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Why those fleeing religious persecution in China should be granted asylum

HRWF / Bitter Winter (14.09.2018) - <https://bit.ly/2peZBq1> - Speeches of Massimo Introvigne and Rosita Sorytè at the 2018 Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) Human Dimension Implementation Meeting, Warsaw, September 13, 2018.

Massimo Introvigne, the repression of religion in China: consequences for OSCE Participating States

On February 1, 2018, a new Religious Affairs Regulation came into force in China. The consensus of legal experts is that it imposed new restrictions on the “gray market” of religions and churches that are not part of the five official government- controlled religious institutions. It also provided new tools for persecuting the religious communities in the “black market,” included in the official list of [xie jiao](#), “heterodox teachings” that are entirely prohibited and persecuted. Being active in a xie jiao is a crime punished by art. 300 of the Chinese Criminal Code with a term to three to seven years “or more” in jail.

Tibet and Xinjiang have special regulations, but the general climate hostile to religion has led to increased persecution of Uyghur and ethnically Kazakh Muslims in Xinjiang and dissident Buddhists in Tibet. Scholars estimate that “transformation through education” camps, which are in fact concentration camps, host 1,5 million inmates, two-thirds of them Uyghurs.

OSCE participating States have multiple relations with China, and we would encourage them to raise human rights and religious liberty issues in a more decisive way in bilateral meetings.

The OSCE space is also affected by the situation in China, as participating States receive a growing number of religion-based asylum requests by Chinese citizens. The largest contingents of them are Uyghurs, particularly in Central Asia, and members of religions listed as xie jiao, particularly in Western Europe and North America. There are still

refugees from Falun Gong but in recent years the highest number comes from The [Church of Almighty God](#), a Chinese Christian new religious movement listed as a xie jiao since 1995 and credited by governmental sources with some four million members in China. The Church of Almighty God has been persecuted since 1995 or before, and more than 300,000 members of the Church have been detained in China. Some NGOs have documented several instances of torture and extra-judicial killings. It has also been targeted by consistent campaigns of fake news, accusing it of crimes rigorous investigation by Western scholars proved it has not committed.

Because of the fake news, general hostility to refugees, and confusions about how refugee laws should be interpreted, out of more than 2,200 asylum requests of members of this Church in the OSCE area, excluding the United States, only 320 have been accepted.

We commend Canada and Sweden for its prevalence of favorable decisions and note that the Italian authorities have started a cooperation with scholars for receiving more accurate information on this and other groups.

But in other countries, most of the asylum seekers of The Church of Almighty God and other persecuted Chinese religions are rejected and, in some cases, deported back to China where they quickly “disappear.”

We recommend that serious and fair consideration be given to religion-based asylum requests by Chinese refugees, including those from The Church of Almighty God, in all participating states, and that nobody should be deported without seriously evaluating the risks he or she would face in China, which may include incarceration, torture, and even death.

Rosita Šorytė, Intolerance and Discrimination Against Religion-Based Refugees from China in the OSCE Area: The Case of The Church of Almighty God

These days there are a few issues that are particularly toxic in our societies: refugees and China. And my very young and still very small organization – ORLIR – is dealing with both of them.

We see how the issue of migration is turning apart countries, changing alliances, and helping populists of all kind to rise to power. It took us and media a long time to finally acknowledge that most of those people who massively arriving in Europe are not refugees but migrants. Still in the media confusion persists and very often information is inaccurate and blurred.

We all know that there is a big difference between migrants, searching for a better economic life, and refugees, who for reasons of war and persecution are fleeing their countries of origin. Some of these people have only two choices: to be persecuted, tortured and even killed, or flee their country and try to seek protection.

I perfectly understand the challenge for the authorities of recipient countries to distinguish who is persecuted and in imminent danger, and who is pretending for the sake of getting the right to stay. My humble experience of talking to many refugees shows that those who are pretending being persecuted and are better actors and are getting refugee status. And those who are in real danger very often fail to prove their case and thus are sent back to their oppressors.

I could tell many moving and tragic stories of people who flee severe persecution in China on religious grounds. I will focus today on members of a new Christian group called The Church of Almighty God. The Church of Almighty God is one of the largest and fastest growing religious groups in China. And this is exactly why it is severely

persecuted. Any member identified by Chinese authorities would be sent to jail, most of them will be tortured in order to extract information about other members of the Church. They will be sent to re-education camps and, once released, will be kept under watch, and eventually put in jail again if they would not agree to cooperate with Chinese authorities and renounce their faith. Cases of suspect organ harvesting from prisoners of conscience of this Church have also been reported.

Most members of The Church of Almighty God would flee their country only and when they have confirmed information that their arrest is imminent. They do not flee to seek our jobs or get financial or economic benefits but to survive and protect other brothers and sisters of their group. By fleeing China, they lose everything: their families, friends, homes, and jobs. They arrive in our countries with nothing but their faith and their hope that fellow brothers and sisters would support them. They arrive carrying a lot of pain and deep trauma. Very often, out of fear, they are not able to present their cases well enough and end up being denied asylum or even being deported.

On August 31, despite protests by the Red Cross, the German Evangelical Lutheran Church, and several NGOs, including mine, a member of this Church, sister Zhao Xueliang, was deported back to China from Germany. She has "disappeared" in China and her whereabouts are unknown ever since. My pleading today to the representatives of the participating States is, please hear and remember the name of The Church of Almighty God. Please carry out serious research about this group, do not believe what Chinese media, and Western media that copy them, are saying but read reliable information from independent NGOs and academic sources. We have no right to play with people's lives and we cannot send them to their death.

Another toxic issue is to talk about China. Yes, China spares no efforts and financial means to persuade us that there are no human rights problems there. They bribe and buy everybody they can: politicians, journalists, even academics who would be paid to say that what we are presenting to you today it's not true. Some of the meetings we organize during international political or academic conferences are half empty because people know: once you will be spotted by Chinese authorities participating in this kind of meetings, you will never go to China again. China plays an important role at the United Nations to kill every mention of human rights, and human rights are rarely part of the agendas of bilateral meetings either because everybody wants to have good economics contracts with China. But, if we cannot change Chinese politics, perhaps we can at least protect those who flee Chinese persecution. It is not only our moral duty to protect those who are in imminent danger. States have a legal obligation under international law.

Footnote

The paper of HRWF on this issue was already published in our newsletter.

Annual Report of the Parliament Intergroup on FORB

APPG for International Freedom of Religion or Belief (06.09.2018) - <https://bit.ly/2Nz1ZMr> - On 4 September 2018, the European Parliament Intergroup on Freedom of Religion or Belief and Religious Tolerance presented its annual Report on Freedom of Religion or Belief 2017. The report mentions 34 countries of which 19 significantly restrict the right of people to live in accordance with their faith. It also calls for a strengthening of the mandate of the EU Special Envoy for the Promotion of Freedom of Religion or Belief outside the European Union.

