EU countries and Russia voted by members with a mandate of two years.<sup>39</sup> The current Steering Committee, elected in November 2014 at the Tallinn General Assembly, is composed of: Katarzyna Batko-Tołuć (Citizens Network Watchdog, Warsaw), Evgenia Chirikova (Environmental Defence of Moscow Region, Moscow), Yuri Dzhibladze (Centre for Development of Democracy and Human Rights, Moscow), Harry Hummel (Netherlands Helsinki Committee, The Hague), Ralph du Long (UNITED for Intercultural Action, Amsterdam), Stefan Melle (German-Russian Exchange, Berlin), Simon Papuashvili (International Partnership for Human Rights, Brussels), Anna Skvortsova (NGO Development Centre, St. Petersburg), Natalia Taubina (Public Verdict Foundation, Moscow), Ksenia Vakhrusheva (Environmental Rights Centre Bellona, St. Petersburg).<sup>40</sup> The Steering Committee represents

36 EU-Russia Civil Society Forum, Newsletter N.15/2014. The press release on President Ilves's keynote speech is available on the Office of the President of Estonia official website.

37 *Ibid.*, The list of side events is available in the Programme of the Forum's General Assembly held in Tallinn.

38 *Ibid.*

39 EU-Russia Civil Society Forum, Steering Committee; EU-Russia Civil Society Forum, Charter.

40 *Ibid.*; EU-Russia Civil Society Forum, Newsletter N.16/2014. Former Steering Committee Members were: Anton Burkov (Sutyajnik, Ekaterinburg), Fraser Cameron (EU-Russia Centre, Brussels), Oksana Chelysheva (Finnish-Russian Civic Forum, Helsinki), Aleksei Kozlov (Groza, Voronezh), Danuta Przywara (Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights, Warsaw), Olga Sadovskaya (Committee Against Torture, Nizhny Novgorod), Sergey Simak (International Socio-Ecological Union, Samara), Rostislav Valvoda (People in Need, Prague).

the Forum in relations with the public authorities and the media, convenes and prepares the Assemblies with the assistance of an Organising Committee, and coordinates the work of the Forum on the basis of its founding documents.<sup>41</sup> It expresses own positions as well as endorses common views of Working Groups and Forum members through statements, which have been an instrument to voice the Forum's perceptions.<sup>42</sup> In addition, the Forum's structure includes a Consortium of six partner organisations, a Secretariat, and six thematic Working Groups. The Consortium functions as a project team, it is responsible for elaborating project proposals, "preparing applications for grants and further co-funding tools to enable the continuation of the Forum's work".<sup>43</sup> It is currently composed of a leading Consortium organisation, the German-Russian Exchange (Berlin), the Netherlands Helsinki Committee (The Hague), the Agency for Social Information (Moscow), the Public Verdict Foundation (Moscow), the Stefan Batory Foundation (Warsaw), and IREX Europe (Lyon) as associate partner.<sup>44</sup> The Secretariat, hosted by the German-Russian Exchange, manages the Forum's everyday technical, informational and organisational work liaising with the Steering Committee and the Consortium; it is composed of the Head of Consortium, an Executive Director, a Coordinator of the "Contact Group EU-Russia CSF- Eastern Partnership CSF", a Financial Manager, a Project Coordinator, and a Public Relations Coordinator supported by a small team of young volunteers.<sup>45</sup> At the core of the Forum's activities there are six Working Groups bringing together CSF members to favour networking, exchange opinions on topical dynamics, current activities, and work on mutual projects.<sup>46</sup> According to the field of activities and interests of each single organisation, Forum members join one (or more) of the Working Groups on Human Rights and Rule of Law, the Environment, Social Issues and Civic Participation, Democratic Structures and Processes,

