

Taking stock of EU human rights and democracy action: Annual report for 2018

European Parliament Think Tank (09.01.2020) – <https://bit.ly/309MqyW> – The 2018 annual report on human rights and democracy in the world has just been published. It is a comprehensive exercise that takes stock of all European Union (EU) actions in the human rights and democracy field. The report provides the European Parliament with an opportunity to recommend future EU action, considering current challenges, in its yearly resolution adopted in response to the EU report. The report for 2018 underlines that the EU should continue to play a leading role in tackling global democracy and human rights challenges, a view shared by the Parliament.

A section is devoted to

Freedom of religion or belief

“In 2018, freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) continued to be under attack in the world. Accordingly the promotion and protection of FoRB remained a key priority in the EU’s external human rights policy. The EU’s policy is led by the Guidelines on the promotion and protection of the freedom of religion or belief.

During 2018, the EU consistently raised concerns about FoRB violations in the course of political dialogues with partner countries, including during more than 20 human rights dialogues and consultations. Concerns were raised in particular with countries of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, South Asia, Central Asia and South East Asia. The EU paid particular attention to acts of violence and discrimination against persons based on their religion or

belief. Concerns were raised about the criminalisation of apostasy and blasphemy, as well as about legislation that hinders the official registration of religious groups. Ahead of human rights dialogues, the EU systematically consulted civil society to receive information on the most extreme human rights violations (including FoRB violations) in third countries.

The EU also reacted publicly to condemn violations of FoRB (e.g.: the persecution of Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia) as well as attacks on religious grounds (e.g. the attacks on Coptic Christians in Egypt or persons belonging to Yazidi minorities in the Middle East).

The EU continued to be a strong FoRB advocate in the UN multilateral fora. The EU was the lead sponsor of a FoRB resolution both in the Human Rights Council (HRC) and the UN General Assembly (Third Committee). The FoRB resolution urges states to protect, respect and promote the right to freedom of religion or belief, while expressing concerns for violations to the right to FoRB and calling on states to step up their efforts to implement the commitments undertaken. The EU continued to work closely with the OIC on its resolution on 'Combating intolerance, negative stereotyping and stigmatisation of, and discrimination, incitement to violence, and violence against persons based on religion or belief' to ensure the complementarity of both resolutions and universal ownership. The EU, together with other international partners, also raised concerns about FoRB violations through statements under agenda item 4 of the HRC, highlighting shortcomings in countries such as China, Pakistan, Myanmar/Burma, DPRK, Syria, Iran and others, and also addressed violations by Da'esh.

In addition, the EU was active in raising the profile and the importance of the right to FoRB during the Human Rights Council session: it organised a side event with the UN Special Rapporteur (UNSR) on FoRB on his latest report focused on the theme 'Religion and State – a multidimensional relationship'.

The event offered the opportunity for the UN Special Rapporteur to present his views on how to protect freedom of religion or belief regardless of the type of state-religion relationships that exist. The EU also held a side event on 'The Impact of Media on FoRB', jointly organised with Canada, Norway, the OSCE/ODHIR, the Council of Europe and NGOs. This event provided a framework to discuss the potential of film and media to promote FoRB as an educational tool, to inspire civic engagement and provide a case for the media's role within this setting.

The EUSR for Human Rights, Stavros Lambrinidis, remained committed to upholding and defending FoRB. The EUSR represented the EU at the first Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom, organised by the United States that took place in Washington DC in July. During the Ministerial meeting, EUSR Lambrinidis engaged with more than 70 delegations from across the world on the EU's internal and external FoRB initiatives.

The EEAS continued to co-chair the Transatlantic Policy Network on Religion and Diplomacy (TPNRD) – a forum of diplomats from Europe and North America who collaborate on religion-related foreign policy issues. A number of concrete initiatives (including academic research to foster religious literacy for diplomats) have grown out of this network, combining FoRB and the wider agenda of diversity and tolerance and building on already existing dialogues with the OSCE, the UN and the OIC.

In May 2018, the EU delegation in Geneva also sponsored a Symposium on FoRB, Cultural Rights and Women, organised by the NGO Muslims for Progressive Values. The event, jointly supported by Canada, the Netherlands and the International Panel of Parliamentarians for Freedom of Religion or Belief (IPPFoRB), identified some critical links between the right to FoRB, cultural rights and women's rights.

As a strong sign of the EU's excellent cooperation and support for the mandate of the UNSR, it is important to highlight the visit of the UNSR on FoRB to Brussels in June. The UNSR was invited to address COHOM together with the Working Party on Fundamental Rights, Citizens Rights and Free Movement of Persons (FREMP) and to set out his main priorities for the year to come. During his visit, he also met with high-level officials of the EEAS to discuss common actions across several regions.

