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EU: Some thoughts about public diplomacy for religious freedom

Conference organized by EPRID at the Baha'i Centre in Brussels with the participation of EU Special Envoy on FoRB, Frans van Daele (on the right), and UN Special Rapporteur on FoRB, Nazila Ghanea (in the middle). EPRID was represented by Francesco di Lillo (on the left)

EU: Some thoughts about public

diplomacy for religious freedom

By Willy Fautré, director of Human Rights Without Frontiers

HRWF (03.07.2023) – In Europe, freedom of religion or belief is generally treated as a poorer relation of the human rights family, even though its protagonists consider it to be the mother of all other freedoms: freedom of thought, conscience and religion; freedom of expression; freedom of association; freedom of assembly; freedom to share and spread one's beliefs and to make new members. All these freedoms are not specific to the right to hold beliefs, whether they are theistic, non-theistic or philosophical. They are concomitant and intimately intertwined with other human rights.

At a conference organized at the end of June to mark the 10th anniversary of the EU Guidelines on Freedom of Religion or Belief at the Baha'i Centre in Brussels, the recently appointed EU Special Envoy on Freedom of Religion or Belief outside the European Union, Frans van Daele, stated that, on the one hand, the defense and promotion of religious freedom faces some major obstacles in Europe: indifference and ignorance.

On the other hand, EU institutions are fragmented, have their own agendas and must follow their own procedures, which makes it difficult to promote freedom of religion or belief in a consistent and coordinated way or to denounce violations of that freedom, let alone take steps to remedy them.

The UN also has its own institutions and mechanisms but

collaboration between the EU and the UN is both possible and complementary, according to Nazila Ghanea, UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief who took part in the same conference organized in Brussels by the European Platform against Religious Intolerance and Discrimination.

In some countries, there are tensions between well-established majority religions and newly established ones but sometimes also with historic religious minorities because the state is identifying itself with the contemporary dominant religion. In such conditions, the European Union's public diplomacy has to promote tolerance, respect and non-discrimination through education, appropriate school and public education, according to EU Special Envoy on FoRB Frans van Daele. This EU vigilance strategy is already in place in countries such as Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, with varying degrees of progress. The EU strategy is to promote a more inclusive society and to purge negative stereotypes concerning religious and ethnic minorities from the schoolbooks.

Another aspect of public diplomacy involves prioritizing the countries to be targeted, according to certain criteria. Frans van Daele contends that confrontation should be avoided with the selected country, as it is unproductive and even counterproductive. Priority should be given to countries whose centers of power can be considered open to the EU's message and which are ready to move in the right direction. Most countries that harshly repress the freedom of religious minorities and their members lack the political will to align themselves with international standards despite their formal commitments and are not prioritized in the EU's strategy.

The EU's public diplomacy is therefore highly complicated

since it has to operate both within its own internal complex fragmented architecture and externally, through the political and social arcanae of the target countries where it has to identify potential leverages to be activated with some chance of success, or at least progress.

Human Rights Without Frontiers considers that, if the EU wants to do more and more efficiently, it needs to staff and to fund appropriately the EU Special Envoy on FoRB, the EEAS unit in charge of FoRB issues, the Intergroup on Freedom of Religion or Belief at the European Parliament, just to name a few of its advocacy mechanisms, but political will has been missing after the end of the mandate of the first EU Special Envoy.

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

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Notice: Undefined index: et_template in [/home/hrwfe90/domains/hrwf.eu/public_html/wp-content/plugins/pdf-print/pdf-print.php](#) on line 1269