41 Charter of the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum.

42 Steering Committee and other Forum's statements are available at <http://eu-russia-csf.org/home/statements.html>.

43 EU-Russia Civil Society Forum, Consortium.

44 *Ibid.*

45 EU-Russia Civil Society Forum, Structure; EU-Russia Civil Society Forum, Secretariat.

46 EU-Russia Civil Society Forum, Working Groups.

Citizenship Education, and Historical Memory and Education.<sup>47</sup> With reference to information, the Forum's communications strategy has allowed for the creation of a bilingual website, the regular issuing of its own publications, and the active presence on the main social media channels, thus offering a continuously updated source of information on developments occurring within the Forum and at the wider EU-Russia policy dialogue level.<sup>48</sup> Its publications consist in press releases, policy papers, a daily news-feed coverage, a monthly Newsletter, and a quarterly Policy and Advocacy Bulletin embracing Forum's positions, news, reports, analysis, interviews, events and opportunities with relevance to civil society both in the EU and Russia.<sup>49</sup>

In early 2010, when few EU civil society advocates proposed to re-launch intersocietal cooperation with Russia, a favourable atmosphere called for renewed efforts to enhance relations between the EU and Russia in the fields of rule of law, democracy and human rights, civic participation, and the environment. The factors shaping such timely initiative were, among others, the EU's Eastern Partnership new dynamic and the Partnership for Modernisation together with "[former] President Medvedev's repeated calls for Russia's modernisation underlying an active role for civil society".<sup>50</sup> The initial proposal to establish a joint platform was firstly included in the position paper "For a New Start in Civil Society Cooperation with Russia" (March 2010), followed by a series of round-table discussions and a position

47 *Ibid.* Respectively, each Working Group is coordinated by Oksana Chelysheva (Finnish-Russian Civic Forum, Helsinki), Maria Kanevskaya (St. Petersburg); Ksenia Vakhrusheva (Environmental Rights Centre Bellona, St. Petersburg); Oleg Sharipkov (Civil Unity, Penza), Remigiusz Lesiuk (Polish Forum of Young Diplomats, Warsaw); Łukasz Wenerski (Institute for Public Affairs, Warsaw), Denis Primakov (Transparency International, Moscow); Annegret Wulff (MitOst Association, Berlin); Robert Latypov (Youth Memorial, Perm), Tereza Vávrová (Anikomplex, Prague) and Kristina Smolijaninová (EU-Russia Civil Society Forum Project Coordinator).

48 The Forum is active on Twitter, V Kontakte and Facebook. In the latter it has an official and a thematic page dedicated on the Visa Project.

49 Forum's publications are available on the sections News, Policy Papers, Opinions and ideas of the Forum's website.

50 Position Paper "For a New Start in Civil Society Cooperation between the EU and Russia", p.1. It was drafted by Stefan Melle (German Russian Exchange) and Stefanie Schiffer (European Exchange) and signed by leading EU civil society representatives on 23 March 2010.

paper elaborated by Russian civil society advocates (October 2010).<sup>51</sup> As a result, the Forum's Founding Meeting took place in Prague (28-29 March 2011), gathering over 60 civil society representatives and supporters, who discussed and adopted the Forum's founding documents, established four thematic Working Groups and elected a Steering Committee.<sup>52</sup> The initiative was welcomed and positively acknowledged by EU and Russian experts and officials, with whom the Forum has subsequently organised a number of round-tables, meetings and events.<sup>53</sup>

Few years afterwards, the situation of civil society is deteriorating in Russia as well as within some EU member states, particularly in Hungary, where the work and existence of NGOs is under increasing pressure.<sup>54</sup> The unfavourable context has engendered a vocal response in the Forum, particularly regarding the set of decrees and laws enacted by the Kremlin since spring 2012, limiting fundamental rights and introducing restrictions.<sup>55</sup> In a nutshell, the Forum's Steering Committee considers these proceedings "to suppress and stigmatise any civil society activities, which [the Russian government] sees as critical towards its policies", as "clearly in breach of international

51 In the Position Paper "Russian NGOs' position on the establishment of an EU-Russia Civil Society Forum" (October 2010) Russian advocates welcomed the proposal by EU colleagues, set aims and common steps for the creation of the Forum. It was elaborated by: Centre for the Development of Democracy and Human Rights, International Youth Human Rights Movement, Human Rights Centre "Memorial", SOVA Centre for Information and Analysis, Human Rights Institute, "Sakharov" Public Centre and Museum, Public Verdict Foundation, Social Partnership Foundation.