The European Parliament Intergroup on Freedom of Religion or Belief and Religious Tolerance (FoRB & RT) is a group of like-minded Members of European Parliament (MEPs) dedicated to ensure that the European Union (EU), in its external actions, promotes and protects the right to freedom of religion or belief as well as religious and belief tolerance.

They state in the introduction "Through this report, we hope to highlight the practical ways in which the EU can use its influence in the wider world, to promote and protect freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief for all people. In addition, we have included signs of hope, in an attempt to appreciate glimmers of light in otherwise dark places.

"Nevertheless, much of the world's population is deprived of their right to freedom of religion or belief, thought or conscience. Rohingya Muslims continue to be persecuted in Myanmar, Christians continue to be sentenced to death for blasphemy in Pakistan, Atheists continue to be demonized and non-Hindu's are step-by-step deprived of their rights in India, to name but a few of the many examples of the persecution of religious or belief communities throughout the world."

Recommendations

Strengthening the mandate of the EU's Special Envoy for FoRB

At the institutional level, the Intergroup was and is pleased that one of its main goals – the creation of a separate Envoy for FoRB outside of the EU – has been realized with the appointment of Mr. Figel in May 2016. We have seen him very active in the promotion of freedom of religion or belief outside the EU since his nomination.

However, the formal position of the Special Envoy is weak. It is not a full time activity, and with limited resources. As far as FoRB is concerned, we have recently seen that more and more governments and decision-makers realise the importance of freedom of religion or belief. Within Europe the UK and Denmark both now have Special Envoys on FoRB. And the German government is considering such a position too.

Moreover, it is now ever more widely acknowledged that not only is the role of religion or belief in third countries so important that it cannot be ignored in the EU's external relations, but also that religious and belief organisations and especially their leaders can play a constructive role in the field of peacebuilding, especially through reconciliation, humanitarian assistance, good governance and development policies in general.

Therefore we recommend:

- That starting in the autumn of 2019 the SE for FoRB gets a more visible position, and adequate human and financial resources;
- That the mandate of the SE includes not only the protection of FoRB, but that the SE also becomes the central focus for the EU's external policies in regard of the role of religion or belief, and religious and belief organisations in third countries;
- That therefore the most logical place for the SE is to report directly to the HR/VP since both the work of the EEAS and of the Commission is relevant for the SE's mandate and only the HR/VP brings the two institutions together;
- That the SR on HR and the SE on FoRB discuss their working programmes in such a way that they strengthen one another. And that the SE on FoRB has the full mandate and capacity to do whatever is necessary for the implementation of the EU Guidelines.

EU Guidelines on the Promotion and Protection of Freedom of Religion or Belief

The EU Guidelines were adopted five years ago, and a revision is neither foreseen nor necessary. The intergroup does see, however, the number of training activities increasing and agrees with the broad approach taken during these training activities, for example,

focus on religious and non-religious beliefs, focus on the positive role religious and belief actors can play in realising objectives of foreign and development policies as well as meeting the challenges posed by intolerance and violence based on religion or belief.

Based on these considerations, the intergroup's second group of general recommendations relate to the promotion of the implementation of the EU Guidelines:

- The EEAS should rethink the decision not to publish its Guidance Note. MEPs, MPs and civil society together might provide a useful source of ideas for improvement, but they can only deliver if they can respond to a public document;
- The current format of training sessions on FoRB literacy is well-balanced and attracts ever more attention from within the EU-delegations and Member State embassies. The EEAS should continue to invest in these sessions, and could usefully work together in this respect with the FoRB Learning Platform developed by NORFORB;
- Although it is good to see that the Heads of Delegation will be offered a special session on FoRB during their annual meeting in Brussels, the session should be extended in time, so that stakeholders, including representatives of the intergroup, can contribute;
- The EU Guidelines protect all religions or beliefs. During the training sessions, this should be emphasised, calling for particular attention for those religious and belief communities, who are less vocal. For example, because their religion or belief does not have a hierarchical organisation or the adherents are less known and less organised. Delegations and embassies should also reach out to those religious and belief communities, whose religions or beliefs are abused by extremists for advocating violence and terrorism;
- Training sessions should, in particular, focus on relations with religious leaders. While it is not up to diplomats to get involved in theological discussions, they should not shy away from engaging with these leaders in order to strive for commonly held policy objectives, such as peace-keeping and reconciliation, good governance, respect for the environment and humanitarian relief.

European Parliament

In the past, the intergroup's annual reports did not contain recommendations for Parliament itself, but considering the growing interest in FoRB and the increasing activities of both the Foreign Affairs Committee and the Vice-President responsible for the Art. 17 Dialogues, this year a number of recommendations seem relevant to be included:

- The Art. 17 Dialogues should, whenever they relate to the promotion of FoRB literacy, be integrated into the EEAS training activities, the activities of Parliament's Foreign Affairs Committee and the intergroup itself. Too often, these Dialogues are stand-alone activities and their outcomes are not widely known, let alone discussed in parliamentary committees and networks;
- Whereas the intergroup welcomes the initiative taken to adopt during this mandate a report on FoRB, it should not become a fig leaf for not acting through other on-going parliamentary activities, such as in the context of the Parliament's delegations with third countries. Once the plenary has adopted the Resolution based on the report, it should also find a way of checking its implementation by all EU institutions and Member States.
- Instead of formulating only general recommendations on the protection of FoRB, Parliament should try to be more targeted when it comes to the relations with individual third countries.

Many of the country specific recommendations included in the report are meant to stimulate EU-delegations and Member State embassies to become active. In its contacts with the EEAS, the Commission, representatives from third countries and with civil society, Parliament should highlight the need for country-related FoRB literacy.

[Read the full report](#)

EU should 'put people of the world' first in quest for religious freedom – report

World Watch Monitor (06.09.2018) - <https://bit.ly/2NuyjAo> - Members of the European Parliament (EP) have called for the EU to “put the people of the world before our financial and political interests”, in a report about religious freedom.

The [Annual Report on Freedom of Religion or Belief 2017](#), presented by the EP Intergroup on Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) and Religious Tolerance, points at the growing understanding of the importance of freedom of religion or belief around the world.

“We cannot accept that people are being killed, tortured, or oppressed, because of their religious convictions or beliefs,” said Adina Portaru, Legal Counsel for [ADF International](#) after the presentation of the report at the European Parliament on Wednesday (5 September).

