

Table of Contents

- ***Opinion: ECJ ruling to uphold ban on kosher, halal slaughter a disastrous decision***
- ***EU-CHINA: Advocacy for the Uyghur issue***
- ***Europe's Muslims are European. Stop outsourcing their plight to foreign leaders***
- ***Restrictions on religious freedom in Europe in the name of the fight against COVID-19***
- ***48 MEPs call upon the EU to appoint a Special Envoy on FoRB***
- ***EU-Vietnam Free Trade Agreement but 14 Protestants still in prison***
- ***EU Statement on the situation of Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia***
- ***Churches-EU Dialogue: COMECE and CEC meet with the Croatian EU Presidency***
- ***The EU must work for Freedom of Religion or Belief for all***

Opinion: ECJ ruling to uphold ban on kosher, halal slaughter a disastrous decision

Deutsche Welle (18.12.2020) - <https://bit.ly/2WBcim0> - The European Union's top court has deemed kosher and halal slaughter incompatible with animal welfare. This is a grim day for religious freedom in Europe, writes Christoph Strack.



In Europe, leaders often laud the continent's Judeo-Christian heritage. Not only that, 75 years after the industrial mass murder of European Jews in the Shoa, German and European leaders celebrate the return of flourishing Jewish life on the continent. They welcome the fact that liberal, conservative and orthodox Jews are once more part of Europe's social fabric.

But for how much longer, given the European Court of Justice (ECJ) ruling that upheld a ban on kosher and halal slaughter in Belgium? The practice is only banned in two or three Belgian regions.

Belgium's top court had called on the ECJ to determine whether the ban on kosher and halal slaughter — i.e. without stunning the animal — is compatible with the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU and its enshrined principle of religious freedom. The bloc's top court ruled the ban legal, dealing a blow to pious Jews and Muslims across Europe.

Tolerance

For decades, there have been heated political discussions in Europe over whether to outlaw ritual slaughters. Several courts have ruled on the issue as well — including in Germany. Within the past 20 years, Germany's constitutional court often examined the issue, reaching wise verdicts in favor of religious freedom. The court has upheld the ban on stun-free slaughter — but with exceptions that may apply for those who, for religious reasons, say they can only consume kosher or halal meat. This right, therefore, applies to Jews and Muslims alike, as this is a question of religious freedom broadly speaking.



DW's religions expert Christoph Strack

As European societies grow progressively secular, more and more people take offense to certain religious practices. This pertains to certain rituals, religious needs and sensitivities; religion is no longer taken as seriously as it once was.

A recently planned protest march of coronavirus deniers and conspiracy theorists, for instance, was allowed to go ahead after being rebranded as a religious service. This makes a mockery of religion, even though some may have secretly admired the protesters for thinking on their feet.

Measures to curb the coronavirus outbreak, and how they have been publicly communicated, have not always been easy to stomach for religious people. Sure, German Health Minister Jens Spahn, Foreign Minister Heiko Mass and Justice Minister Christine Lambrecht joining Berlin's Jewish community to light Chanukah candles — all while social distancing — sent a strong message of solidarity. Yet the introduction of

nighttime curfews in parts of Germany, even on Christmas Eve, has irked many Christians, for whom Christmas services are among the most cherished events of the year.

Jews and Muslims join forces

But back to kosher and halal slaughter. We should be able to tolerate people's religious practices. In this instance, animal welfare advocates are at loggerheads with religious representatives. Germany's top court, which has ruled on the issue, imposed strict limitations on ritual slaughters. It allows certain exceptions that allow religious people to be able to continue practicing their faith in Germany.

Bans on such forms of animal slaughter in Belgium, and elsewhere, arose over debates over the way Islam is practiced in Europe. Individuals sought to impose tighter rules on Islam on the continent — yet also hit Europe's Jews.

Muslim and Jewish representatives joined forces in challenging the Belgian ban in court. And several months ago, Pinchas Goldschmidt of the Conference of European Rabbis (CER) and Muhammad bin Abdul Karim Issa of the Muslim World League even published a joint letter — replete with a joint letterhead — on the issue.

Jews, again, forced out of Europe?

Back then, Jewish leaders were worried that if EU judges upheld the Belgian ban on kosher slaughter, other countries could follow suit. They projected that this would compel thousands of Jews to leave Europe. Now, the ECJ has spoken on the matter. This is a very sad, indeed fateful, day for religious freedom in Europe.