52 EU-Russia Civil Society Forum, Prague Founding Meeting. The Forum's founding documents are the "Charter of the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum" and the "Mission Statement of the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum". Working Groups established in 2011: 1. Human Rights and Rule of Law; 2. The Environment; 3. Social Issues/Civic Participation; 4. Democratic Institutions; see footnote n. 41. Further details are available in the Newsletter N.1/2011.

53 To learn more about the acknowledgment by EU and Russian officials see <http://eu-russia-csf.org/home/about/experts-about-csf.html> and Newsletter N.2/2013; about events and meetings the Forum (co-)organised or was invited to participate in see all the Forum's Newsletters.

54 EU-Russia Civil Society Forum, Policy and Advocacy Bulletin N.1/2014; Statement of the Steering Committee of the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum, The Pressure on NGOs in Hungary Undermines the Rule of Law in the European Union, 15 September 2014.

55 See footnote 25.

and European standards”.<sup>56</sup> The clampdown on civil society affects a large number of Russian NGOs and greatly limits the activities, and in some cases even the existence, of several Forum members through “paralysing inspections, long and time-consuming court cases, and government actions to put a derogatory label of “foreign agents” on them”.<sup>57</sup> Despite “of administrative and judicial pressure” exerted on Russian NGOs “to voluntarily accept the status of “foreign agents”, most of them have refused it and experienced, in turn, the effects of the June 2014 amendments to the so-called “Foreign Agents” Law (N. 121-FZ) - authorizing the Ministry of Justice “to register” NGOs “as “foreign agents” without their consent”.<sup>58</sup> As to Forum’s members directly affected by these proceedings, emblematic are the cases of the Anti-Discrimination Centre “Memorial” (St. Petersburg), the Kostroma Centre for Civic Initiatives (Kostroma), the Association for the Protection of Voters’ Rights “Golos” (Moscow) and its member organisation Moscow Centre “Golos”, which had to suspend their activities or close down, after having lost lawsuits and being unable to pay the fine.<sup>59</sup> Others Forum’s members, have faced similar prosecution and “have had their reputation severely damaged”.<sup>60</sup> Nevertheless, while at a

56 EU-Russia Civil Society Forum, “Appeal of the Steering Committee of the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum to the Newly Elected Members of the European Parliament”, 1 July 2014, p. 2.

57 *Ibid.*, p.2.

58 The Ministry of Justice ascertains to register an NGO as “foreign agent” in case it is “engaged in “political activity” and it “is receiving foreign funding”, Human Rights Watch, Russia: Government Against Rights Groups, 12 January 2015; Statement of the Steering Committee of the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum, Amendments to the Russian Law on “Foreign Agents” Signify a New Level of Threat to Civil Society in Russia, 10 June 2014, p. 1.

59 *Ibid.*; Statement of the Steering Committee of the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum, On the Prosecution of the Memorial Anti-Discrimination Centre”, 17 December 2013.

60 Statement of the Steering Committee of the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum, Amendments to the Russian Law on “Foreign Agents” Signify a New Level of Threat to Civil Society in Russia, 10 June 2014, p. 1. Other Forum’s members included in the “foreign agents” list are: All-Russian Movement for Human Rights (Moscow), Citizens’ Watch (St. Petersburg), Committee Against Torture (Nizhny Novgorod), Institute for Freedom of Information Development Foundation (St. Petersburg), Human Rights Resource Centre (St. Petersburg), Human Rights Centre “Memorial” (Moscow), Man and the Law (Mari El Republic), Public Verdict Foundation (Moscow), Regional Press Institute (St. Petersburg), Soldiers’ Mothers of St. Petersburg (St. Petersburg). Human Rights Watch, Russia: Government Against Rights Groups, 12 January 2015. See the Statements of the Forum’s Steering Committee of 23 July 2014; 12 September 2014; 19 November 2014; 20 January 2015.

