

## Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on the contribution of civil society to EU-Russia relations

(2005/C 294/07)

On 1 July 2004 the European Economic and Social Committee, acting under Rule 29 of its Rules of Procedure, decided to draw up an opinion on 'The contribution of civil society to EU-Russia relations'.

The Section for External Relations, which was responsible for preparing the Committee's work on the subject, adopted its opinion on 20 May 2005. The rapporteur was **Filip Hamro-Drotz**.

At its 419th plenary session (meeting of 13 July), the European Economic and Social Committee adopted the following opinion by 109 votes to two, with six abstentions.

### 1. Reasons for issuing the opinion

1.1 The Russian Federation which plays an important international role is a strategic partner for the EU. EU enlargement further highlights the importance of the cooperation between the EU and Russia as neighbours and the establishment of the best possible relations between the EU and Russia, in the context of the development of the common European values of democracy and respect for both human rights and civil rights, is of vital importance to both parties.

1.2 Social development and improvement of living conditions, establishing the rule of law and ensuring greater predictability in the conditions and environment for business, as well as building a market economy, call for determined action. Although Russia's leadership formally subscribes to such objectives, progress in achieving them and the realities of everyday life fall far short of the expectations both of Russian and international society. The attitude displayed by the country's current leadership towards, for example, economic players and the media does not, in the EESC's view, serve to confirm the statement of intent of the authorities regarding promotion of democracy and strengthening civil society. The current trend of developments in Russia is worrying, and not just for its citizens. Russia is clearly moving away from democracy, the State is in control of the media, the Russian Army, despite international commitments, is present in Moldavia and Georgia, and the judiciary serves political ends. Building organised civil society under such conditions is an extremely difficult task.

1.3 Deepening EU integration — the internal market, the single currency and increasing cooperation in a growing number of policy areas — is a fundamental objective of historic significance, to which all Member States are committed, regardless of the recent setbacks in this process. However, the EU's internal integration must not lead to a situation where the EU draws away from Russia and the rest of Europe, which is not developing in the same way, since this could result in the division of Europe.

1.4 The declaration of 9 May 1950 by the French foreign minister Robert Schuman on the building of a united Europe draws its inspiration from the idea that European integration must be based on the desire to work together on equal terms

to achieve stated goals, on shared values and reconciliation and on people's vision of a common future. Robert Schuman also stated that Europe cannot be built all at once, but rather through practical achievements and, above all, by creating genuine solidarity. The message of the Schuman Declaration is also relevant to EU-Russia relations and the efforts to strengthen their cooperation.

### 2. Contribution of civil society to EU-Russia relations

2.1 Strengthening EU-Russian relations also requires solid support from organised civil society in the EU. The efforts of civil society in the EU are aimed at achieving improved cooperation between the EU and Russia and at supporting the process of building civil society structures and democracy in Russia.

2.2 The experience of the new EU Member States, which in ten years have successfully completed the process of post-Communist transition, is important and they can provide added value in cooperation between the EU and Russia. In particular civil society actors (NGOs) in these countries can play an important role in relation to democratisation and protection of human and citizens' rights in Russia.

2.3 The union of EU countries' business confederations (UNICE) has for many years presented proposals and opinions on the development of economic relations and EU and Russian business leaders regularly discuss this issue in the framework of the so-called EU-Russia Industrialists' Round Table and present their views to EU-Russia summits. The European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) also presents its position to summit meetings, and in 2004 it forwarded a joint letter with the Russian trade union confederation (FNPR) to the European Commission president and the Russian president in which they proposed that the EU and Russian trade union confederations should be given a similar role to that of the EU-Russia Industrialists' Round Table. Other civil society actors have on their own initiative developed ways to express their views about the development of EU-Russia relations in their specific sectors. Russian society is still poorly organised, the emergence of NGOs is slow, and they do not yet play a significant role.

2.4 For its part, the EESC has in recent years presented several opinions on EU-Russia relations, in which it addressed also the functioning of Russian civil society. The main opinions are listed in footnote 1. The recommendations and findings presented in these opinions have been taken into account in the present opinion, without, however, making specific reference to them<sup>(1)</sup>. This work led the EESC to establish direct contacts with many of the main Russian civil society actors.

