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# Filling the Void

Why the EU Must Step Up Support  
for Russian Civil Society

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## Policy Brief

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Over the past 15 years, the space for civic engagement in Russia has continuously shrunk, and it looks set to be cut further during Vladimir Putin's fourth presidential term. Following a wave of repressive measures, it is already more restricted than it has been since 1991. Non-governmental organisations and activists have been stripped of funds as their activities have been criminalised. They increasingly face a double disconnect: from international partners and within their own society. The clampdown on civil society reflects the growing repression of Russian society as a whole. But growing local initiatives and rising protests across the country undercut the narrative that Russian civil society is dead. And despite the pressure, Russian civil society is proving to be more active, resilient and diverse than is generally assumed. It continues to have new ideas and the capacity to be a key agent of development and social change in Russia. Many groups and individuals continue to have a vision for the country's future and are willing to work with Western partners. The example of Ukraine shows that civil society is an indispensable factor in overcoming the authoritarian legacy of post-Soviet societies.

The European debate has to refocus on Russia as a major driver of global authoritarianism and of 'closing space' for civil society, a worldwide pushback against civil activism. Instead of looking only at what Russia does abroad, the EU and the member states should look more deeply at developments within the



country. Many international funders have pulled out of Russia, and the EU should now fully embrace its role as the main Western donor. This brief calls on the EU to give civil society more political support, to increase the funding it provides and to redesign the instruments it has at its disposal so that it can reach out to a broader range of activists. It is time the EU lived up to its own guiding principles on relations with Russia, and in particular, the fifth of the Five Guiding Principles passed by the European Affairs Council in March 2016. Here the EU has pledged to ‘support more and more Russian civil society’.<sup>1</sup> The overall aim of EU support should be to build an ‘eco-system’ of civic networks that link the various social sectors in Russia and connect civic activists across the post-Soviet space.

**Keywords** Russia – Civil society – EU support to civil society – EU policy on Russia

## Introduction

Kremlin disinformation has twisted the European debate on Russia. Since the annexation of Crimea in 2014, European thinking has become one-sided, looking only at what Russia does abroad: in Ukraine, Syria and so on. The Kremlin has successfully diverted attention away from the situation within the country. Europe needs to refocus to see Russia for what it is: a country steeped in a prolonged structural crisis and facing a myriad of social problems which the Putin regime has been unable to solve over the past 18 years. Since a wave of mass protests brought public discontent to the surface in the wake of the Duma elections in 2011, the Putin regime has used a two-pronged approach to reconsolidate its power. First, it has channelled public sentiment towards foreign policy in order to forge a new social contract around Russia’s ‘national greatness’. Second, it has progressively closed the space for active civic engagement and most forms of what Václav Havel called the ‘independent life of society’.<sup>2</sup> The two efforts are really two sides of the same coin as the Putin system seeks to ensure its own survival. ‘Crimea is a synonym for the destruction of civil society in Russia’, blogger Alexander Morozov wrote in 2014 in an open letter to Matthias Platzeck, a leading German Social Democrat, ‘it is a synonym for the deep abyss into which the Kremlin has thrown Russian society’.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> From a statement by High Representative Federica Mogherini (see below).

<sup>2</sup> Václav Havel, ‘The Power of the Powerless’, in *Open Letters: Selected Writings, 1965–1990*, P. Wilson (trans. and ed.), (1991).

<sup>3</sup> For the full text see <http://dekabristen.org/2014/11/28/alexander-morozov-antwort-an-platzek/>.



# Repressive trajectory

Today's Russia is a central driver behind an alarming double trend: the global rise of authoritarianism and a worldwide crackdown on independent civil activism. The phenomenon known as 'closing space' for civil society, a clampdown on civil activism in many regions of the world, has been discussed on civic platforms for several years. Since 2016 the issue has at last moved to the centre of international expert and political debate. According to Freedom House, a US-based non-governmental organisation (NGO), political rights and civil liberties have been in decline around the world for 12 consecutive years.<sup>4</sup> The international CIVICUS network warns of a 'crisis of democracy', with serious threats to civic freedoms now affecting some 106 countries.<sup>5</sup> As expert studies have long centred on the 'Global South', it has taken time for Russia and the other post-Soviet countries to become a focus of the debate.<sup>6</sup> In its Freedom of the World index, Freedom House has defined Russia as a 'non-free' country since 2005. In 2017, however, Russia's overall score sank to 20% (100% being given to completely free societies), with an all-time low in the index for political and civil rights. On the map of the world provided by the *CIVICUS Monitor*, Russia is now marked as a country where civic space is being 'repressed'.<sup>7</sup>

While China is the undisputed champion of state censorship and Internet control, Moscow has spearheaded the legal and judicial repression of civic activism for several years. In 2012 the Kremlin's controversial 'foreign agent' law was passed to target Russian NGOs. It has become an international bestseller, reproduced in various versions not only by Russia's post-Soviet neighbours, but also in countries around the world. A similar NGO law was passed by the Knesset in 2016, triggering accusations that in its anti-NGO drive Israel is becoming similar to Putin's Russia. The debate has been refuelled by plans for a special parliamentary committee to investigate foreign funding of Israeli NGOs and a travel ban on 20 foreign NGOs. The case of Hungary highlights how far anti-liberal policies are making headway within the EU. The government of Viktor

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<sup>4</sup> <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/freedom-world-2018>.

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.civicus.org/index.php/state-of-civil-society-report-2017>.

<sup>6</sup> See Tanja Lokšina and Anna Sevortian, *Civic Space in Eurasia: Ideas for Change, Russia 2017* (February 2017), <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/02/24/briefing-shrinking-space-civil-society-russia>; Melissa Hooper and Grigory Frolov, *Russia's Bad Example*, Free Russia Foundation (February 2016), <http://www.4freerussia.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/Russias-Bad-Example.pdf>.

<sup>7</sup> See <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2017/russia> and <https://www.civicus.org/index.php/state-of-civil-society-report-2017>.