meeting in Moscow with members of the Russian Presidential Council for Civil Society Development and Human Rights and Ombudsman (5 December 2014), President Putin claimed that the “Foreign Agents” Law “needs adjustments” as it is “not perfect and perhaps some of its clauses fail to correspond to the present-day conditions”.<sup>61</sup> In addition, the Russian Minister of Justice Aleksander Kononov “announced amendments to the Law No.121-FZ, which are supposed to document the ways of exclusion of NGOs from the list” (14 January 2015).<sup>62</sup>

Not only has the Forum repeatedly condemned these measures, it has initiated an action of solidarity and information expertise as well, which combines constant monitoring, analysis, and discussions with EU and Russian experts on the legal framework of the proceedings, their impacts on individuals, on NGOs and on the civil society sector.<sup>63</sup> Clearly, this course has contributed to create a context that “diminish[es] the possibilities for civil society to counter the decrease in cooperation between partners and endanger constructive development of the EU-Russia relations at large”.<sup>64</sup> While striving to consolidate its platform in a rather adverse framework, the activities of the Forum have to be more and more devoted towards countering the deterioration of civil society situation in Russia, as well as in the EU, through solidarity and urgent measures. At the panel discussion “Solidarity and Civil Society” during the V Forum’s General Assembly (28 November 2014), participants discussed how and to what extent solidarity activities are efficient and relate to public good.<sup>65</sup> Symbolically, at the end of the panel there was an hand circle followed by the “decision to picket the

61 Itar Tass, “Putin Agrees it is Necessary to Correct Law on NGO-foreign agents”, 05 December 2014. See also EU-Russia Civil Society Forum, Vladimir Putin: NGO Law Needs Adjustment, 06 December 2014.

62 Statement of the Steering Committee of the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum, “Russian Government Should Repeal the “Foreign Agents” Law and Restart a Dialogue with Independent Russian NGOs”, 20 January 2015.

63 See Schiffer S., Dzhibladze Y., “European Solidarity for Russia’s Civil Society”, 26 June 2013; Statement adopted at the IV General Assembly in The Hague on October 6 2013, “EU-Russia Civil Society Forum: Connecting Cooperation with Solidarity”; EU-Russia Civil Society Forum, Newsletter N.15/2014.

64 Statement of the Steering Committee of the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum, “New Moves of the Russian Ministry of Justice to Include Leading NGOs into the List of “Foreign Agents” Endanger Development of the EU-Russia Relations”, 23 July 2014, p.1.

65 EU-Russia Civil Society Forum, Newsletter N.15/2014.

Embassy of the Russian Federation in Tallinn requesting freedom for Evgeni Vitishko”, and the related release of a statement approved by Assembly participants.<sup>66</sup> Paradoxically, whereas the Forum endeavours to favour exchange between EU and Russian civil society actors, the hardship of the moment hinders its capacity to cement it.

The Forum is financially supported by the European Commission under the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR); it can count on the backing by the Robert Bosch Stiftung, the Stefan Batory Foundation, Open Estonia Foundation, and had previously relied upon the contribution of several other donors, *in toto* or for specific initiatives.<sup>67</sup> Without hampering the Forum’s independence, such financial assistance has allowed for the creation of the platform and it is sustaining the consolidation. However, a priority is to guarantee the sustainability of the Forum’s future activities by seeking additional financial resources. In this regard, a Donors’ Conference is planned to be organised in London in spring 2015, to present the activities of the Forum to current and potential donors as well as to favour networking.<sup>68</sup> The initial EIDHR grant allocated in the period 2012-2013 (Phase I) together with other funding, enabled the Forum to establish and organise its structure, create a bilingual website, elaborate and implement 15 projects, (co-)organise two General Assemblies and numerous events and advocacy meetings.<sup>69</sup> Particularly, the initiatives implemented during the project-cycle 2012-2013 focused on expertise, as the “Visa Project” and “Election

66 *Ibid.* Extract of Rostislav Valvoda’s (People in Need, Prague) interview reported in Newsletter N.15/2014. Evgeny Vitishko is an imprisoned activist of the recently liquidated NGO Environmental Watch on North Caucasus. Statement of the General Assembly, adopted at the General Assembly in Tallinn on November 29 2014, “The Decision on Liquidation of the “Environmental Watch on North Caucasus” Contradicts with the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms”.