The report calls for the position of the Special Envoy for FoRB outside the EU, Jan Figel, to be strengthened: he should play a more visible and central role in the EU’s external relations.

It focusses on 34 countries, in 19 of which people face significant restrictions in living in accordance with their faith. It urges the EU, for example, to “openly condemn” [the anti-conversion laws in seven of India’s states](#) and “encourage central government to push for their repeal”.

Although ostensibly aimed at preventing “forced conversions”, in reality such laws are [often used to prevent all conversions](#) – whether by force or free choice – and especially conversions to minority religions such as Christianity. Accusations of forced conversions also regularly [lead to attacks](#).

The report also calls on the EU to work with [Pakistan](#) to repeal its blasphemy laws. “At least 19 people are on death row as a result of sentences passed under Section 295c166 of the penal code and many more are serving prison sentences”, the report said, adding “a reported 71 people have been killed by mobs due to blasphemy accusations since 1990”.

[Pakistan’s blasphemy laws](#) caught the world’s attention with the conviction on blasphemy charges of [Aasiya Noreen](#), a Christian woman, in 2009.

Noreen (better known as ‘Asia Bibi’) faces the death penalty and has been in prison, waiting for her appeal to be heard. In April Pakistan’s chief justice [said](#) he would decide, “soon,” her fate.

The parliamentary Intergroup in their report suggested the EU would “include FoRB as a priority in the next EU Pakistan Strategic engagement plan”. The situation for Pakistan’s minorities remained problematic, it said, and “the EU should ensure that protecting the rights of the citizens of Pakistan, especially minorities, is a priority for both parties”.

During a visit in December 2017 the EU’s Special Envoy for Freedom of Religion or Belief, Jan Figel, [told Pakistani officials](#) that the renewal of their export privileges to Europe would depend on the release of Noreen.

In February, however, the EU [renewed the trading agreement with Pakistan](#).

HRWF Preliminary Comments

The 48-page report of the Intergroup (<https://bit.ly/2wMzod2>) and its 98-page explanatory annex (<http://www.religiousfreedom.eu/2018/09/04/2018-report-and-annex/>) is of high quality but the methodology still needs a number of important improvements.

Ukraine is listed as a country with **severe violations** of religious freedom (the worst category) perpetrated in territories that it does not control any more while **Russia** does not appear as such on the list of violators of religious freedom in the table of contents. Under the title "Ukraine" (Annex, pp 77-78), almost all the criticisms concern violations committed by Russia in Crimea and the separatist leaders in Donetsk and Lugansk.

Surprisingly, according to the report, Russia does not appear on the list of countries that violate religious freedom. However, in Russia,

- The peaceful Muslim movement Tablighi Jamaat was banned in 2009
- Jehovah's Witnesses were banned in April 2017. All the properties and places of worship of their 395 congregations were confiscated and their 175,000 members were denied freedom of assembly even in private homes
- 25 Jehovah's Witness, including a Danish/EU citizen, have been arrested since then and are in pre-trial detention
- 9 Jehovah's Witnesses are under house arrest
- At least 5 peaceful (Muslim) Said Nursi followers are also in prison
- 5 Scientologists are in prison for the mere exercise of their religious freedom.

Among the 34 countries listed in the report, many do not have any people behind bars for the exercise of their religious freedom (Article 18 of the ICCPR). Russia is increasingly jailing peaceful believers but does not appear on the list of the countries where there are Minor Violations, Problematic Issues or Severe Violations...

Will Europe ban circumcision?

The question sounds absurd, but anti-circumcision activists are winning legal and policy victories—and overturning the definition of freedom of religion in the process.

By Seth Kaplan

Mosaic Magazine (29.08.2018) - <https://bit.ly/2omVFJO> - In June 2012, a court in Cologne, Germany ruled that the circumcision of boys should be considered a prosecutable physical assault. In a case involving a four-year-old Muslim boy, the judges declared that the permanent physical alteration of any part of the body infringes a child's right to decide his beliefs for himself. The verdict against the doctor who had performed the procedure stated that neither the rights of parents nor the right to religious liberty could justify "serious and irreversible interference with physical integrity."

Human-rights advocates, medical associations, and many legal experts in Germany supported the decision. For Holm Putzke, a professor of criminal law at the University of Passau who had long argued for a ban on non-medical circumcision, the ruling was a particularly hopeful sign for the future, one that, "in the best case, [could] lead the religions concerned to change their mentality when it comes to respecting children's fundamental rights." Another leading expert called for a national discussion on "how much religiously-motivated violence against children a society is ready to tolerate."

To be sure, the ruling also met with protests, mainly on the part of practicing Jews, Muslims, and Christians. For the first two groups especially, circumcision is a basic element of identity and a tradition that strengthens communal bonds but most of all, in the words of the American political theorist William Galston, “a God-given obligation, the key to and symbol of membership in an ancient and worthy community.”

Jews in Germany have adhered to this commandment, which is performed on the eighth day after birth, for some 1,700 years; Cologne itself had a synagogue at least as early as 321 CE, when Constantine the Great ruled the city as part of the Roman empire, well before the ancestors of most of the city’s current inhabitants had settled on German soil. In Islam, although there are variations in the age at which the rite is performed—for some it is as early as the seventh day after birth, for others as late as puberty—circumcision has likewise been a religious norm from the start.

For Jews and Muslims, therefore, if a government bans circumcision, it is in essence banning the practice of their religion.

Although German lawmakers would soon override the Cologne ruling—in December 2012, legislation was passed explicitly permitting parents the right to have their boys circumcised—the issue is unlikely to disappear given the growing opposition to the practice among Germany’s general population.

And not just there. The Cologne ruling produced ripple effects elsewhere in the German-speaking world. In light of it, two hospitals in Switzerland announced that they would temporarily stop performing circumcisions altogether. In Austria, the governor of Vorarlberg province ordered state-run hospitals to cease the procedure except for health reasons until the legal situation was clarified.

Beyond these locales, the episode in Germany marked just another step forward in a growing trend across Northern Europe, where an “intactivist” movement has been gaining momentum. A 2013 poll in the United Kingdom showed almost two-fifths of the population favoring a ban on non-medical circumcision. A number of other countries have debated outlawing the practice or at least requiring medical supervision of all circumcisions (as Sweden has done since 2001 and Norway since 2014). According to Anne Lindboe, Norway’s ombudsman for children, “With good information about risk, pain, and the lack of health benefits of [circumcision], I think parents from minorities would voluntarily abstain from circumcising children.” In its place, she charitably proposed that Jews and Muslims enact a symbolic, non-surgical ritual—as if the underlying issue were one of their collective ignorance of modern medicine, a deficiency to be overcome by means of a bit of symbolic play-acting.

