

## ***Putin visits Austria: Will leaders stand up for religious freedom and other human rights?***

***Press Release: FOREF and HRWF call upon the President and the Chancellor of Austria to raise the issues of religious freedom and human rights in Russia***

FOREF/ HRWF (04.05.2018) - When Russian President Vladimir Putin meets with President of the Republic Austria of Austria Alexander Van der Bellen and Federal Chancellor Sebastian Kurz on 5 June 2018, will they express concern about deteriorating human rights in Russia, and use Austria's influence for the better?

Two international human rights organizations with special focus on the freedom of religion are appealing to the President and Chancellor to do so. The Forum for Religious Freedom – Europe (FOREF, Vienna) and Human Rights Without Frontiers (Brussels) both closely monitor human rights and religious freedom conditions in the Russian Federation.

"Russia has moved into the vanguard of authoritarian states that infringe on the freedom of religion and conscience, fundamental human rights without which equality before the law and democracy are impossible," according to Dr. Aaron Rhodes, president of FOREF, who holds Honorary Citizenship in Austria.

"Austria cannot have business as usual with Russia without engaging in the most egregious moral hypocrisy," he said.

Russia's ban on the Jehovah's Witnesses had made criminals of 170,000 peaceful citizens and subjected them to vandalism and other abuse by others.

The ban is apparently part of a comprehensive project to suppress minority religions, undertaken in concert with the Russian Orthodox Church, and with the aim of protecting the "feelings" of members of the Orthodox Community.

Willy Fautré, President of Human Rights Without Frontiers, said, "Numerous Jehovah's Witnesses have been jailed, some for months; the authorities have conducted around 30 police raids and have launched 20 criminal investigations.

"This is an unprecedented assault on the freedom of religion by a member of the Council of Europe, and one seeking economic and political partnership with Austria and other European countries; who will hold Putin accountable?" he added.

Russia's illegal restrictions on religious freedom, while violating human rights and Rule of Law principles, are creating conflict and instability in the society. Muslim communities have come under pressure from "anti-terrorism" legislation and practices.

The Russian Federation, under President Putin's rule, has cracked down on all fundamental rights and freedoms, in addition to the freedom of religion. There is virtually no freedom of expression in the mass media, while citizens are subjected to

state controlled propaganda. Numerous independent journalists have been murdered. The government has made the work of independent human rights organizations almost impossible. Russia has invaded a neighboring country and annexed part of its territory and threatened members of the European Union. Critical political voices have been jailed, and elections are managed Soviet-style. Citizens peacefully protecting these policies have been beaten and jailed.

To undertake business deals with the Russian Federation without exercising leverage to improve human rights conditions there would be a betrayal of the universal principles Austria claims to uphold, the two human rights groups insisted.

**For more information and interviews:**

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