And by the way: Do not stress the absolute primacy of animal welfare and turn a blind eye to Europe's meat industry. Consulting the figures quickly shows that kosher and halal slaughter are a marginal issue compared to any one of the continent's meat processing plants, where livestock are pumped full of chemicals, industrially killed and processed. Granted, they are stunned before being killed. But this is merely to soothe one's conscience.

This opinion piece was translated from German.

Further reading

[European Court upholds Flemish restrictions on halal and kosher slaughter](#) (Howard Friedman, *Religion Clause*)

[EU states can ban kosher and halal ritual slaughter, court rules](#) (Arthur Neslen, *Politico*)

[Ban on ritual animal slaughter upheld by EU high court](#) (Molly Quell, *Courthouse News Service*)

[In order to promote animal welfare in the context of ritual slaughter, Member States may, without infringing the fundamental rights enshrined in the Charter, require a reversible stunning procedure which cannot result in the animal's death \(PDF\)](#) (*Court of Justice of the European Union*)

[EU states can require stunning before ritual slaughter](#) (*Associated Press*)

EU-CHINA: Advocacy for the Uyghur issue

Speech on behalf of HR/VP Borrell at the European Parliament on forced labour and the situation of the Uyghurs in Xinjiang

Madam President, Honourable Members of the European Parliament,

EEAS (17.212.2020) - <https://bit.ly/3p7IWIo> - The European Union has spoken out clearly and repeatedly on the situation of Uighurs: expressing grave concerns about political re-education camps, surveillance, and restrictions on freedom of religion and belief.

As High Representative/Vice-President Josep Borrell mentioned during the debate on the situation of Uighurs one year ago: “the policies applied to Xinjiang appear disproportionate to the stated aim of fighting against terrorism and extremism”. The conclusions of United Nations experts expressing serious concerns are, regrettably, still valid.

During the past year, a number of reports have brought to light worrying allegations that Uighurs and other minorities in China are subject to forced labour and forced labour transfer schemes, as well as forced sterilisation and forced birth control. They add to the gravity and magnitude of concerns we already expressed.

EU leaders raised these concerns in their meetings with Chinese leaders this year: at the EU-China Summit on 22 June and at the EU-China Leaders’ Meeting on 14 September. We also issued a comprehensive statement during the last UN Human Rights Council, under the ‘Item 4’ debate on human rights situations that require the Council’s attention. We clearly highlighted the need for meaningful access to the region for independent experts.

We will continue to call on China to uphold its national and international obligations, and to respect human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities, especially in Xinjiang and Tibet. Defending human rights and combatting forced labour are priorities for the EU.

As a key trading partner of the EU, China should ensure that business activities in its territory meet international standards on labour rights and responsible business conduct. We expect the Chinese authorities to implement those standards across all sectors of production and at all levels of supply chains.

Responsible business practices by European companies working in China play a very important role. While the Commission is working on a legislative proposal on sustainable corporate governance, the EU already has mandatory standards in some sectors and actively promotes international guidelines. European companies are already encouraged to implement effective due diligence practices across their supply chains.

The Commission and the European External Action Service will continue working with companies to underscore the importance of taking up international due diligence guidelines in all aspects, including human rights.

The new EU Global Human Rights Sanctions Regime, adopted on 7 December [2020], enables the EU to forcefully stand up for human rights. It allows the EU to target human rights violations and abuses worldwide, irrespective of where they occur. The regime does not contain any listings yet; however, we expect discussions on listings to start soon.

I thank you all for your engagement in this debate and your contributions to further increase the awareness on this matter.

Thank you.

Link to the video: <https://audiovisual.ec.europa.eu/en/video/I-200285>

Europe's Muslims are European. Stop outsourcing their plight to foreign leaders

For EU leaders to seek solutions abroad to end prejudice against millions of their own citizens is insulting and meaningless.

By Shada Islam

The Guardian (13.11.2020) - <https://bit.ly/376uDMO> - Terror attacks in France and Austria have put Europe's 25 million Muslims back in the spotlight. The unwanted attention is familiar. Discussing Muslims as a security risk invariably reaches fever pitch after an Islamist-inspired terrorist act. This time the attackers came from Chechnya, Tunisia and one had roots in North Macedonia. But never mind: anxiety over the Muslim "enemy within" goes deep.