Orbán has put pressure on internationally funded NGOs since 2015. According to Hungarian experts, a law passed by the Hungarian parliament in June 2017 imposing tough restrictions on foreign-funded NGOs is part of a broader effort to apply a copy-and-paste version of Russia's clampdown on civil society.<sup>8</sup> While Hungary is stepping up anti-NGO legislation, fellow EU member states Poland and Romania have jumped on the bandwagon, tightening state regulation of foreign funding for domestic NGOs. Poland's right-wing government, in particular, has set an alarming new precedent with a controversial law passed in October 2017. Under this legislation all funding of NGOs is now controlled by a central agency that is close to the government and directly attached to the prime minister's office. Critics are predicting the 'total manipulation of civil society'.<sup>9</sup>

More than anywhere, Russia's repressive trajectory is felt in its post-Soviet neighbourhood, which Moscow is again claiming as its sphere of influence. Azerbaijan, Armenia and four of the five Central Asian countries (Kyrgyzstan being the exception) have all adopted their own variants of the foreign agent law to repress their civil societies. In 2014 Azerbaijan became Moscow's most eager apprentice, rapidly surpassing even the Russian model in the severity of its violent crackdown. Over a two-year period, almost all leading NGO representatives were sentenced to long prison terms, while most international donors and agencies were forced to leave the country. By late 2015 small Azerbaijan had some 100 political prisoners, more than were held by Russia, which is 15 times as populous. Although some activists have been released, the authorities have intensified their witch-hunt against independent groups and journalists. The number of political prisoners has risen to a record 158, while civil activism is struggling for survival amid a lack of international support.<sup>10</sup>

Post-Soviet countries have not only been copying Moscow's example: they are also increasingly cooperating with the Russian authorities—and each other—to suppress civic activism. While civil groups are becoming marginalised in their countries, the regimes are building a new 'axis of repression' that stretches from Belarus to Central Asia.<sup>11</sup> Playing on the interest despotic regimes share in preventing 'colour revolutions', Russia is forging new loyalties in the region.

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<sup>8</sup> 'Hungary: Crackdown on Civil Society à la Russe Continues', <https://www.csis.org/blogs/international-consortium-closing-civic-space/hungary-crackdown-civil-society-à-la-russe>.

<sup>9</sup> On Poland see <https://www.politico.eu/article/pis-polish-ngos-fear-the-governments-embrace/amp/>. On Romania see <https://www.romania-insider.com/romania-functioning-rules-ngos/>.

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.humanrightsclub.net/en/news/2017/azerbaijani-political-prisoners-numbers-grow-lack-adequate-action-stop-repressions/>, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2018/country-chapters/azerbaijan>.

<sup>11</sup> 'RepressIntern': Russia's Security Cooperation with Fellow Authoritarians', <https://www.opendemocracy.net/od-russia/mark-galeotti/repressintern-russian-security-cooperation-with-fellow-authoritarians>.



Increasingly, these authoritarian partnerships are focusing not only on legislative copy-pasting, but also on targeting the activities, lives and freedoms of individual citizens. In 2016 Russia extradited hundreds of Uzbek asylum seekers and migrants to Uzbekistan, where they faced prison and torture. Most recently a Russian court ordered the deportation of a prominent advocate for migrant workers to Tajikistan.<sup>12</sup>

## Negative synergy

The Russian authorities have mostly put pressure on Russian civil society and society itself. The discrediting of any pro-civic engagement outside state control has been a hallmark of the ‘power vertical’ that Putin has built up since the early 2000s.<sup>13</sup> Legislative pressure has come in several waves, each growing in size and magnitude. The first wave came in response to the first ‘colour revolutions’ in Georgia and Ukraine in 2003–4. With the revised NGO law of 2006, Russia was still prepared to back down to insert some corrections following international criticism. The second wave came in response to the mass protests of 2011–12. A whole bundle of repressive legislation was rushed through parliament, and this time the Kremlin ignored all international criticism. On the contrary, it initiated another wave of legal and judicial repression in early 2014, following the Euromaidan protests in Ukraine. This wave has continued up to the present, with the current focus falling increasingly on Internet users and social media. A particularly negative synergy has developed between the foreign agent law and the 2015 law on ‘undesirable organisations’, which is directed at international donor organisations. Together, the two laws have put the non-state sector under relentless pressure. They have cut the sector off from crucial funding, thus paralysing many organisations and leaving limited room for operational activities. An overview of Russian legislation directed against civil society is given in Table 1.

<sup>12</sup> On Uzbekistan, see the reports by Amnesty International: [www.amnesty.ie/uzbekistan-russian-authorities-complicit-forcibly-returning-hundreds-asylum-seekers-migrants-face-torture/](http://www.amnesty.ie/uzbekistan-russian-authorities-complicit-forcibly-returning-hundreds-asylum-seekers-migrants-face-torture/). On Tajikistan see <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-deports-migrant-advocate-tajikistan/28890548.html?>

<sup>13</sup> For a recent analysis of the precarious system built up under Putin’s power vertical, see <http://intersection-project.eu/article/politics/regional-power-russia-why-it-getting-more-fragile>.



**Table 1 Legislation targeting civil society in Russia (2012–the present)**

2012	<b>Law on foreign agents</b>	<p>This law requires all non-commercial organisations to register as foreign agents if they accept foreign funding and engage in ‘political activities’. Any transaction above 200,000 roubles (approximately €3,000) must be declared to the Ministry of Justice. An amendment in 2014 authorised the Ministry of Justice to register NGOs as foreign agents without their consent. For most Russians, this label is linked to being a ‘spy’ or ‘traitor’. NGOs are obliged to mark all statements and publications with a ‘foreign agent’ label and must regularly provide detailed reporting on their funding and activities. Organisations that fail to comply can incur fines of up 300,000 roubles (around €4,400) while individual heads of NGOs can face criminal charges leading to up to two years in prison.</p>
2015	<b>Law on undesirable organisations</b>	<p>The law authorises the prosecutor general’s office to declare any foreign organisation it deems a threat to Russia’s constitutional system and national security ‘undesirable’ and to ban it from the country, without a judgment by a Russian court. In response, 11 foreign donor organisations, mostly from the US, have closed their Russia offices. In March 2018, two election-focused NGOs based in Berlin and Vilnius were added to the list. The law prohibits Russians from accepting financial support from organisations declared ‘undesirable’ and from disseminating their materials. Penalties for involvement with ‘undesirable’ foreign organisations range from administrative fines to imprisonment for repeated violations. On the basis of this law, legal proceedings have been initiated against 11 Russian organisations for posting hyperlinks to websites of ‘undesirables’ on their websites.</p>
2016	<b>Defining ‘political activities’</b>	<p>Following long-standing demands by NGO leaders, the Ministry of Justice proposed a new definition of ‘political activity’ that included virtually any attempt to influence public policy. Despite criticism from the Presidential Council for Human Rights and Civil Society, the amendments were passed by the Duma in May 2016. Under the amended law, any legal or policy analysis, monitoring of government, public opinion surveys or even research can be defined as ‘political’ if it is aimed at influencing the government or public opinion.</p>