### 3. Recommendations

#### 3.1 *The EU must adopt a more integrated policy towards Russia and implement it in a pragmatic fashion*

3.1.1 The consistent development of cooperation between the EU and Russia has been hampered by the fact that individual Member States promote their own interests by working bilaterally with Russia, even in matters whose management has been entrusted to the EU. Of course, nothing should be done to restrict the development of constructive and open bilateral relations between individual Member States and Russia in areas which do not fall within EU competence. On the contrary, this kind of bilateral, regional and sectoral activity is highly important, and each EU Member State must bear the responsibility for it.

3.1.2 In order to achieve positive results in EU-Russia cooperation, EU countries should agree on an EU policy towards Russia which is clearer and more focused than at present and on the mechanisms for its implementation civil society in the EU should take a more proactive stance in sharing practices of self-organisation, and in supporting the revival of solidarity networks in Russian civil society. The European Union can place what constitutes its true wealth — namely its diversity, the plurality of its forms of social organisation, and the democratic, social and cultural cross-fertilisation underpinning this diversity and plurality — at the disposal of Russian civil society and thus of Russia itself. All the Member States must work to promote common goals, a task which has become even more important following enlargement. It is equally evident that an open and straightforward approach is the best way to achieve results in developing cooperation between the EU and Russia. The EU should also develop technical assistance to help Russia become a stable, democratic and prosperous country. The structure of existing technical assistance programmes should be re-evaluated. Progress can best be made in small but determined steps.

<sup>(1)</sup> *Relations between the EU and Russia, Ukraine and Belarus (1995); TACIS – Technical Assistance to the Commonwealth of Independent States and Mongolia (1998); Relations between the European Union and the countries bordering the Baltic sea (1998); The northern dimension and relations with Russia (1999); The Northern Dimension: Action Plan for the Northern Dimension in the external and cross-border policies of the European Union 2000-2003 (2001); EU/Russia strategic partnership: What are the next steps? (2002); Wider Europe – Neighbourhood: A New Framework for Relations with our Eastern and Southern Neighbours (2003).*

#### 3.2 *The Road Maps should stimulate the preparation of a dynamic agreement between the EU and Russia*

3.2.1 The EU and Russia are expanding and deepening their relations on the basis of the Road Maps to achieve the four Common Spaces. The four Common Spaces are: 1) the Common Economic Space, 2) the Common Space of Freedom, Security and Justice, 3) the Common Space of Co-operation in the Field of External Security, and 4) the Common Space on Research, Education and Culture. The Road Maps set out some 400 measures to be taken over the few years. The EESC considers this to be an excellent approach and would stress that the EU must increase its efforts in order to create open and wide-ranging political, economic and social relations between the EU and Russia.

3.2.2 There are several aspects of the Road Maps that are relevant for civil society: for instance the prioritised sectors for regulatory and economic dialogue; facilitating competition, investment and trade; interregional and cross-border cooperation; environment; promotion of people-to-people links; movement of persons; youth; cooperation in the field of civil protection; research and education; and gradual integration of transport networks.

3.2.3 The EESC urges the EU and Russia to implement the Road Maps without delay. Their content should be constantly updated with a view to making them as practicable as possible, and their implementation should be subject to annual review by the two sides. Both the EU and Russia should also designate bodies to be responsible for their implementation. The EESC for its part is prepared to actively contribute — as a follow-up to this opinion — to this process in spheres relevant to civil society. It intends in this respect to present proposals on the content and implementation of the Road Maps, and to step up its direct contacts with the main Russian civil society actors (see points 3.4.3. and 3.5.5.).

3.2.4 The initial ten-year period of the EU-Russia Partnership and Cooperation Agreement, which was drawn up in the first half of the 1990s, will expire in 2007 if either side so wishes. The Road Maps for the four Common Spaces should serve as the basis for a new, modern EU-Russia agreement founded on strategic partnership. Russia should be encouraged to remove persisting obstacles to trade in goods and services, and to guarantee a well-functioning regulatory framework for investment so that the EU and Russia can start to draw up a free trade agreement based on Russia's market economy status and membership of the WTO.