Anxious debates on the place of Islam in Europe and claims that European Muslims are footsoldiers in an existential confrontation between Europe and Islam and represent an impossible-to-integrate "other" have dogged Muslims across the continent for decades.

There is a dangerous new shrillness to the conversation this time, however.

The rhetoric over the alleged "Islamisation" of Europe is fired up by xenophobic and populist parties including such figures as Hungary's Viktor Orbán, but it has been embraced by too many mainstream European politicians.

EU home affairs ministers are this week discussing measures to block online Islamist propaganda, provide imams with training in "European" values and pay more attention to the integration of Muslims. And given the fears of increased Islamist-related terrorism, some of these steps are justified. But governments must ensure such actions do not fuel an increase in violence, discrimination and hate against their own Muslim citizens.

Amnesty International has warned French authorities not to contribute to a "portrayal of all Muslims as suspects" and to stop "stereotypical, stigmatising and discriminatory comments targeting Muslims and refugees", although the French president, Emmanuel Macron, denies allegations of fostering racism against Muslims.

The reality is that the relationship between European governments and their Muslim citizens is in dire need of a reset. The climate of mutual suspicion is both a rebuke to the values of inclusion and tolerance that the EU claims to uphold and it lends support to the extremist claim that there can be no coexistence between Islam and the west.

Crafting a new social contract into a constructive conversation requires the transformation of outdated thinking and the acknowledgement of past errors and misperceptions.

As an important first step, the myth of European Muslims as eternal outsiders, with a culture and customs that make them forever "untrue" Europeans, must be challenged.

This means not conflating the actions of a tiny minority of Islamist extremists with the beliefs and conduct of the majority, which abhors such views. It means accepting not only Islam's historical role and influence in Europe, as Macron has done, but also recognising, as Angela Merkel did in 2018, that Islam is a part of modern Europe.

Crucially, it demands an end to the outsourcing of Europe-Muslim relations to foreign leaders. The war of words between EU leaders and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan of Turkey, and

even Macron's interview with the Arab news channel Al Jazeera in which he explained his respect for Islam as well as his plans to appoint an envoy for the Muslim world, are beside the point.

Worse, they are counterproductive. EU leaders talking to their foreign counterparts over the heads of their own Muslim citizens is insulting and meaningless. All it does is reinforce perceptions of European Muslims as exotic, alien and forever non-citizens.

Neither Erdoğan nor Pakistan's Imran Khan have any real interest in improving lives of European Muslims. Nor do they share their concerns, priorities and values. Truth be told many European Muslims fled these very countries to find shelter here. The last thing they need is counsel from foreign powers.

Anti-Muslim racism and hate must be tackled head on. Discrimination against so-called "third generation migrants", mainly young men, often results in marginalisation and disaffection, which in turn can lead to radicalisation. European Muslim women who wear the headscarf should not have to fight the perception that they are victims in need of help or a public menace.

The lived reality of many Muslims points in another direction. The large majority of Europeans who follow Islam live fulfilling and productive lives as law-abiding and taxpaying European citizens. Many are in politics (although not at EU level). Across Europe, Muslim entrepreneurs are revitalising impoverished urban neighborhoods, creating jobs and prompting innovation in business. They excel in medicine, sports, art and culture. Their stories need to be told.

As the Open Society Institute has noted, European Muslims and non-Muslims share the same concerns, needs and experiences including "better quality of education, improved housing, cleaner streets and [the tackling of] antisocial behaviour and crime".

"There is no evidence supporting the common contention that Muslims are living in a separate, parallel society," according to Germany's Bertelsmann Foundation.

Finally, it's important to shift the focus from religion to Europe's broader equality agenda as articulated in the EU's anti-racism action plan, adopted in September following the Black Lives Matter protests.

An overwhelming majority of Muslims in France and Germany describe themselves as loyal to their country and see no contradiction between French/German and Muslim values. "There is no evidence supporting the common contention that Muslims are living in a separate, parallel society," says the Bertelsmann Foundation.

The ambitious blueprint recognises the deep roots of structural racism across Europe and that anti-Muslim hatred is a form of racism. It should be systematically used to tackle the marginalisation of European Muslims.

Empowering national equality bodies in EU states to include anti-Muslim hatred in their anti-racism work is one important step. Changing police culture and conduct another.

The good news is that even as some national politicians step up their anti-Muslim rhetoric, local politicians have adopted a different, more inclusive approach. Additionally, Covid-19 has highlighted the strong presence of Muslims in frontline services across the continent.