More drastically, a bill was introduced this year in Iceland’s parliament not only to ban circumcision on non-medical grounds but to impose a six-year prison term on anyone who removed “part or all of the [child’s] sexual organs.” According to Silja Dögg Gunnarsdóttir, the Progressive-party parliamentarian who introduced the bill, the central issue is “children’s rights, not . . . freedom of belief.”

More virulent themes, themselves suggestive of deeper motivations, have also been mobilized in condemnation of the practice. Thus, one of Denmark’s most prestigious newspapers published an article referring to “black-clad men” who torture and mutilate babies in fulfillment of a barbaric custom. Similarly, a cartoon in a Norwegian newspaper pictured law-enforcement officers questioning a rabbi who holds a religious book while stabbing a baby in the head with a devil’s pitchfork and a woman holding a bloodied religious book while cutting off the child’s toe. The woman protests: “Mistreating? No, this is tradition, an important part of our belief!”

No less loaded sentiments, possibly voiced in ignorance or cultural blindness, can occasionally be spotted lurking behind, or obtruding from, official pronouncements. In October 2013, a resolution on “Children’s Right to Physical Integrity” was passed resoundingly by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE). The resolution itself was based on a report prepared by PACE’s Committee on Social Affairs, Health, and Sustainable Development, which held that “circumcision applied to young boys is clearly a human-rights violation” since it permanently changes a child’s physical integrity at an age when he is unable to give a well-informed consent. The committee’s rapporteur, self-described as “a children’s-rights activist,” added that arguments in favor of the practice are “purely serving the adults who wish to avoid a confrontation with the ‘dark side’ of their own religion, traditions, and, finally, identity” (emphasis added).

A Hierarchy of Rights

In parsing these various statements and the attitudes behind them, it’s critical to understand the cultural and legal background against which they play out. Almost uniformly, opponents of circumcision appeal to a single standard of judgment—namely, the standard of human rights. That being the case, in what follows we need to shift our focus to the concept of human rights itself, and in particular to see how that concept is interpreted and applied by different groups, cultures, and societies, with, inevitably, certain rights prioritized over others—a seemingly theoretical exercise but one in which the debate over circumcision figures prominently.

For the Icelandic parliamentarian who introduced the bill criminalizing neonatal circumcision, the priorities are starkly clear: “everyone has the right to believe in what he wants,” she said flatly, but “the rights of children come above the right to believe.”

As it happens, this statement is based on the false assumption that only religious belief qualifies as a human right, and not religious practice—an error that bedevils virtually every discussion not only of circumcision but of the nature of religious liberty in general. But, putting that aside for the moment, the parliamentarian’s statement well captures the debate between those, like proponents of the ban on circumcision, who raise the banner of individual rights against those who believe that religious or communal norms ought to matter at least as much if not more. Both sides claim their position is backed both by law and by human-rights conventions.

For instance, many anti-circumcision activists point to Article 5 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), which states that “no one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment”; for these activists, circumcision qualifies as just such a form of cruel and inhuman treatment. But supporters of circumcision also point to the same declaration, with its strong backing for religious freedom and the right of families to decide how to raise their children. Article 18 states:

[E]veryone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes . . . freedom, either alone or in community with others, and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship, and observance.

The word “practice” would seem to include circumcision.

Nor is this the only source of tension between the sides. Western public authorities have greatly expanded the definition of what can legitimately be considered “child abuse”—i.e., situations in which authorities can intervene to protect a child’s rights. In the case of outright sexual abuse, such interventions by the authorities are broadly supported across all groups. Disagreement arises when a government substitutes its own standards for those of the parent in areas such as levels of parental supervision, sex education, and religious practice; in these cases, what some may see as a parent’s prerogative or

community right, others may see as an activity legitimating state action to protect a child's individual rights.

This can happen even when both the family and the government share broadly similar values. But it is more likely to happen when they do not—as is often the case in a highly individualistic, secular society that contains within it one or more strongly religious groups, or similar groups with a strong sense of communal identity.

Unsurprisingly, in Western societies of this kind, and especially in Western Europe, opposition is building to certain longstanding religious practices, going so far as to cause some among the faithful to doubt their continued ability to live a religious life in their home country; indeed, significant numbers have begun either to consider the possibilities for them elsewhere or actually to pick up and move. Thus, alongside the efforts to ban circumcision in the name of children's rights, campaigns have been mounted (successfully in Sweden, Switzerland, Norway, Poland, Denmark, and Iceland, moving forward in Holland and France) to ban kosher and/or halal slaughter in the name of animal rights; to abolish eternal cemeteries (in Belgium and Switzerland) in the name of environmental concerns; and to interfere in the operation of religious schools (in the UK and Belgium) in the name of non-discrimination.

European courts have forced a Belgian Jewish girls' school to admit boys; ruled, on the basis of claimed risks to health and safety, against a nurse who wanted to wear a cross at work; and accepted the dismissal of a government employee who refused to perform same-sex civil partnerships. Sweepingly, the Council of Europe has declared that all states ought to "require religious leaders to take an unambiguous stand in favor of the precedence of human rights . . . over any religious principle."

In the United States, generally and rightly considered a more hospitable home to religion, practices like circumcision are unlikely to be outlawed in the near future—although, as Jon Levenson acutely pointed out almost two decades ago, America, "a society undergoing a painful sorting-through of its own moral and cultural dispositions," has hardly been immune to anti-circumcision fevers. And even here the state is increasingly seeking conformity with a hierarchy of rights centered on the principle of personal autonomy. Whereas once religion was protected on the grounds that the Constitution forbade the establishment of any law that infringed on religious duties if they were a matter of conscience that could be traced to sincerely held beliefs (cf. the Wisconsin v. Yoder case of 1972), in recent years the courts have protected religion only from discrimination that targets it directly.

Starting in the 1980s, for instance, the Supreme Court has allowed the government to prohibit religious activities if the specific prohibition at issue could be shown to be applicable to all citizens. On these grounds, it ruled in 1988 that the U.S. Forest Service could build a road on lands deemed sacred by Native Americans—even though an environmental assessment had recognized that the damage would be severe and irreparable and had proposed alternative routes.

The 2010 Affordable Care Act (that is, Obamacare) originally did not allow religious organizations to opt out of its across-the-board requirement that employers provide insurance coverage for the purchase of abortifacient drugs. Legal challenges ensued, and in one prominent case the Supreme Court overturned lower-court rulings against Little Sisters of the Poor on the grounds that a reasonable opt-out accommodation could be made. But despite an interim October 2017 rule issued by the Trump administration to allow for such voluntary accommodations, the issue still awaits judicial resolution.

