



ON DISCLOSURE OF THE LIST OF COMMON STEPS

Statement of EU-Russia Civil Society Forum

Saint Petersburg, 10 September, 2012

We, the members of the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum, appeal to the Russian government and the Council of the European Union to disclose the list of *Common Steps towards Visa-free Short-term Travel*, the bilateral document between the Russian Federation and the European Union setting out the benchmarks that need to be met by both sides in order to achieve visa-free travel between the Russian Federation and the European Union, as well as respective Progress Reports.

We consider transparency in public life as the fundamental condition for democracy and the rule of law and support every effort to increase the level of transparency and accountability of national and European authorities to the public. Therefore we strongly believe that a bilateral document affecting the lives of so many people in such a tangible and direct way should be made public.

The list of common steps towards visa-free short-term travel was approved at the EU-Russia Summit in December 2011. They concern measures for both the EU and Russia that need to be fulfilled before the negotiations on visa-free travel can be opened and covers such policy areas as document security, including biometrics; combating illegal immigration and border management; public order, security and judicial cooperation, including the fight against transnational organized crime, terrorism and corruption. The implementation of the measures has already started, yet the full list of benchmarks has not been made public, unlike in case of the similar documents adopted by the EU for Moldova and Ukraine.

Public access to state documents having an impact on the legislative process is a fundamental precondition for democracy and the rule of law, which are declared to be core principles of cooperation between the EU and Russia by the current Partnership and Cooperation Agreement. Denial of access to the list of common steps to the Russian and European civil society severely undermines the transparency of the process and accountability of the authorities to the public. The visa dialogue cannot be fully monitored and the proper implementation of the reforms cannot be assisted or assessed by non-governmental organisations. In this way, the civil society is excluded from the decision-making process affecting vital public policy areas.

Denial of public access to the list of *Common Steps* is not justified, since the disclosure of the similar Ukrainian and Moldovan documents, containing the same sort of information, has in no way harmed the implementation process or the bilateral relations between these countries and the EU. On the contrary, the experience of these two countries, as well as the Balkan states, which have covered the same route of reforms and now enjoy visa-free travel with the EU, demonstrates the significant role that the civil society can play in the process. The involvement of civil society organisations has proved to be crucial in boosting the necessary reforms, providing experience and

expertise in the relevant policy areas as well as creating the favourable political climate for change. Thus, achieving visa-free travel between Russia and the EU – which is possible only after meeting all the agreed policy benchmarks – will be greatly assisted by active participation of the European and Russian civil society. Its full participation is not, however, possible unless the document containing the conditions for starting the negotiations on visa-free travel is fully disclosed.

Therefore, the General Assembly of the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum calls upon the government of the Russian Federation and the Council of the EU to disclose the *Common Steps towards Visa-free Short-term Travel* and respective Progress Reports immediately.