Anti-Muslim hatred and prejudice can be seen as a Muslim problem. In truth, it is much more than that. It is a stain on European values, Europe's internal cohesion and its global

reputation. In addition, rebuilding the post-pandemic European economy demands all hands on deck and the contribution of all citizens.

In the end it is very simple: Europe's Muslims are not going anywhere. They are here to stay because Europe is home.

Restrictions on religious freedom in Europe in the name of the fight against COVID-19

ECLJ (04.11.2020) - <https://bit.ly/3ePQyLB> - As of November 4, 2020, it appears from the study of more than 40 European countries that, in the vast majority of them, religious services are authorized, subject to compliance with health rules whose rigor varies greatly (physical distance, mask...).

The principle therefore remains that of the respect for the fundamental right to religious freedom, including freedom of worship, limited by strict health measures to protect the health of citizens.

Respect for religious freedom and public health can therefore be ensured, as is the case in most European countries, by maintaining an authorization in principle for religious ceremonies, accompanied by health restrictions to guarantee the health of European citizens.

Conversely, regarding the conduct of religious ceremonies, their general and absolute prohibition seriously infringes on religious freedom and often becomes discriminatory with regard to other gatherings, authorized despite the health situation.

Among the countries that maintain public religious ceremonies, two situations can be distinguished: countries with a more flexible lockdown than France and those with an equivalent lockdown. Some countries, such as Spain, Poland or the Netherlands, have never prohibited public worship, even during the first lockdown.

Here is a classification of the different European countries according to three main categories, from the freest to the most restrictive:

- **Partial lockdown (or no lockdown), authorized religious services:** Croatia, certain regions of Spain and Switzerland, Denmark, Finland, Bulgaria, Greece, Hungary, Estonia, Iceland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Montenegro, Norway, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, the Czech Republic, Romania, Slovakia and Sweden.

- **Lockdown, authorized and regulated religious services:** Austria, Germany, Slovenia, certain regions of Spain and Switzerland, and Ukraine.

- **Lockdown, prohibited public religious services:** France, Belgium, Great Britain and Ireland.

Most U.S. states fall into the first two categories (see this [article](#)).

Last update: November 10, 2020. If you have reliable new information or our information below is incorrect, please let us know: secretariat@eclj.org.

Some elements by country

Germany

From November 2, bars, sports halls and cultural venues will be closed for one month. No distance limit for travel.

Chancellor Angela Merkel and the prime ministers of the Bundesländer stressed that freedom of religion is a fundamental right.

Restrictions are made at the state level, and access to churches is sometimes subject to prior online registration. For the time being it appears that the Länder have not banned religious gatherings.

Germany thus distinguishes worship from other types of gatherings, as it is the object of a fundamental freedom. See in particular the decision of 29 April 2020 of the German Constitutional Court, denouncing the violation of religious freedom following the prohibition of worship during the first lockdown.

Austria

Second lockdown, with the introduction of a curfew and the closure of restaurants, hotels, cultural and sports institutions.

Churches and the state are in bilateral discussions; Catholic churches are self-limiting. Currently, masses are maintained, but without singing and with the wearing of masks. Since November 3, respect of a 1.5 m distance, which can be reduced for certain rites (communion).

The ministers took the opportunity to emphasize that religious practices are an element of "basic human needs" (see statements in this [article](#)).

Belgium

Lockdown: mandatory telework, prohibition to invite more than one person to your home, closure of non-essential businesses.

No public religious services before December 14, but churches remain open for individual prayer.

See the ministerial decision of October 28, 2020 establishing (at that time) the new stricter sanitary measures. Churches must remain open with a maximum number of 40 participants per "space" for each worship event.

See the ministerial decision of November 1, 2020 modifying the ministerial decision of October 28, 2020 establishing the (then) stricter (effective) measures. Prohibition of all public worship, with the exception of weddings and funerals, with a limited number of participants) These measures are applicable at least until December 13, 2020.

There is no explicit mention of religion/cult as such - the most relevant references are to the higher risk of transmission of the virus inherent in people gathering in closed spaces.

Bulgaria

The churches have not officially been closed, as confirmed by the Prime Minister. The faithful were encouraged to attend services online, but if they could travel to a nearby place of worship, many did. Religious communities renting halls or buildings were sometimes prevented from meeting, however. No lockdown. Masses with health instructions and protocols.