<b>2017</b>	<b>Foreign agents media law</b>	<p>The law was rushed through parliament in retaliation for US moves against Kremlin-funded media outlets in the US. It authorises the government to designate any foreign media organisation operating in Russia as ‘performing the functions of a foreign agent’. The law makes targeted foreign media outlets subject to the provisions of the 2012 foreign agents law. That is, they must mark their products with a ‘foreign agent’ label and submit detailed reporting on their funding and activities. So far nine US media outlets have been declared foreign agents. Russian experts warn that the hastily drafted legislation threatens to erode the Russian media law and to further restrict independent media in the country.</p>
<b>2018</b>	<b>What is next?</b>	<p>New legislation extending the scope of the foreign agents media law to include individuals passed first reading in the Duma in January 2018. The expanded law will also force blacklisted news organisations and individuals to add a ‘foreign agent’ label to all content, including social media posts. Russian organisations or users who cite the content will also need to specify that it was created by a foreign agent.</p> <p>At the same time, a report by a temporary commission of the Russian Federation Council (Upper Chamber) has called on lawmakers to tighten legislation to ensure the ‘defence of national sovereignty’ and ‘prevention of interference’ in Russia’s internal affairs. The report defines nine major threats to national sovereignty, starting with the ‘creation of and support to NGOs . . . directly or indirectly participating in political activities in the interests of foreign governments’. According to press reports, both the Duma and Federation Council have taken up the call to draft new legislation.</p>

State pressure has intensified since the Russian Ministry of Justice was authorised in 2014 to register targeted NGOs on its list of foreign agents. Until then, most Russian NGOs had refused to register themselves, demonstrating impressive solidarity within the sector. But by late 2016, some 158 NGOs were forcefully registered by the Ministry, including respected veteran organisations such as the International Memorial Society and the renowned Levada Centre. The city of Perm, which since the 1990s had acquired fame as the ‘capital of Russian civil society’, became a depressing symbol for the continued setbacks



after local authorities took over and re-designed Perm-36, the only Gulag museum set up in an authentic historical setting in the former Soviet Union.

During 2017 the foreign agent register was reduced to 79 organisations, as Russian NGOs gave up foreign funding, 'liquidated' themselves or, in some cases, successfully defended their cases in court. But even if the register has been halved, most leading and renowned NGOs, many performing substantial work since the 1990s, continue to be listed. In December 2017 five NGOs were added to the register, including a well-known truckers' organisation, which has staged public protests since 2015. This has served as a reminder to everyone that the law is still being enforced.<sup>14</sup> In 2016 parliament approved a long-awaited legal definition of what constitutes a 'political' activity, but this has done little to allay the uncertainty evoked by the foreign agent law. Virtually any social activity seen to 'influence government or public opinion' is now classified as 'political'. And as the Ministry of Justice was quick to explain, any public criticism of the foreign agent law is itself sure to constitute a case of 'political activity'. In early 2017, Deputy Head of the Kremlin administration Sergei Kirienko underlined that any amendment of the law was 'not realistic', making it clear that the law continues to be a sword of Damocles hanging over the sector. Indeed, a young lawmaker recently even proposed branding US fast food chains, such as McDonalds, KFC and others, as foreign agents and labelling their products accordingly. In late 2017 the authorities demonstrated new resolve, rushing through new foreign agent legislation to target non-Russian media outlets and to brand individuals, including bloggers, as foreign agents. Nine US media outlets have been added to the ranks of foreign agents, with the authorities also starting to apply a new legal framework to ban international websites and newspapers in Russia.

At the same time, the law on undesirable organisations continues to produce strange new buds. It has already led to the withdrawal of all leading US-funded donor organisations, leaving an estimated funding gap of at least \$20 million. Russian human rights organisations and environmental NGOs, which receive no or hardly any support from the Russian state or Russian society, have been hit the hardest. The EU and its member states are facing the challenge to fill the gap, even after two election-focused NGOs based in Berlin and Vilnius

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<sup>14</sup> For the current list, see <http://unro.minjust.ru/NKOForeignAgent.aspx> and <https://www.rferl.org/amp/russia-truckers-foreign-agent-label/28890827.html>.



have been added to the list.<sup>15</sup> Meanwhile, the authorities have also started targeting Russian individuals and civic groups under the law, which shows that they are the real focus of this legislation. In 11 cases groups have been charged (and some of them fined) just for posting hyperlinks to materials found on the websites of ‘undesirable’ foreign organisations.<sup>16</sup> Again, it is clear that this is not the end of the story. Russian lawmakers have started to examine legislation on deporting foreigners engaged in ‘undesirable behaviour’ as well as the imposition of penalties for Russian citizens involved in activities of the same kind. Most recently a special commission set up by the Federation Council has submitted a worrying new blueprint on the ‘defence of Russian sovereignty’ from alleged ‘outside interference’. Again, foreign-funded NGOs are presented as ‘threat no. 1’, even ahead of foreign media and foreign sanctions against Russia. Legislators tackled the issue head-on to prepare legislation to fend off any ‘outside interference’ in 2018, an election year in Russia.<sup>17</sup>

## United in repression

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In this climate, civic space in Russia has continuously shrunk and is now more closed than at any point since 1991. Through the state media the regime has generated an atmosphere of defamation and hatred, which has revived the old logic according to which ‘everyone who is not for us is against us’. Citizens criticising the state or engaging in independent activity are branded ‘enemies’ or members of a ‘fifth column’ financed by the West to destroy Russia. As a result, the NGO sector is facing a double disconnect: from its foreign partners, but also within Russian society as a whole. This exposes a serious gap, which has been partially created by Western donors since the 1990s, as many NGOs came to rely solely on foreign funding, neglecting to develop domestic fundraising and to build constituencies in Russian society. This allows the authorities to play on an existing disconnect to widen the rift between civic activism and wider Russian society.

For experts from Russia and the wider region, state efforts to set civil society against the larger society reflect a deep mistrust of society which goes back to

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<sup>15</sup> For the list published by the Russian Ministry of Justice, see: <http://minjust.ru/ru/activity/nko/unwanted>. For more details and public statements, see the website of the European Platform for Democratic Elections, <https://www.epde.org/en/news.html>.

<sup>16</sup> ‘Russia: Punished Over Hyperlinks’, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/11/30/russia-punished-over-hyperlinks>.

<sup>17</sup> <http://www.council.gov.ru/media/files/f8SAIXEeNH3T8krO2G1fHZA2W2hTRuMJ.pdf>. On the legislative machinery in motion, see [https://www.newsru.com/russia/16nov2017/kontrpatriot.html?utm\\_source=tema-](https://www.newsru.com/russia/16nov2017/kontrpatriot.html?utm_source=tema-).