3.2.5 The EU and Russia should also work together to revamp regional cooperation — the Northern Dimension (including Baltic Sea cooperation and the Arctic cooperation) and Black Sea cooperation — along similar lines. The EESC is pleased to note that this aspect has also been duly taken into account in the Road Maps and encourages further measures to develop regional cooperation as part of EU-Russia relations.

### 3.3 *The role of civil society must be enhanced in the context of the Road Maps for the EU-Russia cooperation*

3.3.1 Strengthening EU-Russia relations in a sustainable way will be limited unless the activities of the parties are guided by common values. These include individual responsibility, respect for the rule of law, respect for the individual and property, human rights (i.e. media freedom, organisation of free elections, political pluralism, equal opportunities and minority rights), transparency, integrity, human dignity, equality and freedom of speech, the right to organise and basic workers' rights, sound industrial relations and adequate social protection. There will be no common ground for cooperation and mutual understanding unless these values can be permanently built into the foundations of Russian socio-economic and political life.

3.3.2 The EESC considers the overall objectives of the Road Maps to be relevant. It is pleased to note that the importance of common values has been underscored as a fundamental basis in three of the Road Maps (the Common Space of External Security, the Common Space of Freedom, Security and Justice and the Common Space of Research and Education, including Cultural Aspects).

3.3.3 Strengthening of cooperation between the EU and Russia will be affected by what happens in these areas in Russia. The EESC recommends that this issue should be underlined in the implementation of the Road Maps. It strongly believes that more concrete actions to achieve the common values, which are fundamental to developing a functioning civil society, should be added to the Road Maps.

3.3.4 It is important to develop an environment in Russia where the social partners and other organised civil society actors can operate independently and participate with confidence in the preparation of social and economic decisions having a bearing on them. This calls for open dialogue and networking, which require independent media. This also requires that key international agreements such as the ILO core labour standards should be implemented in practice.

3.3.5 Prerequisites for a functioning civil society are that Russian economic and social actors should have a high degree of representativeness, be independent and have the capacity to engage in constructive and transparent expert dialogue with authorities and other actors in society.

3.3.6 The EESC welcomes the launch in spring 2005 of consultations between the EU and Russia in the framework of the second Common Space, on human rights and related basic rights, e.g. of minorities. Resolving national and local self-determination issues and avoiding the use of conflictual methods (Chechnya), which put people in Russia in danger and also pose a threat for the citizens of the EU, should be addressed in these consultations.

3.3.7 Over the years the EU has demonstrated its ability to bring about essential changes in third countries on the basis of

dialogue, and this should also be the aim in dialogue with Russia. The Council of Europe and the OSCE obviously play a key role in these matters. The EESC notes with satisfaction that the EU and Russia have agreed in the Road-Maps to strengthen their cooperation within the framework of these forums.

3.3.8 Sufficient EU financial assistance is needed to develop EU-Russia relations. More use should be made of TACIS, etc. resources to develop civil society, education and independent media, and this should also be taken into account in the European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument (ENPI). The EESC recommends that the European Commission present a proposal on how Russian civil society could derive greater benefit from the EU's relevant instruments.

### 3.4 *Civil society actors should be given an adequate role in implementing the Road Maps for EU-Russia cooperation*

3.4.1 The EU has emphasised that, in building relations between the EU and Russia, the aim is to find solutions and ways forward that are qualitatively sustainable. This requires that the views of different stakeholders in civil society be taken on board, which is why it is so important to develop civil society in Russia.

3.4.2 The EESC recommends that the role of credible civil society actors be strengthened in EU-Russia cooperation mechanisms by setting up a consultative committee under Article 93 of the PCA. This would enable maximum benefit to be derived from their expertise in cooperation between the EU and Russia. There has been positive experience with similar arrangements in EU relations with the Mediterranean countries, India, Latin America and the ACP countries. The EESC's understanding is that Russia also has large numbers of actors who have the necessary capacity to contribute to this end.

3.4.3 The EESC aims to play a significant role in the process of finding the right way for civil society to be involved in EU-Russia cooperation.. The EESC's intention to strengthen its contacts with the main Russian civil society actors, mentioned in points 3.2.3 and 3.5.5, should ideally be expanded in the foreseeable future into an advisory forum in the context of formal EU-Russia cooperation.