At the UNGA High-Level Week in New York in September, the EU joined other key actors in organising a campaign to raise awareness of the scourge of antisemitism worldwide. The EU also co-sponsored a side event on 'Women of faith as agents of transformation and peace' which provided a platform for women from different faiths and religions to exchange best practices with policy makers and UN agencies on their unique role as agents of transformation. A broad mix of actions driven by women of faith in conflict/post-conflict and reconciliation processes was presented. The event was one of the first such collective efforts to put women faith leaders in the spotlight, which was particularly welcomed as their voices are usually less heard and their actions less visible from an international perspective. In 2018 the freedom of religion or belief was also regularly discussed with other like-minded countries during the meetings of the International Contact Group on Freedom of Religion or Belief (ICG) where the EU and several Member States participated.

At the OSCE level, the EU engaged constructively in the negotiations on the OSCE Ministerial Council's draft decision on enhancing efforts to promote freedom of religion or belief and combat intolerance or discrimination based on religion or belief, in line with the well-established EU comprehensive approach to all forms of discrimination and intolerance, and the existing EU Guidelines on FoRB. The EU participated actively in the discussions on FoRB during the annual OSCE

Human Dimension Implementation Meeting (HDIM) in Warsaw, in the Human Dimension Committee and in other human dimension events. On several occasions the EU also raised the situation of Jehovah's Witnesses in the Russian Federation, both in the OSCE Permanent Council and at the HDIM.

In order to continue to strengthen EU officials' awareness of the FoRB Guidelines, the EEAS organised several training courses on FoRB-related issues. In April, a training course delivered by practitioners working in the human rights area to EU and Member State diplomats focused on identifying challenges to advocate FoRB, the initiatives in multilateral fora to promote this right, and explaining the plight of atheists and non-believers worldwide.

The EEAS also organised wide consultations to improve the implementation of the Guidelines. In February, the EEAS consulted more than 25 faith-based organisations and human rights NGOs in order to gather recommendations for a better implementation. Consultations were also held with EU Member States to analyse their new FoRB tools and possible synergies. In addition, the EEAS cooperated closely with the European Parliament Intergroup on FoRB on its 2017 Annual Report. The report, presented in the Parliament in September, provides clear recommendations to EU delegations.

The Special Envoy for the Promotion of Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) outside the EU, Jań Figel, intensified his activities to make FoRB a human rights priority, highlighting the important role religion and belief, including the right to hold no faith, plays for citizenship, good governance and pluralism.

The Special Envoy held a number of constructive missions in 2018 as part of his mandate. He visited Bosnia and Herzegovina, Pakistan, Nigeria, Lebanon, Burkina Faso, Malaysia and Egypt. Visits reinforced dialogues with authorities and government officials on policies and legal

frameworks related to FoRB and offered opportunities to engage with religious and civil society actors. The Special Envoy also supported initiatives in the area of interreligious dialogue and synergies between FoRB, education, and cultural activities.

Special Envoy Jań Figel was active in many international fora, UN processes and academic networks. Notably, he participated in the interactive dialogue on Freedom of Religion or Belief that took place as part of the Human Rights Council in March 2018. To ensure better coordination, more visibility and synergy between the EU and Member States, Special Envoy communicated throughout the year with the European Parliament and COHOM.

Following a first call for proposals on intercultural dialogue in 2017, the Development Cooperation Instrument – Global Public Goods and Challenges (DCI-GPGC) now finances three regional interfaith projects in the Middle East and Africa with more than EUR 5 million for the period from 2018 to 2022. The projects aim to enhance cultural pluralism and intercultural understanding related to religion or belief. Thereby, they will contribute to strengthening understanding, tolerance and respect for cultural and religious diversity.

As a result of the 2017 dedicated global call for proposals on freedom of religion or belief under the EIDHR, six civil society projects were selected (final EU contribution: EUR 5.18 million). The projects address key strategic areas of the Guidelines, including the fight against different forms of discrimination and violence on grounds of religion or belief, paying particular attention to vulnerable groups and situations where individuals are penalised for freely choosing, changing or abandoning their religion or belief. The call emphasises enhancing mutual understanding and respect between individuals of different faiths or none through peaceful means. With this latest call, the EU has significantly stepped up support for FoRB under the EIDHR

compared to the period before the adoption of the EU Guidelines.

The Commission has increased awareness-raising activities through training for staff. In 2018, two thematic seminars on gender, religion and development, and freedom of religion or belief were organised. The EED 2018 also included, for the first time, a high-level event on religion and gender equality, bringing together policy makers, development practitioners and academics to discuss how religion and religious dynamics support or challenge gender equality in the context of development cooperation and human rights.”