Soviet times. Nobel laureate Svetlana Alexeevich puts the matter in stark terms: ‘If the state aims at inciting citizens to rise against each other—what else is this but civil war?’<sup>18</sup> But as human rights activist Tanya Lokshina notes, the division between civil society and society at large ultimately has to be overcome, as both are repressed and the Russian authorities are seeking to ‘lock all those who criticise the government into a vacuum.’<sup>19</sup>

The situation of Russia’s civil society directly mirrors the authorities’ efforts to stifle independent thought in general. The search for ‘inner enemies’ is a sign of a ‘return to totalitarian traditions of state control’, notes well-known publisher Irina Prochorova. Levada Director Lev Gudkov also emphasises the systemic interrelatedness of civil society and Russian society as a whole: ‘The destruction of Russia’s civil society . . . not only shames the country, but more importantly, leads to the suppression of the sources of its development and to stagnation. This inevitably turns the country into moral, intellectual and social morass, in which the state and society disintegrates.’<sup>20</sup>

These twin campaigns—against both organised civil society and activism in the wider society—have greatly intensified since 2012. Even before the Duma passed the foreign agents law, a new law on assembly was rushed through parliament. It was expanded shortly afterwards to make mere participation in a non-authorized demonstration a potential criminal offence and then followed by a barrage of new legislative and judicial measures directed at society at large. And as shown by a series of recent attacks, especially the assault on the well-known environmental activist Andrey Rudomakha, as well as by cases of torture of anti-fascist activists in Penza and St Petersburg, physical violence is increasingly becoming the new normal for civil activism in Russia.<sup>21</sup>

More recently the authorities have started to zero in on the last few remaining areas which had been left relatively untouched by state interference: the Internet, and also art and education. After trailing behind China in online control for a long time, the Russian state has set off an intense race to bring digital media under state surveillance. The first volley came in 2016 with a package of legislation initiated by Duma Deputy Irina Yarovaya. Officially presented as

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<sup>18</sup> *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 13 May 2015, author’s translation.

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.demdigest.org/russia-ombudsman-slams-putins-new-weapon-undesirable-ngos/>.

<sup>20</sup> Interview with Irina Prochorova, <https://meduza.io/feature/2016/08/01/my-nikakie-ne-marginally-my-avangard-obschestva> (author’s translation). ‘Declaration of Lew Gudkov after the registration of the Levada Centre as a “foreign agent”’, [www.zeitschrift-osteuropa.de/support-levada/erklärung-gudkov/en.html](http://www.zeitschrift-osteuropa.de/support-levada/erklärung-gudkov/en.html).

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.opendemocracy.net/od-russia/dmitry-shevchenko/protecting-the-environment-is-becoming-a-deadly-occupation>; <http://en.publicverdict.org/topics/found/7406.html>.



anti-terrorism measures, the 'Yarovaya package' has dramatically widened state control of communication data. The only thing slowing it down has been the immense cost of the infrastructure required. The curtailment of privacy and personal freedom is continuing with new laws imposing restrictions on instant messengers and on digital tools designed to circumvent Internet censorship. The latest amendments aim to restrict ownership of Russian Internet exchange points, again in the name of state safety, to protect the country from 'possible foreign interference'. For Russian journalist Andrei Soldatov, the clampdown has 'old KGB roots', with 'national security' again being used as a euphemism for the stability of the present political regime. The NGO Agora speaks of a 'creeping criminalisation' and sees the Russian Internet as being de facto 'under martial law'.<sup>22</sup>

In the world of art and culture, state pressure has been growing more slowly, with the authorities intervening mostly in individual or local cases, often with the support of the Russian Orthodox Church. But the spectacular arrest of prominent theatre director Kirill Serebrennikov in August 2017 has clearly signalled that the authorities are seeking to draw new lines on cultural freedom as well. As in Soviet times, the worlds of theatre, film and literature have moved to the centre of political controversy, setting off intense debates over national values. Unveiling a controversial new monument, Culture Minister Vladimir Medinski praised the Kalashnikov gun as 'Russia's cultural brand' in 2017,<sup>23</sup> which shows that in present-day Russia the foremost role of culture is that of defending national interests. Meanwhile, Serebrennikov, who is accused of embezzling state funds, has been kept under house arrest, despite a wave of protests from leading cultural figures in Russia and abroad.<sup>24</sup> At the same time, state control is expanding quietly but rigorously in the realm of education and science. The registration of the Dynasty Foundation as a foreign agent in 2015 was the first worrying sign. The immediate target was Dmitry Zimin, a leading Russian philanthropist who had supported an impressive range of educational projects. This time, the foreign agent mania did not affect a small human rights organisation, but programmes supporting university professors, publishers and students in the chronically funding-strapped academic sector. Even more worrying is the pending closure of the European University of St Petersburg. Manoeuvres that lack transparency and continued pressure on Russia's most

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<sup>22</sup> <https://www.kyivpost.com/article/opinion/op-ed/andrei-soldatov-kremlins-vpn-ban-kgb-roots.html>.

<sup>23</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/sep/19/30ft-high-statue-of-mikhail-kalashnikov-unveiled-in-moscow>.

<sup>24</sup> <https://themoscowtimes.com/articles/show-trial-kirill-serebrennikov-58759>; <http://m.faz.net/aktuell/feuilleton/debatten/gespraech-mit-der-theaterkritikerin-marina-dawydowa-15219460.html?GEPC=s2>.



successful private university are clear signs of how academic freedom is also rapidly shrinking in Russia. University lecturer Irina Pisarenko warns that the Russian education system is turning into a ‘humanitarian disaster area’. In their obsessive hunt for imaginary foreign agents, state authorities ignore the real danger of ‘a collapse of Russia’s entire education system’, as though ‘it presents no threat to the country’s national security’.<sup>25</sup>

With new restrictions being placed on the remaining free spaces in Russian society, the authorities are leaving no doubt about their resolve to prevent any wider anti-government protests. This is underlined by the ominous new National Guard, which was set up only a year ago and already comprises 400,000 troops, drawn from different services. With its official task being to protect the ‘public order’, this personal army has clearly been formed to deter and suppress any major social protests against the regime. Expert Pavel Luzin emphasises that, like other attempts to control society, the new ‘praetorian guard’ has its roots in the early years of Bolshevik rule and reflects the state’s ‘old distrust of Russian citizens as a hostile environment’.<sup>26</sup> Official propaganda extols the narrative of a population rallied behind its ‘SUPERPUTIN’ leader, as the President is currently depicted in a Moscow exhibition. However, it is probably mutual distrust which is most decisive for state–society relations in present-day Russia.

