



EU-RUSSIA CIVIL SOCIETY FORUM
ГРАЖДАНСКИЙ ФОРУМ ЕС-РОССИЯ

The EU Rights and Values Programmes Needs Sufficient Funding: Lessons Learnt from Wider Europe

Position of the Advocacy Group of the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum

In 1993, the Copenhagen criteria put the Chapter 23 on judiciary and fundamental rights and the Chapter 24 on justice, freedom and security of the *acquis* into the centre of the European Union's accession process. Since then, these crucial democracy and value indicators have played an important role in verifying eligibility of the specific country for an EU membership.

The support for a democratic development and human rights in the countries outside the EU is a tool that enables preservation of fundamental values and security in wider Europe. We at the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum know about the EU positive role in supporting civil society in Russia. We are also aware of how crucial this support was for Bulgaria, Croatia, Czechia, Hungary, Poland or Romania and other states, before they joined the EU. Over the last 15 years, however, we observe that lack of support for the pro-reform and democracy action adds to democratic backsliding and erosion of the rule of law. And this holds true within the EU architecture and degradation of the union of common values and principles, as we have seen in some of the EU member states from Central and Eastern Europe but also beyond.

In that context, in 2018, we in the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum (EU-Russia CSF) welcomed a decision of the European Parliament (EP) and the European Commission in support of democracy and fundamental rights inside the EU through the EU's Rights and Values Programme (RVP). The request of the Parliament later in 2018 to increase the budget for this cause in the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) to EUR 1.83 billion was an absolute necessity to respond to the magnitude of challenge. The EU-Russia CSF strongly supported this request, along with many other civil society groups.

The proposal made by the European Commission on 27 May 2020 to cut the already relatively modest RVP's budget of EUR 641 million by more than 20%, due to other priorities, came as a negative surprise to all of us in the civil society groups in Europe. The recovery after the 2020 pandemic is, indeed, essential – both for economies and healthcare systems, to enable the EU to come back to normal. The support of the fundamental rights and values – a cornerstone of the EU – should not be overlooked either.

The democracy and human rights situation has significantly deteriorated worldwide during the pandemic. Unjustified restrictions in freedom of speech and assembly, rise of domestic violence,

disproportionate digital monitoring of citizens or abuse of power by the authorities are just a few of our concerns¹. Cutting funds for the RVP under these circumstances sends a very wrong signal. As the post-coronavirus support of civil society actors, working for democracy, rule of law and fundamental freedoms, increases for countries outside the EU (e.g., in Russia and elsewhere), the same should be done inside of the Union.

Looking back at the decades of support for the Russian civil society, one can observe how vital the EU support has been. Even given the restrictive climate for civil society in Russia, the EU funds contributed to:

- Preservation of prominent human rights organisations, including those preventing torture, monitoring unlawful detentions and providing detainees with legal assistance, bringing perpetrators to justice, etc.;
- Supporting independent media outlets and their sustainability;
- Cooperation of Russian civil society with its counterparts from the EU, including through the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum;
- Practising democratic citizenship².

Our members and supporter NGOs from Bulgaria, Czechia, Hungary, Poland and other EU member states call for creating a stable infrastructure for democracy and civil society support within the EU. We believe all in the EU will benefit from a stronger civil society sector based on fundamental values.

Subsequently, we suggest:

- To come back to the original amount of the EU RVP budget in the MFF (EUR 641 million until 2027) or, better, increase the budget to EUR 1.83 billion, as proposed by the EP in 2018, and in that sense recognise the concerns of the European civil society actors³;
- To design an appropriate structure of the RVP to allow the new tool to flexibly and rapidly respond to the situation on the ground;
- When designing the RVP, to consider best practices from other EU tools and instruments, such as the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR), when balancing the tool qualities (centralised – localised, big – small) or fine-tuning the instrument's structure so that it stands out of the reach of the member states;
- To empower well-established civil society organisations (CSOs) and/ or their networks with appropriate experience and capacity to help with dissemination of the financial aid (as modelled by the European Commission's framework partnership agreements for the European Eastern neighbours);

¹ See a related statement by the Board of the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum on 9 April 2020: <https://eu-russia-csf.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/StatementCOVID09.04.2020.pdf>

² One of the recent examples for that is a petition to the Council of Europe (CoE) with a request to hold a review by the Venice Commission of the compliance of 2020 amendments to the Russian Constitution to the CoE standards – signed by more than two hundred thousand people in Russia. See the text of the petition at www.change.org/popravki_konstitutsia (English text is below Russian)

³ See an open letter by European civil society organisations – co-signed by the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum: <https://civic-forum.eu/publications/open-letter/letter-to-eu-and-national-leaders>

- To include issues that are now missing in the EU's toolbox at home: for example, the emergency support for human rights defenders (EIDHR and ProtectDefenders.eu might serve as examples);
- To provide the civil society actors within the EU with emergency and core (operational) funding, flexible support with a lower administrative burden. Foreseeing such funding via negotiated procedure (without calls for support) for the CSOs, which could meet the local needs on the ground and respond to crises, providing funds for advocacy at the local governments' level will help achieving a long-term change envisaged by the RVP.

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The EU-Russia Civil Society Forum was established in 2011 by non-governmental organisations as a permanent common platform. At the moment, 182 NGOs from Russia and the European Union are members or supporters of the Forum. It aims at development of cooperation of civil society organisations from Russia and EU and greater participation of NGOs in the EU-Russia dialogue. The Forum has been actively involved, inter alia, in the questions of facilitation of visa regime, development of civic participation, protection of the environment and human rights, dealing with history and civic education.

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