Freedom of Religion vs. Freedom of Conscience

Although it should not be necessary, it's no doubt useful to stipulate that no one is arguing for all religious practices to be condoned. No society or community should be able, in the name of freedom of religion, to prevent women from being protected from violent treatment, for example. But different societies will naturally have different standards that they wish to uphold: some societies will accept polygamy, while others ban it. That is why religious practices, and longstanding traditional customs that have taken on a religious flavor, are among the hardest issues to address within a human-rights framework: the large number of potential conflicts with non-believers, and the necessary tradeoffs with other rights, are highly complex and not easily reducible to simple either-or categories.

Yet this has hardly deterred those hostile to religion, including those who should know better, from jumping to dangerously sweeping conclusions. A representative example in the UK is John Grant McKenzie Laws, a former lord justice of the English Court of Appeal. Responding to a relationship counselor who had lost his job after raising objections to advising same-sex couples, Laws dismissively proclaimed: "In the eye of everyone save the believer, religious faith is necessarily subjective, being incommunicable by any kind of proof or evidence." Moreover, he continued, the defense of any position whatsoever on purely religious grounds "is irrational, as preferring the subjective over the objective. . . . [I]t is also divisive, capricious, and arbitrary."

It is thanks in part to prejudicial reasoning like this that freedom of religion is being reconfigured by judges, politicians, government officials, and political theorists to mean only freedom of worship and association, on a par with freedom of conscience and of political opinion. So narrow an understanding of faith ignores the communal and institutional components of religion, both of which have unfortunately little purchase in a society driven by an ethic of autonomy. But this understanding also, as we have seen, contravenes Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. And it has no grounding in the American Constitution—which hasn't prevented American lawmakers, officials, and courts from espousing it.

The same turn of mind obstructs careful deliberation of the appropriate ways to govern liberal democratic societies increasingly defined by their diversity. Whereas once there was a widely-accepted dominant ethos in such relatively cohesive and homogeneous countries as the Netherlands, Norway, France, and, to a lesser extent, the United States, secularization and individualization have splintered the previous consensus—and at a dangerous moment, just as these countries have found themselves dealing with millions of recently arrived immigrants who not only do not share the once-common ethos but who also tend to place a much greater emphasis on the values of faith and community.

Deciding what limits to set on observant religious groups—with regard to marriage, divorce, female clothing, schooling, parent-child relationships, circumcision, and so on—requires a delicate touch. In societies increasingly governed by elites hostile to even their own religious heritage, that touch is little in evidence.

Religion and the Roots of Liberalism

This brings us to the deeper problem presented by the current debate over rights, a problem that goes to the heart of contemporary liberalism and that has its own bearing on the issue of circumcision.

Although many today would find it hard to believe, a strong case can be made that both democracy and liberalism were born from and nurtured by religion, and by the social institutions that religion helped produce. Many would find this hard to believe because modern political theory is often assumed to be the product of secularization and dissatisfaction with religion. But that is a misreading of history.

In reality, Christian scholars, energized by religious fervor, transformed political theory in the 16th and 17th centuries. Seeking to understand the institutions and practices of the perfect republic, many turned to the Hebrew Bible, from whose writings on the governance of ancient Israel they developed ideas about the legitimacy of democracy that would influence such thinkers as John Milton, James Harrington, and Thomas Hobbes. Later on, religious pluralism—based on the recognition that religious beliefs hold an essential place in each person’s life; that religion itself is of high value in any moral society; and that it is necessary in such a society to enable people of different beliefs to live together—became a building block of American and European democracy.

In his reflections on early-19th-century America, Alexis de Tocqueville observed that a successful democracy is not only founded on religious principles but positively requires a religious basis because of its unique capacity to “teach . . . citizens how to act in the wider interest, as well as for their own good.” As he admiringly put it in *Democracy in America*,

Religion in America takes no direct part in the government of society, but it must nevertheless be regarded as the foremost of the political institutions of that country; for if it does not impart a taste for freedom, it facilitates the use of free institutions. Indeed, it is in this same point of view that the inhabitants of the United States themselves look upon religious belief. I do not know whether all the Americans have a sincere faith in their religion; for who can search the human heart? But I am certain that they hold it to be indispensable to the maintenance of republican institutions. This opinion is not peculiar to a class of citizens or a party, but it belongs to the whole nation, and to every rank of society.

It is doubtful that any part of this quintessentially liberal vision holds true today. Many current human-rights causes may be based on modern liberal ideas, but they conflict with liberalism as originally conceived. The initial goal of classical liberalism was to promote freedom, equal rights, and tolerance, to protect a diversity of views, to prevent religious conflict, and to restrain government so as to not interfere in the choices made by individuals.

John Locke, considered the “father of classical liberalism,” supported religious toleration on the grounds that accepting diversity of opinion was crucial to maintaining peace and social order and avoiding “a narrowness of spirit on all sides.” Conflict and “miserics” were caused not by diverse opinions but by the lack of tolerance for those with different opinions and by the insatiable desire for domination.

Such thinking informed the Declaration of Independence, central to which is the idea that government is established by the people in order to secure their rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. It works on a premise well described by the scholar Michael McConnell:

In contrast to both ancient and modern neo-liberal regimes, government is not charged with the promotion of the good life for its citizens. . . . Government must leave the definition of the good life to private institutions, of which family and church are the most conspicuous.

This same rationale continued to play a leading role in liberal thought into the 20th century. It can be seen in the work of such otherwise disparate figures as the proto-libertarian economist Ludwig von Mises, who emphasized repeatedly that liberalism “demands toleration for doctrines and opinions that it deems detrimental and ruinous to society and even for movements that it indefatigably combats,” and the pluralist moral philosopher Isaiah Berlin, for whom liberalism meant a tolerant *modus vivendi* among competing value systems.

In this light, it is worth asking whether the 21st-century construction of liberalism is not in fact a betrayal of liberalism's foundational principles—or, to put it differently but no less accurately, whether, over time, liberalism has not become illiberal. For instead of promoting principles, institutions, and practices, including religious ones, that protect difference and allow as much space as possible for distinctions across individuals and groups, constrained only by some minimum standards and the need to ensure societal unity, liberalism has become a homogenizing agent that systematically seeks, in particular, to reduce the scope of "non-conforming" religious actors and practices.

Among such religious practices, ritual circumcision is a salient exemplar and, in consequence, a highly tempting target. And attacks on it are not occurring in isolation. They take their place as a brightly lit warning sign amid a broader set of accumulating threats to the liberal political order in Western countries.

EU annual report on human rights and democracy: Freedom of religion or belief

EU (01.07.2018) - <https://bit.ly/2uEaKJR> - The EU is determined to continue promoting freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) as a right to be exercised by everyone everywhere, based on the principles of equality, non-discrimination and universality.