## Mixed impact

More than ten years of intensifying state pressure have had a mixed impact on Russia’s civic sector. The first repressive wave, in 2006, ended up boosting the competence and professionalism of many NGOs. Since then, state and civil society have been locked in a cat-and-mouse race, with both sides learning from each other. Even the latest spate of reprisals is producing a complex and mixed picture. On the one hand, the viability of many organisations has been seriously threatened; on the other, the sector is showing an impressive resilience, adapting to the new normal of restrictions and becoming more diversified than ever. In the wake of the foreign agent law, NGOs have become involved in hundreds of legal proceedings. In 2016, fines for non-compliance amounted to an estimated 30 million roubles (€430,000).<sup>27</sup> The drying up of funds weakens not only human

<sup>25</sup> <https://www.opendemocracy.net/od-russia/irina-pisarenko/whos-left-to-fight-for-russian-academia;>  
<https://www.opendemocracy.net/od-russia/alexander-kondakov/the-rise-of-russias-vice-squad.>

<sup>26</sup> <http://intersectionproject.eu/article/security/ominous-rise-russian-national-guard.>

<sup>27</sup> ‘Davlenie na grazhdanskoe obshchestvo v Rossii’, <http://publicverdict.org/topics/research/12227.html>.



rights organisations, but also NGOs engaged in environmental protection, political education and dealing with the country's totalitarian past. And for the first time, legal restrictions are creating an imbalance in the NGO sector as organisations blacklisted as foreign agents are cut off from state funding even after giving up foreign support. With NGOs increasingly being divided into 'good' organisations (those active only in social issues) and 'black sheep' (those that are critical or active in broader issues),<sup>28</sup> selective state funding has been deepening the division further. Having grown to almost seven billion roubles (€100 million) in 2017, the presidential grant system favours organisations close to the (semi-official) Public Chamber, official youth movements or the Orthodox Church. 'There is always money for patriotism', complains even a Public Chamber representative, 'but never funds for projects dealing with real social problems'.<sup>29</sup> In fact, state funding is being used as another instrument to manipulate the Russian NGO sector. Political activist and journalist Andrey Kalikh speaks of 'toxic money' aimed at undermining the independence of civil society.<sup>30</sup> Instead of 'fighting for the interests of Russian citizens and holding the government accountable', warns researcher Olesya Zacharova, the Russian NGO sector is becoming 'almost a branch of the state, obediently fulfilling its instructions'.<sup>31</sup> The problem is compounded by the emergence of pseudo-NGOs that are not independent and push pro-government agendas. In the age of disinformation, such GONGOs (government-operated NGOs) are another 'fake' item which Western donors have yet to learn to handle.

The first task, however, is to break through the narrative that Russian civil society has become weak, ineffective and marginalised. While repression from above is real and is stifling the non-state sector, many Western observers underestimate how active and diverse Russia's civil society continues to be. It is true that a number of organisations have been forced to close down, but others have responded to the pressures by realigning their strategies. Many NGOs labelled as foreign agents have shown special resilience, sometimes re-registering under a new name or setting up subsidiaries abroad. At the same time, activism is taking on new forms as organisations embrace new tools and technologies to modernise community engagement. One area where citizen initiatives are developing most dynamically is urban activism. In addition, new initiatives have emerged to modernise and professionalise the civil sector itself. Groups active in the sector are accomplishing

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<sup>28</sup> 'Structural Inequality in the Third Sector', *BRICS Law Journal*, 3/3 (2016).

<sup>29</sup> 'Neravnyj grant. Kakim NKO pomogaet gosudarstvo', *Kommersant*, 10 October 2016, <http://kommersant.ru/doc/3100825> (translation by the author).

<sup>30</sup> <https://www.opendemocracy.net/od-russia/%20andrei-kalikh/kak-repressii-i-prezidentskie-granty-usmiryaut-nko>.

<sup>31</sup> 'Vladimir Putin Loves Civil Society (As Long As He Controls It)', *Foreign Policy*, 12 October 2016.



this through innovative seminars and creative workshops, but also by ‘embedding’ themselves in NGO offices to empower organisations to make more effective use of new forms of crowdfunding, social media marketing and digital security. ‘We are anything but marginals’, says publisher Irina Prochorova about Russian civic activism, ‘we are the vanguard of Russian society’.<sup>32</sup>

To sum up, legal repression and new inequalities are reshaping the civic landscape in Russia, making it more diffuse, but also more diverse than ever. While the number of officially registered NGOs is stagnating, new initiatives, grass-roots movements and creative projects are emerging all over the country, even in remote regions. Some organisations offering social services are proving hugely successful, for example, those providing help in the search for missing people (‘Liza Alert’) or family support provided by elderly people (‘Granny for an hour’). And in the social sphere, philanthropy, charities and private donations are on a steep rise, reviving a tradition which had been lost for almost a century. Support for charity work has been rising steadily, increasingly through online crowdfunding. In January–November 2017, Russians donated a total of 1.2 billion roubles (€17.2 million), twice as much as in the same period of the previous year.<sup>33</sup> If they are to identify and support potential new partners, Western donors need to develop a better understanding of this shifting terrain. As in the past, impressive work is being done by individuals. Examples include human rights lawyer Ivan Pavlov; a young honey producer who has revived a dying village; the people persistently guarding the memorial to slain opposition politician Boris Nemtsov on the Great Moskvoretsky bridge; and the many independent activists who are working in Moscow district councils after winning a surprise victory in September 2017.

## Rising protests

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Nationwide protests organised by opposition leader Alexey Navalny in March, June and October 2017 also demonstrated a new potential for overtly political activism in the wider society, and especially among young people. But although the anti-corruption rallies were held across the whole country, spreading more widely than those in 2011–12, the range of overtly political protests in Russia remains limited. Some protests attract special audiences, for example,

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<sup>32</sup> See n. 23.

<sup>33</sup> <https://www.rbth.com/document/5a1ef78c85600a28311b6fed/amp>.



the parody marches or ‘monstratsiyas’, which have been organised in different parts of Russia for some time. In 2017 some 3,000 people took part in a march of this kind held in Novosibirsk. But even public protests by citizens in St Petersburg last year against the decision by city authorities to transfer to the Orthodox Church the hallmark St Isaac’s Cathedral (which has been a state museum since the 1930s) failed to have a larger impact.<sup>34</sup>

So far political protests have also remained disconnected from social protests, which have increased sharply throughout the country. According to a recent study by the Center for Economic and Political Reform, protests rose steadily across Russia in the first nine months of 2017. Of a total of 1,100 events, three-quarters concerned socio-economic issues, while outright political rallies were rare.<sup>35</sup> The long-distance lorry drivers (since then branded foreign agents) have been the most visible group. They staged a series of nationwide protests against hikes in the unpopular ‘Platon’ highway tax scheme, which benefits the son of an oligarch close to Putin. At the same time, a wide range of local protests—against unpaid wages, lay-offs, closures of industrial plants and other issues—is gaining steam throughout the country and becoming the new normal in today’s Russia.

