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EU: The 10th Anniversary of the EU Guidelines on FoRB – a call to stand united

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On 29 June, MEPs Peter van Dalen and Carlo Fidanza, co-chairs of the Intergroup on Freedom of Religion or Belief at the European Parliament, hosted a conference at the European Parliament to commemorate the 10th

anniversary of the EU Guidelines on Freedom of Religion or Belief. The FORB Roundtables Brussels-EU and Netherlands as well as HRWF contributed to this event.

By Arie de Pater (*)

HRWF (29.07.2023) – Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) is a precious human right and the 10th anniversary of the EU Guidelines on FoRB is definitely a reason to celebrate but also to reiterate the importance of the document. Also on behalf of the European Platform against Religious Intolerance and Discrimination (EPRID), I commend the EP Intergroup on FoRB & Religious Tolerance for organising this event in the European Parliament.

The EU Guidelines on FoRB are a great example of cooperation between the EU Council and civil society. Ten years ago, I was the International Director of Advocacy for Open Doors and I followed the drafting process mainly from a distance as my colleague, Esther Kattenberg, was directly involved in the discussions both with EPRID members and other civil society experts, and with the Council. If my memory serves me well, I personally attended only one round table between the Council and civil society representatives. I was impressed by the cooperative spirit of all participants. Ten years later, I still appreciate the quality of the collective effort. Of course, the world has changed since the adoption of the guidelines and the opportunities for digital surveillance were not as prevalent and intrusive as they are now, but the guidelines are broad enough to address these issues. Therefore, I fail to see an urgent need to amend the guidelines. Let's implement them!

In the weeks and days preceding the 10th anniversary, EPRID organised two round tables to discuss the EU guidelines, including the need or opportunity to amend the document. Further, we held a brief series of online interviews with experts and practitioners. This culminated in an event in Brussels, featuring the EU Special Envoy for the Protection of Freedom of Religion or Belief outside the European Union, Frans van Daele, and the UN Special Rapporteur on FoRB, Nazila Ghanea as highly esteemed guests.

At the EPRID celebration of the 10th Anniversary of the EU Guidelines, Mr Van Daele identified two main threats to FoRB: ignorance and indifference, and I could not agree more. Religious freedom is an important human right, not just for those adhering to a religion, but for all of us. FoRB grants us all the right to freely choose any religion or belief (broadly defined) without any coercion or interference of the state. When we lose sight on the importance of FoRB for all of society, we could easily lose the motivation to defend and promote this freedom, both within the European Union, and in our external relations. The limited interest in joining the EP Intergroup on FoRB, therefore, is reason for concern.

Awareness of the importance of FoRB is key in understanding the importance of the EU Guidelines and in implementing the guidelines by EU delegations abroad.

Policy discussions, including those in the European Parliament, have a tendency to focus on numbers and statistics. These are no doubt important, but figures do not really illustrate the day-to-day impact and importance of FoRB or the absence thereof. FoRB is not about numbers but about

people. Therefore, it is important to share personal stories illustrating how life looks like without FoRB or when this right is violated. That's why reports like the Freedom of Thought Report by the Humanists, the World Watch List by Open Doors International, or the report of Aid to the Church in Need are important. Together, they present a broad and diverse picture of the importance of FoRB in various countries, situations, and backgrounds.

It goes without saying that these individual stories should be objective and well documented. They should be presented in context. Not all incidents involving believers are indeed FoRB violations. A fair representation and thorough analysis of all relevant facts is key. If we fail to get a clear and comprehensive picture of the situation, we will fail to come up with meaningful recommendations and strategies to address the situation. Nigeria might be a point in case. Especially in the middle belt, we have seen eruptions of violent attacks on people and villages and high numbers of casualties. When we present this violence just as a religious conflict, foregoing the economic elements involved, we'll miss the mark. But if we neglect the religious element and just focus on resources and economic factors, we'll equally miss the mark. Both one-sided analyses will lead to ineffective strategies and therefore a continuation of bloodshed. They could make it even worse. That's why thorough monitoring, documentation, and analysis are so important when presenting cases of FoRB violations.

As I've stated before, FoRB is not about numbers and statistics but about people. There is no competition in victimhood. It should not matter whether the victim involved is a humanist, a Hindu, a Muslim, a Bahá'í, or a Christian. They are all equally important. We should all speak up against any violation of religious freedom, regardless the victim

involved. EPRID, as a broad interfaith platform has a long history of standing united and I really appreciate that. Having said that, our solidarity is not limited to members of the platform. We are more than happy to work with others who are defending and promoting FoRB.

The EU Guidelines on FoRB have shown what we as civil society can achieve when we work together. We need each other to defend and promote FoRB, at home, in the European Union, and beyond. I call on all civil society actors to stand united, and to speak up whenever FoRB is threatened or violated, no matter the victim or the perpetrator. FoRB is not a privilege or a luxury. It is a human right. Therefore, I wish the EU Guidelines on FoRB a happy anniversary and an even happier future!

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[Further reading about FoRB in the EU on HRWF website](#)

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