67 EU-Russia Civil Society Forum, Donors; Delegation of the European Union to the Russian Federation, Civil Society Dialogue. To learn more about the donors that previously supported the Forum on the whole or on specific activities and events, please visit the dedicated sections on the Forum’s website or on Newsletters.

68 The Donors’ Conference was confirmed by the Forum’s Secretariat. Details will be available on the Forum’s website.

69 EU-Russia Civil Society Forum, Projects 2012-2013. During Phase I, the Secretariat was hosted by the Prague-based DEMAS, see Delegation of the European Union to the Russian Federation, List of Projects 2012. Details on Phase I projects and donors are available on the Forum’s website, in Newsletters N.1-N.7 and in News Summaries.

monitoring”, on exchange, as the “Youth Exchange Programme”, on learning and creativity, as the “Video&Film for Awareness and Advocacy” and the “European Youth Forum Pilorama Lab 2012”.<sup>70</sup> Following the successful co-organisation of the latter in the framework of the “International Civil Forum Pilorama” (Perm, July 2012)- which gathered Russian and international activists in the last weekend of July at the Memorial Centre of History of Political Repression “Perm 36” - for two years in a row both events had to be cancelled, “officially due to the lack of co-financing and past ineffective management”.<sup>71</sup> In place of these, a solidarity event was co-organised by the Forum and local organisations in Perm in July 2013, while the 2014 “Pilorama was held as a “picnic” on a private spot beside the former GULAG camp on August 9th”.<sup>72</sup> As a continuation of the “Pilorama Lab” within CSF common initiatives, the European Forum for Young Professionals “European Lab” will be held in the summer 2015 in Lithuania.<sup>73</sup> Successfully initiated in 2012, the Forum’s flagship undertaking is the Visa Expert Group, composed of several scholars and NGOs experts from Russia, Poland, Ukraine, Belgium and Germany, who work on the topical issue of EU-Russia visa facilitation and liberalisation.<sup>74</sup> Within this project, a Visa Report was issued in September 2013, drawing considerations on why progresses in the visa dialogue matters for civil society, analysing the legal framework and challenges of the issue, and proposing policy recommendations.<sup>75</sup> Despite the current stagnation of EU-Russia visa negotiations, the Forum’s Visa workshop

70 *Ibid.*

71 EU-Russia Civil Society Forum, Projects 2012-2013; EU-Russia Civil Society Forum, Pilorama Lab; EU-Russia Civil Society Forum, Interview with Kristina Smoljaniinováitė on the Cancellation of the “Pilorama Lab” and on other Projects of the Forum, 16 July 2013; Statement of the Steering Committee of the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum, The Memorial Centre of History of Political Repressions “Perm 36” Should Be Preserved, pp. 1-2, 14 August 2014.

72 Statement of the Steering Committee of the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum, The Memorial Centre of History of Political Repressions “Perm 36” Should Be Preserved, p. 2, 14 August 2014.

73 EU-Russia Civil Society Forum, Projects; the “European Lab” was confirmed by the Forum’s Secretariat.

74 EU-Russia Civil Society Forum, Visa Project.

75 Van Elsuwege P. (ed.), “EU-Russia Visa Facilitation and Liberalization. State of Play and Prospects for the Future”, September 2013, EU-Russia Civil Society Report.

held in Warsaw (June 2014), offered the opportunity to discuss the state of play and the impacts of a visa-free regime on EU and Russian economies, migration and security.<sup>76</sup>