In 2017, the EU continued strengthening the implementation of the Guidelines on the Promotion and Protection of Freedom of Religion or Belief and carrying out the commitments under action the EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy 2015-2019. Their implementation remained a key priority for EU action, which was strengthened through the EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy 2015-2019.

During 2017 the EU regularly raised FoRB at different levels of political dialogue, including in 15 of its human rights dialogues and in consultations with partner countries. The EU also reacted with public statements condemning restrictions to freedom of religion in Russia and Indonesia, but also used private démarches to raise restrictions of FoRB in several partner countries.

The EUSR Stavros Lambrinidis continued to be actively engaged in the issue of FoRB and the promotion of EU Guidelines in his official visits, in his meetings with government officials in third countries, and at the UN. He has also placed special emphasis on the implementation of the UN Rabat Plan of Action that includes positive elements for addressing 'hate speech' and for countering violence perpetrated in the name of religion, most recently in 2017 during the Madrid Conference on ethnic and religious violence in the Middle East in May 2017, and the High-Level Forum on Combating Anti-Muslim Discrimination and Hatred, held in New York on 17 January. This forum mobilised a broad spectrum of faith-based civil society to discuss concrete and innovative ways of combating anti-muslim discrimination. He also continued engaging with the UN Special Rapporteur on FoRB and met with international organisations, and with a number of representatives of religious or belief groups.

The European External Action Service's (EEAS) stepped up its efforts to raise awareness of the Guidelines and FoRB-related issues among its staff and representatives of the EU Member States by organising various training sessions and workshops: most recently the EEAS training module on Religion and Foreign Policy, Brussels, 13 and 14 June 2017, and the Human Rights and Democratisation training on 19 June 2017. The EEAS also runs broader training modules on Political Islam, Islam in Politics with focus, inter alia, on minority rights within a Muslim majority setting, with the most recent session taking place on 18 October 2017.

In the course of 2017 the EEAS Task Force on religion and culture hosted a number of discussions on the place of religion in society. The EEAS also participated in and co-chaired the Transatlantic Policy Network on Religion and Diplomacy (TPNRD). A number of concrete initiatives combining FoRB and the wider agenda of diversity and tolerance have grown out of this network, building on and giving further momentum to already existing work and dialogues with the OSCE, UN and Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC).

BAN OF JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES ACTIVITIES IN RUSSIA

On 17 July 2017 the Russian Supreme Court upheld its previous decision to liquidate all legal entities of Jehovah's Witnesses (JW) in Russia, terminate their activity and confiscate their property, alleging extremist activity. The decision confirms the ban on the peaceful worship of Jehovah's Witnesses throughout the country.

The EU undertook a number of actions in support of the Jehova's Witnesses and urged the Russian authorities to ensure freedom of religion. The EU Delegation to Russia met with representatives of JW in Moscow on 4 April and 13 July 2017 and kept in close contact with them. European External Action Service officials have also met with representatives of the JW in Brussels. EU and Member States' diplomats attended several sessions of the Supreme Court hearing including the hearing of the appeal on 17 July 2017.

On 24 April 2017 the HR/VP Mogherini raised this issue, as well as other human rights concerns, when she met with Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov in Moscow. The EU issued statements condemning the harassment and persecution against Jehovah's Witnesses at the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe's Permanent Council meetings of 30 March, 27 April and 20 July 2017 as well as in the Council of Europe's Committee of Ministers on 5 April 2017.

The EU will continue urging the Russian authorities to ensure that JW, along with other religious groups, are able to peacefully enjoy freedom of assembly without interference, as guaranteed by the Constitution of the Russian Federation, Russia's international commitments and international human rights standards.

On the Commission side, the work of Mr. Jan Figel, Special Envoy (SE) for the promotion of FoRB outside the EU, has played an important role in raising awareness of FoRB and support for the implementation of the EU Guidelines on it. The Guidelines provide the backbone for the SE's action at various levels, notably support to EU Delegations and country stakeholders implementing the policy, engagement in international processes and dialogue with civil society and religious actors. This is illustrated by his country visits, notably in Iraq, Sudan, Senegal and Pakistan, as well as in increased visibility for FoRB in the development cooperation scene: for example, a special thematic prize of the Lorenzo Natali Media Prize was awarded on FoRB during the European Development Days . The Media Prize is an award granted by the European Commission to journalists from all over the world for their outstanding works on development.

Regarding implementation, the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights has been mobilised for FoRB-related activities in all regions of the world with at least 45 specific FoRB projects, accounting for at least EUR 17 million in the period 2007-17. Moreover, the 2017 global call for proposals published in September 2017 also addresses freedom of religion or belief, in particular, the contribution of civil society to the implementation of the 2013

EU Guidelines. These include, inter alia, the promotion of dialogue, and an emphasis on the role of religious and other leaders in these processes (indicative amount EUR 5 million) . The projects will be selected in 2018.

The Commission's call for proposals with the title: 'Intercultural Dialogue and Culture' was published in March 2017. This programme envisages cooperation with partner countries on intercultural dialogue for peaceful inter-community relations 'using intercultural dialogue as a tool to increase understanding and tolerance'. One of the specific objectives of the call is to enhance cultural pluralism and intercultural understanding, including aspects relating to religion or belief. Selected projects will be contracted by the end of 2017.

The EU continued to work to ensure that FoRB remains prominent on the UN agenda, and the EU was the lead sponsor of a Resolution on FoRB both in the Human Rights Council (HRC) and the UN General Assembly (third committee). In November 2017, the EU FoRB resolution to the UNGA 72 was adopted by consensus with 78 cosponsors – three more than in 2016. The FoRB resolution identifies obstacles to the enjoyment of the right to freedom of religion or belief and presents recommendations on ways to overcome these obstacles. It also calls upon states to protect, respect and promote the right to freedom of religion or belief.

During the March 2017 HRC the FoRB resolution was also adopted by consensus with minor technical updates, as a result of parallel negotiations with the OIC on the Resolution 'Combating intolerance, negative stereotyping, stigmatization, discrimination, incitement to violence and violence against persons based on religion or belief'.

In the margins of the Human Rights Council's 34th session in March 2017, the EU, in cooperation with the Special Rapporteur and the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights organised an event on FoRB entitled 'Towards an agenda for implementation'. The panel offered the opportunity to take stock of the progress made to advance the enjoyment of the freedom of religion or belief, and to identify a way forward to boost the enjoyment of this fundamental freedom.

Some Jewish issues in Denmark, France, Germany, Belgium, Hungary

HRWF (02.06.2018) – Various issues concerning Jews in Europe have recently gained momentum in the media: the debate on the ban of circumcision in Iceland and other Scandinavian countries, acts of violence targeting Jews in other countries. See hereafter a short overview concerning their situation in several EU countries.