Most importantly, Russian citizens are readier than before to take action on issues directly affecting them: issues involving private property, local infrastructure or the pollution of their immediate neighbourhood. The list of examples is growing, from an initiative to protect oaks in Moscow’s Dubki Park against an investor’s project, through recent protests by thousands of angry citizens against a new Moscow housing scheme to replace the Soviet-era ‘khrushhevki’ housing blocks, to ongoing protests by citizens and ecologists against a huge new copper complex in Chelyabinsk and toxic dumpsites around Moscow. The first feminist festivals (FemFest) and the decision by a group of Russian athletes to set up separate training grounds outside state structures are other examples that disprove the narrative of Russian society being passive and dysfunctional.

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<sup>34</sup> On the march in Novosibirsk, see [https://vk.com/monstration\\_nsk](https://vk.com/monstration_nsk). On St Petersburg, see ‘Conflict Erupts over St. Isaac’s Cathedral: The End of Neutrality’, <http://intersectionproject.eu/article/society/conflict-erupts-over-st-isaacs-cathedral-end-neutrality>.

<sup>35</sup> <https://bearmarketbrief.com/2017/11/28/are-protests-on-the-rise-in-russia-the-data-says-probably/amp/>.



# Continued demand for EU support

This is the civic landscape in Russia that the EU has to contend with today. As always, it is complex, multifaceted and paradoxical. A new poll by the Levada Centre asked respondents about the extent to which they were ready to take responsibility for the development of their country. One question asked about people's ability to influence the situation around them. A staggering 68% of Russians continue to feel completely unable to change anything in their environment. When asked about their feelings of personal responsibility for the country, 33% of Russians said they were ready to take responsibility: 24% were ready to take responsibility on an 'insignificant' level, 5% were prepared to take responsibility on a 'significant' level and 4% thought they had full responsibility.<sup>36</sup> As small as this share is, it represents a significant number of people. This active part of the population, especially the part organised in civil society, continues to have the potential of becoming a 'vanguard' that could play a major role in advancing development and social change in the country.

The EU has a vital interest in reaching out to and cooperating with these groups and individuals, as fragmented as they are in today's Russia. While the political regime is fixated on a cult of the past, these groups continue to have new ideas and the ability to address real issues affecting Russian citizens, from the rule of law and pressing social deficits, to urban development and environmental protection. Crucially, members of this vanguard, including prominent human rights activists such as Lyudmila Alexeeva, have openly called on the West to maintain its support for and solidarity with Russian civil society in these difficult times.<sup>37</sup> Moreover, in a 2017 survey of members of the EU–Russia Civil Society Forum in four Russian regions, all respondents expressed interest in continued cooperation with European partners, stressing an 'urgent need' for support. The most important thing, they stressed, was for them to remain included in international networks in order to overcome increasing isolation.

<sup>36</sup> Quoted by the state-sponsored RT portal: <https://www.rt.com/politics/409946-two-thirds-of-russians-feel/>.

<sup>37</sup> Ludmilla Alexeeva, 'Russia, Human Rights Groups Need Western Aid More than Ever', *Washington Post*, 24 February 2016.



## EU support: steady but insufficient

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People-to-people contacts and cooperation with civil society have been a consistent element of EU policies on Russia from the days of the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement in 1994. Support has been sustained through a wide range of policy instruments, notably the Technical Assistance to the Commonwealth of Independent States programme (TACIS, 1991–2006) and then the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR). People-to-people contacts were reaffirmed in the roadmap for Four Common Spaces (2003) and the Modernisation Partnership offered to Russia in the Medvedev era. In the present crisis in EU–Russia relations, the EU’s Russia policy is based on the Five Guiding Principles passed by the European Affairs Council in March 2016. With the fifth principle, the EU has clearly pledged ‘to support more and more Russian civil society and engage and invest in people-to-people contacts and exchanges and policies that are related to that . . .’<sup>38</sup> But this political commitment has not been followed up with enough concrete action. According to estimates, investments in EU programmes for Russian civil society organisations still amount to little more than €7 million a year. This is inadequate considering the importance that cooperating with Russian civil society has for the EU and the interest that Russian society continues to have in joint projects and exchanges with its European partners.

EU support to Russian civil society is currently distributed through various channels. These form a complex labyrinth which outside observers find difficult to understand. The EU’s main programme to fund civil society worldwide is the EIDHR. It remains the most important source of the EU’s support to Russian civil society, both in size and because it does not require the consent of governments to operate. Another important source of support is the Civil Society Organisations grant programme. It backs civil society organisations as ‘actors of governance and accountability, partners in promoting social development and key stakeholders in promoting inclusive and sustainable growth’.<sup>39</sup> Russia is also part of the ProtectDefenders.eu programme, which supports human rights defenders worldwide. In addition, the Partnership Instrument, administered by

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<sup>38</sup> From a statement made by High Representative Federica Mogherini in Brussels on 14 March 2016, [https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/5490/remarks-high-representativevice-president-federica-mogherini-press-conference-following-foreign\\_en](https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/5490/remarks-high-representativevice-president-federica-mogherini-press-conference-following-foreign_en).

<sup>39</sup> [https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/russia\\_en/721/EU-Russia%20cooperation%20programmes](https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/russia_en/721/EU-Russia%20cooperation%20programmes).



the EU External Action Service, gives support to important projects such as the EU–Russia Civil Society Forum, and also to public diplomacy programmes aimed at presenting EU activities to the Russian public and media. While Russia is not part of the important European Neighbourhood Instrument, it is included in certain of its cross-border cooperation programmes. Some eight of these programmes—involving different Baltic Sea neighbours and Russia, and all requiring ratification by the Russian Duma—are being implemented in the period 2017–20. Extra funding is provided under the Northern Dimension policy, which was initiated in 1999. It involves the EU, Russia, Norway and Iceland. European Neighbourhood Instrument funds are also allocated for the participation of Russian civil society groups in the Black Sea NGO Forum.

Although this set of programmes reflects an impressive engagement on the part of the EU, the net outcome remains inadequate. Despite efforts in the Commission to experiment with instruments to include Russia, basic funding for the country has not been significantly increased since 2016 and remains too low. Of the entire EIDHR budget of €1.3 billion for 2014–20, only €3 million a year has been earmarked for grants to Russian civil society. It is true that new options have been introduced to permit ‘sub-granting’, which allows organisations to pass funds on to a partner. Still, the size of individual grants remains too large (starting from €300,000), as this excludes many smaller groups that cannot handle such large budget lines and need more flexible funding. To administer larger-size projects from Brussels, cuts were made in the number of personnel at the EU Delegation in Russia—which meant a loss of personnel with local expertise. This trend should be reversed. As things are, only 10 projects in Russia are currently supported under the EIDHR’s 2015 call for proposals, which represents funding of €6 million over two years. Similarly, the €5.2 million allocated to Russia under the Civil Society Organisations programme for 2014–17 only covers nine projects. In response to the EIDHR’s 2017 call for proposals for Russia, the EU received an impressive 110 applications, of which only 10–12 had any prospect of being selected. This means that applicants have a less than 10% chance of being chosen for EU funding. Neither Russian civil society nor the EU can afford to leave so much potential for cooperation untapped in the current environment, where the sector is in dire need of effective strategic partnerships.