At the end of December 2013, the Forum was awarded a new 18-months EIDHR grant (Phase II) with the purpose to “contribute to the continued and improved functioning and sustainability” of the Forum, to “increase exchange of information and policy dialogue related to topics of common interest between” Forum’s organisations “as well as between the CSF and other stakeholders”.<sup>77</sup> Accordingly, the main activities of the Phase II regard common initiatives (Visa Project, European Lab, Fighting Trans-Border Corruption), the consolidation of the internal strategy, the enhancement of Forum’s external relations, policy and advocacy work and four sub-granting programmes – video production and film festival about human rights activists in Russia, development of the Working Group dealing with social issues, promotion of civic education among young professionals, temporary exhibition reflecting conflicting memories on the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the end of World War II.<sup>78</sup> With respect to the Forum’s projects cycle 2014-2015, preliminary results were introduced at the V General Assembly, while final outcomes will be publicly presented at the Final Projects and Strategy Meeting to be held in Berlin (Summer 2015).<sup>79</sup>

Chiefly, since the launch of the consolidation phase (Phase II), the Forum has been involved in many initiatives, projects and events. It officially opened the new Secretariat at the German-Russian Exchange premises in Berlin (May 2014), it has engaged in closer cooperation with the Eastern Partnership CSF and has contributed to the “EU and

76 EU-Russia Civil Society Forum, Visa Project; EU-Russia Civil Society Forum, Newsletter N.10/2014.

77 EU-Russia Civil Society Forum, “The EU-Russia Civil Society Forum Launches New Project”, 10 February 2014; Delegation of the European Union to the Russian Federation, List of Projects 2014.

78 EU-Russia Civil Society Forum, Projects 2014-2015; EU-Russia Civil Society Forum, Newsletter N. 12/2014. To support Working Groups and their common projects on topical EU-Russia issues, a competition was held in spring 2014 among Forum’s members and resulted in four sub-grant programmes, which were confirmed by the Forum’s Secretariat. Details are available in the Projects 2014-2015 section of the Forum’s website.

79 EU-Russia Civil Society Forum, Newsletter N. 12/2014. The Final Project and Strategy Meeting (Berlin, summer 2015) were confirmed by the Forum’s Secretariat.

EU Member States’ Roadmaps for Engagement with Civil Society” in Russia.<sup>80</sup> Furthermore, the Steering Committee addressed an appeal to the newly elected members of the European Parliament (July 2014), calling on the use of its influence “to uphold human rights, rule of law, and democracy both inside the European Union and in its relations with Russia as well as to move Europe and the world towards a just and sustainable economic, social, and environmental model”.<sup>81</sup> In the course of an advocacy mission to Brussels in October 2014, Forum representatives participated at the first joint seminar with the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC), held several meetings with Members of the European Parliament and different Units of the European Commission, who appreciated the “Forum’s focus on the Human Dimension, [that is the] promotion of interpersonal contacts”.<sup>82</sup> While in Brussels, the Forum’s Policy and Advocacy Team, coordinated by the Netherlands Helsinki Committee (The Hague), was launched with the purpose “to engage more effectively in dialogue with public authorities”.<sup>83</sup> The Expert Group on Strategy – coordinated by the Centre for Development of Democracy and Human Rights (Moscow) and composed of People in Need (Prague), Memorial Italia (Milan), Russian Forest Trust (Moscow) and NGO Development Centre (St. Petersburg) – met in Moscow (29-30 October) to discuss the Forum’s development till 2017 and prepared a document, discussed at the Tallinn General Assembly, that is to be adopted in Spring 2015.<sup>84</sup> Likewise, a workshop in Prague (October 20-24) was organised by the Working Group “Historical Memory and Education” to work on

80 The German Russian Exchange acts as Consortium leader since the end of 2013. For further information on the “EU and EU Member States’ Roadmaps for Engagement with Civil Society”, see the Forum’s Newsletter N.11/2014.

81 EU-Russia Civil Society Forum, “Appeal of the Steering Committee of the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum to the Newly Elected Members of the European Parliament”, 1 July 2014, p. 1.

82 A report of the advocacy mission in Brussels and of the joint meeting with EESC is available in the Policy and Advocacy Bulletin N.2/2014, pp.7-8; EU-Russia Civil Society Forum, Newsletter N. 14/2014; EU-Russia Civil Society Forum, Policy and Advocacy Bulletin N.1/2014, p.8.