Danish parliament set to debate proposal to ban circumcision

By **Cnaan Liphshiz**

JTA (01.06.2018) — <https://bit.ly/2sq3WPI> - Denmark's parliament is set to debate and possibly vote on whether nonmedical circumcision of boys should be banned after more than 50,000 people signed a petition requesting its criminalization.

The [petition](#) by the group Denmark Intact crossed the 50,000 mark Friday, four months after its launch. According to regulations passed in January, petitions approved for posting on the Danish parliament's website are brought to a vote as nonbinding motions if they receive that level of support within six months.

The petition describes circumcision as a form of abuse and corporal punishment, equating it with female genital mutilation. The petition states that parents who have their children circumcised outside Denmark should be exposed to legal action in Denmark, which has 8,000 Jews and tens of thousands of Muslims.

But last week, spokespeople for all the parties in the Danish parliament stated their faction's positions on the issue. The tally showed that a majority of lawmakers would vote against supporting a ban if the issue is brought to a vote, the Kristeligt Dagblad daily newspaper [reported](#). Nonetheless, a vote on the petition is likely to take place in the fall unless its language is deemed unconstitutional.

Some parties, including large coalition partners, are split on the issue. But Finn Rudaizky, a former leader of the Jewish community of Denmark, said "parliament will not change the law" that currently allows circumcision. Still, he said, the petition "does mean a great deal because it shows just how many have involved themselves with this issue."

Whereas some of those who oppose nonmedical circumcision do so because of their understanding of children's rights, "many others use the situation to show that they are against Jews, Muslims and they can express anti-Semitism and xenophobia without admitting to it," Rudaizky said. "I am not proud of this situation."

No country in Europe has banned circumcision since the defeat of fascism in World War II.

In 2014, Denmark joined a handful of European Union countries that forbid the slaughter of animals for meat without stunning, as required by Jewish and Muslim religious laws. Earlier this week, Denmark joined several EU countries banning the wearing in public of face-covering garments, such as the burka and nikab veils favored by some Muslim women.

Iceland's parliament earlier this year briefly processed a bill to ban circumcision. It was put on ice following a parliamentary committee's recommendation to nix it amid international pressure.

Opposition to circumcision and the ritual slaughter of animals in Europe features liberal activists who cite humanist motivations and anti-immigration individuals who view the customs as undesirable foreign imports.

French public schools told to enforce 2004 ban on kippah, Muslim head cover

[JTA](#) (01.06.2018) — <https://bit.ly/2J334L7> - The French Education Ministry sent out a circular reminding teachers that wearing religious symbols in public schools is illegal and urging them to punish noncompliant students.

The reminder appeared in an 83-page document sent Wednesday to thousands of public schools throughout France titled "handbook on laïcité," a French-language word describing the principal of ensuring both religious freedom and the separation of religion from the state.

Like a document distributed in 2016 on the same subject, the handbook lists both the Jewish kippah, or yarmulke, as forbidden to be worn in public schools, along with head covers favored by Muslim females and large cross pendants. But it goes further than the earlier document in that it instructs teachers to pursue disciplinary measures against those who "test the application" of these rules, as per a law from 2004, the Marianne magazine [reported](#) Friday.

The handbook states it seeks primarily to "check the spread of extremist viewpoints," a statement many take to mean radical Islam. It also calls for disciplinary action against students who refuse for religious reasons to partake in activities that some devout individuals consider improper, such as swimming lessons with members of both genders or sexual education classes.

Long skirts that appear to comply with religious requirements also are not allowed.

However, the handbook also says that the application of the ban on religious symbols should be "on a per-case basis," [according](#) to *La Depeche* daily.

Whereas in the 1990s the majority of Jewish children attended public schools in France, only a third of them do so today, according to Francis Kalifat, the head of the CRIF umbrella group of French Jewish communities. Thousands have left the public education system due to anti-Semitism, he said, including virtually all of the children from observant families where males wear a kippah and girls wear long skirts.

Still, in some places, including the affluent Paris suburb of Neuilly-sur-Seine, Jewish parents enroll their children in public schools that are considered safer than others because Jews comprise more than half of the student body. But even there, more observant parents tend to enroll their children in Jewish private schools.

Meyer Habib, a lawmaker in the lower house of the French parliament and a former vice president of the CRIF, said he supported the regulations, which he said would have little to no effect on the daily lives of French Jews.

Still, he urged selective enforcement of the regulations.

"Jewish symbols must not be treated the same as characteristics of radical Islam," he told Ynet. "We've never killed innocents in Europe generally and in France specifically in the names of Jewish values," he said of Jews.

Germany's Jews urged not to wear kippahs after attacks

BBC (24.04.2018) - <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-43884075> - The leader of Germany's Jewish community has advised Jews to avoid wearing traditional skullcaps (kippahs) following anti-Semitic attacks.

Josef Schuster, the president of the Central Council of Jews in Germany, told Berlin public radio that Jews should exercise caution in big cities. His comments come ahead of a "Berlin Wears Kippah" solidarity march in the German capital on Wednesday.

[Last week, two young men wearing kippahs were assaulted in the city.](#) The attacker was filmed shouting anti-Semitic abuse.

Jewish organisations in Germany have expressed alarm over a number of recent anti-Semitic insults and threats in schools.

At the weekend, Chancellor Angela Merkel condemned what she described as "another form of anti-Semitism".

She told Israel's Channel 10 TV network that aside from anti-Semitism by right-wing groups, similar threats were coming from some Muslim refugees in the country.

What did Josef Schuster say?

"Defiantly showing your colours would in principle be the right way to go [to tackle anti-Semitism]," he said.

"Nevertheless, I would advise individual people against openly wearing a kippah in big German cities," Mr Schuster added.

But he also stressed that if Germans refused to stand up to anti-Semitism "our democracy would be at risk".

"This is not only about anti-Semitism - it goes along with racism, it goes along with xenophobia. You need a clear stop sign here."

What about reaction from other groups?

Mr Schuster's comments apparently contradict the position taken on the kippah issue by the Berlin-based *Jewish Forum for Democracy and Against Anti-Semitism* - the organisation which shared video of last week's attack on Facebook (<https://jfda.de/blog/2018/04/17/antisemitischer-angriff-in-berlin-prenzlauer-berg/>)

"I used to always advise my Jewish friends and acquaintances not to wear a kippah so as not to show their Jewish identity. I changed my opinion," a spokesman said last week.

"We must take up this fight and be visible again in public."

Separately, the head of Germany's *Central Council of Muslims* condemned recent anti-Semitic attacks.