Amid these shortcomings, it has been a positive step to include Russia in the programmes of the European Endowment for Democracy (EED), which has supported pro-democracy activists and organisations in Eastern Europe since 2013. The EU is one of the EED’s funding members, alongside 21 EU



member states and Canada. With its impressive record in ‘supporting the unsupported’ (the EED’s motto), the organisation points the way to where EU support to civil society should be heading: prioritising short timeframes, flexibility, minimal bureaucracy and a readiness to work with groups that are not formally registered. After lobbying from civil society organisations, the EED board agreed in late 2014 to extend the scope of the endowment to include support to the ‘neighbours of the neighbours’. This opened the door for funding to go to Russia and Central Asia. But again, the funding provided by the EED remains too low to meet the rocketing demand. Of almost 1,000 requests for support received in 2016, only 128 could be selected, and only 37 of these were from Russia.<sup>40</sup>

## Why support civil society?

With international funders having pulled out of Russia, the EU is facing the challenge of filling the void. It is very much in Europe’s interest to defend the competence and diversity which Russian civil society has developed since the early 1990s, much of it as a result of close cooperation with Western partners. Private European donor organisations confirm that calls for grants are meeting a response that is undiminished and often growing. In particular, groups working on more political issues, such as human rights, environmental protection and civic education, are keen to stay connected to Western partners as they have no hope of getting funding in their country. Indeed, amid Russia’s growing political self-isolation, it is vital that the country’s civil vanguard should continue to coordinate its activities with European partners in as many sectors as possible.

The double challenge is to maintain and to develop: to help traditional partners survive and develop, and at the same time to reach out to new actors, while working around obstacles set up by the Russian authorities to stop foreign support to NGOs. In doing so, short-term flexibility will have to be squared with the long-term sustainability of Western programmes. Even though the Putin system seems powerful and stable today, and even though the political elites remain crucial for reform and development in Russia, societal change will only come if supported from the bottom up. The West must do all it can to be better prepared than it was in the early 1990s, when mistakes were made. And it must help to ensure that Russian experts and actors are better pre-

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<sup>40</sup> <https://www.democracyendowment.eu/annual-report-2016/>.



pared to face future changes. The country's unresolved social problems are overwhelming: corruption, poverty, inequality, ethnic tensions, declining health and education sectors, the demographic crisis, social deprivation in 'monocities' (dominated by a single industry or company) and so on. Russia deeply needs expert knowledge in all spheres to create blueprints for reform. Though they differ from developments in Russia in numerous ways, developments in Ukraine show that an active civil society and broad horizontal networks are indispensable to any effort to overcome the legacy of authoritarian structures in the post-Soviet space.<sup>41</sup>

Civil society also offers a window into Russia, an opportunity to engage with Russian citizens and Russian society, and to inculcate mutually shared and universal principles. At a time when the Kremlin is spreading toxic disinformation, and fake news is distorting the international community's understanding of the country, genuine people-to-people connections are crucial, as is promoting fact-based information and exchange inside Russia. Ultimately, Russia is also the key to the wider Eastern region. From Central Asia through the Caucasus to Eastern Europe, regimes take their lead from Moscow: learning tactics and attempting to stifle cross-border cooperation. Just as regimes collaborate across borders and time zones, the EU should be stepping up its efforts to ensure that civil society and independent citizens also remain connected.

## Recommendations

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In the era of closing space, European state and private donors must redefine the basic tenets of cooperation with Russian civil society. In the 1990s support for the country's civil society was based on a broad impulse to help the country in its difficult transition. In the Medvedev era, cooperation moved to a more professional and technical level, with joint projects being developed increasingly 'among equals'. Neither approach works today. New paradigms are needed.

### New approaches

- Most importantly, Western actors must refocus on Russia as an important driver of global authoritarianism and of the worldwide crackdown on civil society. Support for Russian civil society should

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<sup>41</sup> On the role of civil society in Ukraine, see <https://freedomhouse.org/report/nations-transit/2016/ukraine> and <http://carnegieendowment.org/2018/01/08/ukraine-s-civic-progress-and-partial-reform-pub-75181>.



become the cornerstone of a broader European response to the international phenomenon of closing space. As with any crisis, the current situation also offers new opportunities which should be used. In particular, the current environment calls for hybrid responses as well as for more flexible instruments, rules and regulations to support a broader range of groups and individual actors.

- Policymakers and donors must also refocus on the situation within Russia, following and analysing the complex developments in the country's (civil) society. There need to be more travel (including travel to more remote regions), exchanges and personal contacts to sustain genuine people-to-people contacts. The aim must be to support trusted partners who are adapting and proving resilient, and to reach out to new actors from among Russia's social vanguard. These are groups that have new ideas and a vision for their country's future and that are ready to work with Western partners. In today's fragmented landscape, it takes more effort to identify such groups, but they certainly exist.
- Today's disabling environment should also be used to engage in a critical review of cooperation with Russian civil society since the 1990s. State and private donor organisations should discuss new options and best practices for navigating Russia's shifting environment and to open new spaces for civic engagement. In reshaping their agendas, donors must seek to adapt their methods of granting funds to the needs of Russian partners and to the risks these partners face. Grant schemes should be designed in close consultation with Russian partners. They should offer more flexibility with timeframes, reporting requirements and the reallocation of funds. Grantees should be allowed to freely assess the risks they are prepared to take, while Western partners should offer training and assistance in using secure communications channels and other forms of digital security.
- To develop new partnerships with Russian society, Western donors need to reach out beyond traditional NGO partners to wider civil society, including bloggers, lawyers, film producers, artists, designers, urban developers and cartoonists. The aim should be to connect different professional groups to each other, to help build a new 'ecosystem' where social actors from different spheres are



increasingly interlinked. It is equally important that NGOs and activists should be encouraged to engage in new communications and fundraising strategies to raise local support and build constituencies within their own society.

- Apart from continuing direct financial support, it is vital to widen the range of non-material support to civic actors. Offers of exchanges, seminars, travel grants and other new forms of capacity-building should be expanded. In particular, resources should be channelled to connect Russian activists with colleagues in other post-Soviet countries in the Eastern Partnership region and Central Asia. At a time when civil society is facing a multiple disconnect, also with fellow activists in neighbouring countries, it is important to foster professional communities and personal relationships across national borders.
- Finally, private and state donors active in Russia must urgently develop ways to identify GONGOs, which represent Russian state interests under the guise of civil society engagement. Projects with civil society partners can only be successful if organisations and individuals remain independent and clearly define their role as ‘non-governmental’. A methodology must be developed to help establish a stop list of organisations, with clear rules to avoid supporting or cooperating with Potemkin partners that defend government interests.