83 EU-Russia Civil Society Forum, Policy and Advocacy Bulletin N.1/2014 and N.2/2014.

84 Anna Sevortian (Forum’s Executive Director) and Stefan Melle (Forum’s Head of Consortium) participated at the meeting, too. EU-Russia Civil Society Forum, Newsletter N.15/2014; EU-Russia Civil Society Forum, Projects.



the project within the Forum's sub-grant programme and to discuss conflicting memories and the interpretations of World War II in school textbooks in Russia, Czech Republic, Poland, Germany, Lithuania and Italy.<sup>85</sup> The Forum's Expert Group on Trans-border Corruption, coordinated by the Netherlands Helsinki Committee (The Hague), had its kick-off meeting in Berlin (6 November) to discuss the methods, strategies and potential case study to "raise the public's awareness of trans-border corruption practice".<sup>86</sup> Besides, the Steering Committee addressed an appeal to the newly established European Commission (October 2014), urging "to continue pushing for full implementation of international standards by the Russian Federation" as pressure on Russian civil society increases; it also called to "enforce continued compliance of member states with the standards of EU membership", as "space for civil society [...] does not seem to be secure in all European Countries".<sup>87</sup> In addition, the Forum expressed its own position on "the current level of EU support to civil society in Russia" which is considered as "inadequate, compared to such support to civil society in other countries of the post-Soviet region and especially in the context of challenges faced by the Russian society and the influence Russia has on the whole region".<sup>88</sup> The Forum's Head of Consortium Stefan Melle (German-Russian Exchange, Berlin) participated as co-moderator in one of the 14 sections of the second All-Russian Civil Forum in Moscow (22 November 2014), which gathered representatives of Russian citizens initiatives.<sup>89</sup> As part of the sub-grant programme initiated by the Forum, the Working Group on "Citizenship Education" met in Prague (15-17 December 2014) to "discuss challenges and opportunities of

85 EU-Russia Civil Society Forum, Newsletter N.15/2014; EU-Russia Civil Society Forum, Projects.

86 *Ibid.*; EU-Russia Civil Society Forum, Policy and Advocacy Bulletin N.2/2014, p.4. The Expert Group met just before the 19<sup>th</sup> Autumnal Talks devoted to the fight against corruption in Russia, Ukraine and the EU.

87 EU-Russia Civil Society Forum, "Appeal of the Steering Committee of the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum to the European Commission on Policies Relating to Civil Society in Russia and in the European Union", 28 October 2014, pp.1-4.

88 *Ibid.*, p.2. Similar positions were expressed in Schiffer S., Dzhibladze Y., "European Solidarity for Russia's Civil Society", 26 June 2013.

89 EU-Russia Civil Society Forum, Newsletter N.16/2014. The second All-Russian Civil Forum (Общероссийский гражданский форум) was initiated by the Committee for Civil Initiatives (Moscow).

civic education" both in Russia and in the EU.<sup>90</sup> In the framework of a round-table in Berlin (November 2014), Forum's representatives met with the new EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Federica Mogherini, having thus the chance to outline "important expectations of the platform" concerning EU's action Eastwards – e.g. "stronger public and financial support for Russian civil society; [...] prompt implementation of specific steps for better visa regulations [...]; support of territorial integrity of neighbouring states".<sup>91</sup> Lastly, it is relevant to underline the process of re-evaluation of EU-Russia strategy initiated by the High Representative and her cabinet, an ongoing undertaking that actively involves EU member states and represents an opportunity for advocacy activities for EU Forum members as well.<sup>92</sup>

## Untangling the way forward

As long as the sentiments governing EU-Russia relations are lack of mutual understanding and trust associated with dissimilar approaches, at times countering reciprocal interests, disputes, friction and tensions are inescapable.<sup>93</sup>

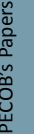
The state of affairs in EU-Russia relations is crumbling two decades of progresses and appears hard to overcome, *i.e.* no EU-led grand vision

90 EU-Russia Civil Society Forum, A Meeting of the Working Group "Citizenship Education" Took Place in Prague, 19 January 2015.