"Anti-Semitism, racism and hatred are great sins in Islam, therefore we will also never tolerate that," Aiman Mazyek told Germany's *Rheinische Post* newspaper.

Germany's Jewish population has grown rapidly since the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989.

Before 1989, the population was below 30,000 but an influx of Jews, mainly from the former Soviet Union, has raised the number to more than 200,000.

Belgian TV cannot find a single Jew to agree to wear a yarmulke in public

Elder of Ziyon (28.05.2018) - <http://elderofziyon.blogspot.com/2018/05/belgian-tv-cannot-find-single-jew-to.html> - Natasha Mann, a reporter for Belgian broadcaster RTBF, was preparing a report on antisemitism in Belgium and wanted to have a visual of a Jew being seen in Brussels in a Jewish skullcap.

So she asked around the Jewish community to find someone who would be willing to be part of the story, just to walk around the capital for the cameras.

For ten years, most observant Jews in Brussels have been wearing caps or hats to avoid being seen publicly as Jews and to avoid being attacked.

After three weeks of looking for a single Jew to be part of the story, she had to give up. The Jewish community is so frightened of Jew-haters that literally none of them would agree to publicly wear the most basic and unobtrusive of Jewish symbols.

First, Mann contacted a couple of rabbis. After finding out which neighborhood Mann wanted them to appear in, they declined. The Chief Rabbi, who was attacked a number of years ago, originally accepted the idea but the community leaders convinced him it was not a good idea.

Mann went to other Jewish community leaders. She thought she hit paydirt when one man said he wanted to do the story, saying that he is sick of being harassed for being a Jew. Mann asked him, "Do you complain to police when you hear antisemitic insults?" He answered back, "Do you complain to police when men whistle at you in the street?" Ultimately, he declined to do the story as well.

Joel Rubinfeld, the president of the Belgian league against anti-Semitism, who normally does not wear a yarmulke, agreed to do the story - but only if he is escorted by a security officer who is in contact with the police. It is too complicated.

The story ran without the visual Mann wanted, which says a lot about how fearful the Jewish community in Belgium is, today.

Here is the story that was broadcast, without a single Jew willing to wear a yarmulke - and with a teen victim of antisemitism and his mother too afraid to show their faces (<http://elderofziyon.blogspot.com/2018/05/belgian-tv-cannot-find-single-jew-to.html>)

The safest country for European Jews? Try Hungary

By David P. Goldman

PJ Media (28.05.2018) - <https://pjmedia.com/spengler/the-safest-country-for-european-jews-try-hungary/> - Last Friday evening I put on a kippah and walked half an hour across Budapest to the Keren Or synagogue maintained by the Budapest Chabad.

After violent attacks on Jews in German streets, the leaders of Germany's Jewish community warned Jews last month [not to wear a kippah](#) or any other visible sign of Jewish identification in public.

The French community issued such warnings years ago.

[Belgian TV](#) could not find a single Jew in Brussels willing to wear a kippah in public. I walked across Budapest four times (for Friday evening and Saturday daytime services), and no-one looked at my kippah twice. At services I met Hasidim who had walked to synagogue with kaftan and *shtreimel*, the traditional round fur hat. Whatever residual anti-Semitism remains among Hungarians, it doesn't interfere with the open embrace of Jewish life. There are no risks to Jews because there are very few Muslim migrants.

On any given Friday evening, the Keren Or synagogue—one of several Chabad houses in Budapest—hosts two hundred people for dinner. Jewish life isn't just flourishing in Budapest. It's roaring with *ruach*, and livened by a growing Israeli presence. About 100,000 Israelis have dual Hungarian citizenship; many own property in the country and vote in Hungarian elections.

EU Statement on the situation of Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia

OSCE Permanent Council N° 1185, Vienna

HRWF salutes the continuous efforts of the European Union and the OSCE to defend the rights of Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia but regrets that many faith-based organizations defending religious freedom and human rights NGOs keep silent about the ban of their movement in Russia (170,000 JW deprived of the right to religious freedom), the confiscation of all their property (395 congregations), the numerous criminal cases opened against them (20, as of 25 May) and the imprisonment of 7 of their members.

EU (10.05.2018) - <https://www.osce.org/permanent-council/381820?download=true> - The European Union is deeply concerned by the recent reports of increased government

harassment of Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia, which includes police raids of private homes, arbitrary detentions and intimidation.

As we have stated previously in many other occasions, members of the Jehovah's Witnesses, like all other individuals, must be able to peacefully enjoy freedom of religion or belief as well as freedom of assembly without discrimination, as guaranteed by the Constitution of the Russian Federation and Russia's international commitments.

On April 20, 2017, the Supreme Court of the Russian Federation banned the Administrative Center of Jehovah's Witnesses and all 395 of the Witnesses' local legal entities on grounds of "extremism". The Russian government claimed that although it was liquidating the legal entities of Jehovah's Witnesses, individual Witnesses would be free to practice their faith. However, the government's claim is inconsistent with its actions. Over the past year, authorities have launched nine criminal investigations and five Jehovah's Witnesses are currently in detention. All could face possible prison sentences of up to ten years merely for meeting together for peaceful worship. In addition to the criminal cases, around 90-100 properties belonging to Jehovah's Witnesses have been confiscated by the Russian state based on court decision, and an additional 100 properties are currently in court proceedings. The Russian authorities have also threatened to deprive Jehovah's Witnesses of parental rights.

The EU reiterates its call on Russia and all other OSCE participating States to respect its international commitments on freedom of religion or belief, freedom of expression and freedom of assembly. OSCE participating States have repeatedly affirmed the importance of freedom of religion or belief as a pillar of the concept of comprehensive security.

The EU will continue to follow closely the developments concerning the Jehovah's Witnesses across the OSCE region and are worried about information received concerning several participating States limiting Jehovah's Witnesses' right to practice their faith.

The freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief is a fundamental right of every human being, without discrimination. This right is enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and our shared OSCE commitments. Freedom of religion or belief includes the freedom to manifest one's religion or belief, individually or in community with others, in public or private, through worship, observance, practice and teaching. The EU continues to promote freedom of religion or belief, a right that must be respected and promoted everywhere on the basis of the principles of equality, nondiscrimination and universality.

The Candidate Countries the FORMER YUGOSLAV REPUBLIC OF MACEDONIA, MONTENEGRO* and ALBANIA*, the Country of the Stabilisation and Association Process and Potential Candidate BOSNIA and HERZEGOVINA, and the EFTA countries ICELAND and NORWAY, members of the European Economic Area, as well as UKRAINE, GEORGIA and SAN MARINO align themselves with this statement.*

** The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Montenegro and Albania continue to be part of the Stabilisation and Association Process.*