

WORLD / EU: Faith roundtables provide open forum for believers and non-believers

By Elena Pavlovska

NewEurope (17.09.2019) – <https://bit.ly/2kNJAzr> – The US State Department organised the Second Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom in Washington DC during the summer, an annual event that is the largest religious freedom gathering of its kind in the world with more than 1,000 civil society and religious leaders and more than 100 foreign government delegations in attendance.

Participants in the event were reminded that the Pew Research Center, the most renowned and reliable think regarding statistics on religion, found that 80% of the world's population live in a religiously restricted environment.

In an effort to raise awareness about the current state of religious freedom in the world, the ministerial acts a platform to discuss civil society initiatives, including the creation and of 100 International Religious Freedom Roundtables around the globe to help empower civil society to organise around the principle that every person has a right to their religious beliefs.

As expressed by the State Department, roundtables and other similar networks currently exist in Nigeria, Colombia, Brussels (EU), Geneva (UN), Sudan, Ukraine, New York (UN), South Korea, Taiwan, and Italy. More roundtables are expected to launch soon in Romania, Hungary, Iraqi Kurdistan,

Indonesia, London, Mexico, Paris, and Mongolia.

The roundtables were first set up in Washington DC more than 10 years ago and quickly became a focal point for the topic of religious freedom for politicians, NGOs, and activists in DC who would have an interest in the issue. The one based in Brussels covers the EU institutions and has existed for several years. Known as the Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) Roundtable Brussels-EU, it acts as an informal group of individuals from civil society who gather regularly to discuss FoRB issues on a non-attribution basis. The participants gather, speak freely when sharing ideas and information, and propose joint advocacy actions to address specific FoRB issues and problems globally.

The participants are free to propose initiatives regarding the protection and promotion of freedom of religion, conscience, and belief in Europe and around the world, and other participants have then the possibility to join these initiatives and self-select into coalitions of the willing on such initiatives”.

The EU Roundtable is chaired by Evangelical Archbishop **Thomas Schirrmacher** of Germany, who is also President of the International Society for Human Rights and Chair of the Theological Commission of the World Evangelical Alliance.

“Freedom of religion and belief needs all actors to sit together and exchange knowledge and ideas, government officials, MPs, multi-state actors, large and small religious and secular worldview actors, official representatives of religions or secular worldview, human rights and advocacy organisations, experts, journalists and many more. Only a

rather loose roundtable can guarantee space for all to speak, to interact and to arrange ever new coalitions for specific letters, actions and summits and I am glad that this is working more and more in Brussels,” Schirmacher said while speaking with New Europe.

“FoRB is a really important issue in the world of today. Discrimination on the basis of religious affiliation exists everywhere in the world, persecution exists, and too many people are killed every day because of their religious choices. This is not something that governments alone have been able to solve until now. This is not something that NGOs or activists alone have been able to solve. So we expect that together, activists, NGOs, faith-based or not, and governments, we will be able to have more concrete results in getting rid of this issue. The Roundtable is open to all goodwill, and honestly, it is maybe the only place today that is really all-inclusive on the topic of FoRB and it already has a track of good results and achievements,” said **Eric Roux**, one of Schirmacher’s five co-chairs, after being contacted by New Europe.

The main principle of these roundtables is all-inclusiveness, and in order to make it a safe space for all, they apply the Chatham House Rule—discussions are off the record and any information disclosed during these meetings may be reported by those present, but the source of that information may not be explicitly or implicitly identified.