## EU funding and instruments

As the new leading Western donor to Russian civil society, the EU faces a number of challenges. It has to promote core European values, provide adequate resources and optimise its funding procedures. Despite the repression, Russian civil society is still willing to cooperate with Western partners and can absorb and use substantial resources, providing they are distributed flexibly.

- Most importantly, the EU must make greater efforts to stand by its own fifth principle, which commits it to supporting Russian civil society ‘more and more’. In official talks with Russian leaders, EU representatives should endorse this principle as a core part



of EU policy towards Russia. Financial and practical support for Russian civil society can only work if it is backed by an affirmative defence of inter-societal cooperation. Russia is an important test case for the EU's response to the global trend of closing space. In an increasingly interconnected world, cross-border contacts and inter-societal cooperation must be upheld as an indispensable part of international relations. They are in the interest of all countries, including Russia. Clear language must be used to resist efforts to curtail civil activity, such as the listing of EU-based NGOs as 'undesirable organisations' in Russia. The aim must be to defend the ideas enshrined in Basket III of the 1975 Helsinki accords, which promote 'freer movement and contacts, individually and collectively . . . among persons, institutions and organizations . . .'.<sup>42</sup>

- The EU should establish a joint working group tasked with developing a long-term consultation process with leading civil society representatives and experts from the EU and Russia. This dialogue should become a regular forum to discuss ways to promote cooperation and engagement between EU and Russian actors. It should build on the competence of the expert community and on the in-depth reflection on which this community has already embarked.<sup>43</sup>
- At the same time, the EU should increase the funding earmarked for Russia through the EIDHR and the Civil Society Organisations programme. To meet continued demand, reach out to new actors and build new networks, the annual budget for each of these programmes should be raised to a minimum of €10 million. This increase is needed to fill the gap left by other donors and to ensure that more Russian applicants can be supported. For the 2021–8 financial framework, the EU should also review available options to include Russian NGOs in the regional and civil society programmes of the European Neighbourhood Instrument and explore other ways to (re-) link Russian groups to colleagues and

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<sup>42</sup> <https://www.osce.org/helsinki-final-act?download=true>.

<sup>43</sup> See, for example, Richard Youngs and Ana Echagüe, 'Shrinking Space For Civil Society: The EU Response', 21 April 2017; EU–Russia Civil Society Forum, 'EU Should Increase Support For Civil Society', October 2013; Stefanie Schiffer and Yuri Dzhiladze, 'European Solidarity for Russia's Civil Society', June 2013; Fraser Cameron and Orysia Lutsevych, 'Russian Civil Society Under Threat: How to Respond', April 2013; and Barbara von Ow-Freytag, 'Vom `schwarzen Schaf' zur Avantgarde - Neue Impulse für Russlands Zivilgesellschaft'. OSTEUROPA, 67. Jg., 3-4/2017, p. 19-40.



partners from Eastern Partnership countries. While Russian civil society remains innovative and resilient, it can only thrive when it has financial resources, efficient networks and a wide range of partners.

- It is equally important that the EU should make its instruments more flexible and review its rules with a view to supporting a broader range of actors. Today's civil society is made up of more than NGOs and civic movements. Thus, instruments should be flexible enough to appeal to and remain valid for a broad range of potential beneficiaries. The EU should review and, wherever possible, relax restrictions on funding non-registered groups, social entrepreneurship, educational initiatives and other activities that have a potential for taking in revenue or making a profit. Special rules should also be designed for organisations which can no longer work in Russia but continue their operations from other countries.
- It is also vital to scale down the minimum size of grants. In the present harsh environment, social actors need funding that is flexible and available in smaller amounts. Smaller-sized grants help to reach a broader range of initiatives; support younger, innovative and creative groups; and respond faster to new legal and judicial developments in Russia. This must be supported by ensuring that adequate human resources are in place at the EU Delegation in Moscow to administer smaller financial awards. Over the years the EU Delegation has proved very professional and committed to supporting European and Russian civil society actors. To continue managing close, trusted and local connections with civil society, the Delegation needs expertise and human resources to manage more targeted grants.
- At the same time, the EU should extend the use of intermediary civil society organisations to reach innovative, independent and regional movements. Smaller international organisations can often act more quickly and flexibly, thus reducing the burden on partnering NGOs while remaining accountable to their funders



and minimising administrative costs.<sup>44</sup> This allows intermediary organisations to implement institutions' direct funding of NGOs by efficiently using small- and micro-grant schemes and combining financial support with capacity-building and convening activities. Finally, they can identify and minimise risks that Russian civil society organisations are facing and provide the protection needed.

- The EU should also review all options for including young Russians in programmes for youth and education. Given the present anti-Western hysteria in Russia, it is vital to give young people more opportunities to travel, study and work in the EU. The EU should not allow the Kremlin to isolate young Russians and alienate them from democratic values. The newly established European Solidarity Corps which so far only includes EU member states, should be opened to young Russians. Although Russia leads among the non-EU members benefiting from the Erasmus+ programme, funds should be further increased to meet the record demand from Russia. Beyond higher education, it is vital to open a 'youth window' for Russia such as now exists for Eastern Partnership countries under the EU4Youth programme.<sup>45</sup>
- Major international actors such as the EU should also recognise the importance of supporting independent Russian-language media outlets. Local independent media are a vital tool for pushing back against closing space, providing fact-based analysis on conditions inside the country and offering citizens windows into issues ranging from war, conflict and corruption to health and education. Such projects require different funding mechanisms from those appropriate for civil society organisations. The EU should study ways to develop programmes which allow for these varying needs. Where necessary, resources should be pooled. And instruments should be developed that make it possible to support innovative, high-growth mass-media outlets across Russia and the wider region.

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<sup>44</sup> Examples are the European Endowment for Democracy, the Prague Civil Society Centre, the EU–Russia Civil Society Forum, the International Partnership for Human Rights and the Netherlands Helsinki Committee.

<sup>45</sup> <http://www.euneighbours.eu/en/east/eu-in-action/projects/eu4youth>.



- To facilitate exchanges with the broader civil society, the EU should also encourage member states to implement recent guidelines that make it easier to grant visas to civil society actors and human rights defenders. Beyond that, visa facilitation procedures should be extended to representatives of wider civil society, such as young people, scientists, students, journalists and artists. At a time when the Russian state is seeking to shut its citizens off from the rest of Europe, the EU should respond with openness. The Union should make it easier for young people and society leaders to establish connections in Europe through travel, visiting, working and studying. While the EU–Russia visa dialogue is currently frozen for political reasons, the EU should consider acting unilaterally to show it remains open and accessible.

## About the author

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