### 3.5 *Cooperation between civil society in the EU and Russia should be further strengthened*

3.5.1 Over the years, some interest groups, including the trade union movement, consumers, employers, farmers and other civil society groups have established contacts with their counterparts in Russia. This is the case both at EU and bilateral level. Russian organisations are also often involved in international cooperation in their respective fields. The aim is to promote direct links, networking, interaction, and exchange of experience and knowledge between ordinary citizens. The main objectives of civil society cooperation should include expanding relations of trust between the EU and Russia.

3.5.2 However, these relations must be further diversified and developed, since many Russian organisations do not have adequate contacts with each other and with similar organisations in other countries. The EESC encourages all actors in organised civil society to further strengthen and enlarge their cooperation with Russian counterparts in their own field of interest. The EU should for its part initiate actions to facilitate this cooperation.

3.5.3 The EU Member States should step up efforts to involve civil society organisations in the setting up of joint projects, in promoting educational and exchange programmes in this framework, and in initiating joint economic projects. The governments of the EU Member States should also provide more public information about the existence of such projects and train the civil society sector to prepare projects.

3.5.4 It is important to find ways of establishing contacts with all parts of Russia, including Kaliningrad. The Committee of the Regions' proposals<sup>(1)</sup> for developing regional cooperation between the EU and Russia are pertinent in this regard. The EESC supports these proposals and recommends that the Permanent Partnership Council upgrades this topic on its agenda.

3.5.5 The EESC will use its position to promote the development of links between EU and Russian organised civil society. A first step in this direction would be to organise regular contacts, joint workshops, etc. on specific topics with Russian partners (e.g. economic reforms and employment, reform of social security systems, development of social dialogue in Russia, involvement of civil society actors in EU-Russia cooperation). The aim would be for this to lead to regular and more intensive cooperation between both sides. This should in due time develop into an advisory forum underpinning the EU-Russia cooperation mechanism (see also points 3.2.3 and 3.4.2-3.4.3).

3.6 *Cooperation between Russia and its neighbours, and between civil society actors in these countries, should be supported.*

3.6.1 It is important for relations between Russia and its neighbouring eastern European countries — e.g. Russia and

Ukraine — as well as Moldova and Belarus — to be consolidated at the same time as the EU steps up its relations with its eastern European neighbours. Closer relations and more intensive interaction are needed on political, economic and social issues, with the aim of improving European cooperation. The EESC proposes that the EU should support such development as part of its neighbourhood and partnership policy.

3.6.2 The EESC recommends that cross-border contacts between civil society actors in these countries should also be supported in this context. The EESC, for its part, has already taken measures to develop dialogue and intends to report regularly thereon to the Commission.

3.7 *Cross-border mobility between the EU and Russia should be promoted*

3.7.1 Good transport links and easy travel are essential for promoting cross-border mobility. The EESC supports efforts to develop and integrate transport links, which require investments in improving infrastructure and logistics in both the EU and Russia. Major international financing bodies, above all the EIB and EBRD, should be more involved in this activity.

3.7.2 The EESC is pleased to note that the objective of facilitating people-to-people contacts and travel between the EU and Russia — e.g. through integration of transport networks, legal border-crossing and visa facilitation and principles for readmission — have been pinpointed in the Road Maps. Border agreements are building blocks for smooth cross-border mobility.

3.7.3 The current visa procedure is slow and expensive and represents a threshold — even an obstacle — to tourism and closer cross-border interaction between civil society actors, including young people and students. Visa and work permit application procedures must be simplified; this would help to promote cross-border mobility and relations. Therefore it is important that the current negotiations between the EU and Russia on visa facilitation lead as soon as possible to an outcome that satisfies both parties.

Brussels, 13 July 2005.

The President  
of the European Economic and Social Committee  
Anne-Marie SIGMUND

<sup>(1)</sup> CdR 105/2004

## APPENDIX

**to the opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee**

A. The following amendment was rejected by the plenary session but received at least one-quarter of the votes cast:

**Point 1.3.**

Delete.

**Reason**

Point 1.1 of the opinion already states that the Russian Federation is a strategic partner of the European Union, which adequately conveys the content of point 1.3.

**Voting:**

For: 33

Against: 64

Abstentions: 8

---