91 EU-Russia Civil Society Forum, Newsletter N.15/2014. EU-Russia Civil Society Forum, Policy and Advocacy Bulletin N.2/2014, pp.3-4.

92 EU-Russia Civil Society Forum, Policy and Advocacy Bulletin N.2/2014, p.9.

93 Popescu N., "EU-Russia: Overcoming Stagnation", European Union Institute for Security Studies, Brief Issue N.3, p. 4; Popescu N., "First Lessons from the Ukrainian Crisis", European Union Institute for Security Studies, Issue Alert, N.41, October 2014, pp.1-2.





ahead seems to be capable of improving the relationship overnight.<sup>94</sup> In the midst of the Ukrainian crisis that is gripping Europe, in a way that hasn't been seen since the Yugoslavian wars in the 1990s, at a time when relationship is dictated by the (counter-)sanctions logic, much needs to be done to restore a dialogue that is glaringly drifting away. Despite peace talks, international players involved in the conflict should open "a free-wheeling" and overarching "discussion with Moscow on differences, suspicions, reproaches" with the purpose of building confidence on all sides to lay the groundwork for stabilisation of the situation in Eastern Ukraine.<sup>95</sup> Hence, on the EU-Russia relations' side the way forward relies on how and to what extent both EU and Russia are capable of exploring, discussing and solving the topical issues on their agenda. It is precisely in embracing the plurality of actors involved in their interaction, engage them in a factual dialogue, and in continuing sectorial cooperation on specific initiatives (trade, visa regime, research, education, etc.) where EU-Russia can recover, stabilise, and even progress, their relations. Nevertheless, this has to deal with whether the parts are willing to effectively engage in such process with a renewed attitude, given that it should encompass an open discussion on matters that are traditionally regarded as more sensitive – such as mutual values and democratic principles – and on thematic and strategic issues upon which they have built the existing partnership – *i.e.* energy, trade, security, sectorial cooperation in the fields of environment, education, culture, etc. In the nearest future, the Russia Civil Society Organisations seminar that the European External Action Service intends to hold in Brussels may provide a remarkable platform for initiating this process.<sup>96</sup>

On the whole, the Ukrainian confrontation has not only emphasised the level of strain in Russia's approach in the crisis with respects to the West and particularly with the EU, but it has also amplified overwhelming sentiments of animosity and deep-rooted fears marking inimical drifts within societies. The EU-Russia Civil Society Forum denotes its commitment to analyse these attitudes and to contribute in improving the societal

94 *Ibid.*, pp.1-4.

95 International Crisis Group, Crisis Watch, No.137, p.18, January 2015; International Crisis Group, "Eastern Ukraine: A Dangerous Winter", European Report, N.235, 18 December 2014, p. 20, p.iii.

96 EU-Russia Civil Society Forum, Policy and Advocacy Bulletin N.2/2014, p.9.

climate within the EU and Russia as well as in the EU's Neighbourhood, on top of which solidarity actions and activities to "ensure diversity of civil society actors and their free interaction" are of significant relevance at the present time.<sup>97</sup> Indeed, according to the Forum's Policy and Advocacy Team, "civil society and democratic institutions should seize the moment and use their power for achieving a better environment for citizens' engagement in development of their countries".<sup>98</sup>

Yet, the Forum's initiative represents a pilot project fostering a bottom-up approach in which non-governmental actors coordinate themselves to intensify their voice and advance their ownership at the institutional level as well as at the EU-Russia relations one. Therefore, the Forum's added value is a combination of the grass-roots essence and its emergence "as a provider of expertise on EU-Russia relations".<sup>99</sup> Although it is undeniable that in few years the Forum has succeeded in establishing a permanent platform for networking, there are still several challenges to tackle – *e.g.* the need of seeking financial sustainability and enhancing the Forum's internal and external strategy, particularly regarding tools to increase the voice and activity of members within the Forum as well as in policy and advocacy. The unfavourable dynamics and the demanding period ahead call the Forum to further the promotion of its mission, thus intensifying efforts and activities.

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