The Czech Republic

The Czech Republic is now in a state of emergency. However, public religious ceremonies are still permitted. Since October 12, 2020, all cultural and religious events are prohibited if they gather more than ten people indoors or twenty people outdoors, unless they are members of the same family. The participation of people in weddings and funerals is limited to 30 people. The social distance of at least 2 meters and the wearing of a face mask or equivalent must be respected. (Source: <https://www.vlada.cz/en/media-centrum/aktualne/important-covid-19-measures-for-foreigners-183562/#31%20October>)

Croatia

No re-lockdown.

Churches are open to mass (people must wear masks, be away from each other, communion in the hand is the norm). During the closure in March and April, there were no public masses, but for the time being, the government does not seem to want to move in that direction again.

Denmark

No lockdown. Religious services are allowed with sanitary instructions.

https://www.katolsk.dk/den-katolske-kirke-i-danmark/aktuelt/single-news/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=15856&cHash=16a34c891338998abc393d984d6670da

Estonia

Gatherings and events are permitted both indoors and outdoors. However, a reasonable distance between people must be maintained and the requirement not to exceed 50% of the capacity of the site must be respected.

(Source: <https://www.katoliku.ee/index.php/en/component/content/featured>)

Finland

No lockdown. Religious services are allowed with sanitary instructions.

<https://katolinen.fi/covid-19/>

Greece

Lockdown known as "partial". Cult still permitted even in the territories where the rules are the strictest.

<https://www.newsbomb.gr/ellada/story/1132549/koronoios-nea-metra-ti-tha-isxyei-giatis-ekklisies-kai-ta-sxoleia>

Hungary

Places of worship remain open and religious ceremonies are permitted. Funerals are possible within the limit of 50 persons and weddings within the limit of very close family. Masses are still possible, but the government limits all events and meetings to 10 people. For now it is unclear if it concerns masses. New regulations will be soon provided by the

National Assembly. Wearing a mask and a social distance of 2 meters is recommended (Source: Origo.hu and MagyarKurir.hu).

Iceland

Weekly religious ceremonies are allowed within the limit of 20 people per place of worship, despite partial lockdown.

Ireland

Public worship in the Republic of Ireland has been suspended nationwide since October 7 as part of 'level 3' of the plan to fight against Covid-19. Ireland is now under level 5 restrictions, the highest level. It is not clear from the law implementing those restrictions whether or not a minister of religion could be prosecuted for holding an act of public worship.

Italy

Places of worship remain open and the faithful are allowed to participate in religious ceremonies. However, several restrictions apply: social distancing, mandatory wearing of masks, no physical contact.

Kosovo

Gatherings of more than five persons in squares, parks and other public places remain prohibited, as do other large gatherings including weddings, seminars, workshops and family parties. However, religious ceremonies are still permitted as long as they are in accordance with the Government's Manual for the protection against the spread of COVID-19. (Source: PrishtinaInsight.com)

Latvia

Religious ceremonies are permitted and the faithful may attend them. Since October 14, 2020, a limit of 30 people is imposed for private indoor events and the wearing of masks is mandatory if the faithful do not have fixed and assigned seats. Olga Zeile, director of the industrial policy department of the Latvian Ministry of Justice, later clarified that the 30-person limit does not apply to religious ceremonies because it does not fall under this legal category. The maximum number of people attending ceremonies for public events is 300. Finally, the place of worship must only be occupied to half its capacity. (Source: <https://www.leta.lv/eng/home/important/3E449BF0-4A9F-45E4-9274-0F16F0E5F611> / <https://bnn-news.com/ministry-restrictions-on-public-gatherings-will-not-apply-to-church-services-218068>)

Lithuania

Religious ceremonies are always permitted and the faithful may attend them. On November 3, 2020, 13 municipalities moved to the "red zone" and tightened health restrictions to combat the spread of Covid-19. In these "red zones" religious communities are "advised" to suspend ceremonies or avoid generating large crowds (Source: <https://www.lrt.lt/en/news-in-english/19/1267705/lithuania-adds-13-municipalities-to-coronavirus-red-zone>).

Luxembourg

Religious ceremonies are allowed and take place in the presence of the faithful. The Archbishop of Luxembourg, Mgr Jean-Claude Hollerich has renounced the traditional

blessing of the tombs of All Saints to avoid crowds in the cemeteries. However, on Monday, November 2, he celebrated a mass in the cathedral. Several restrictions apply however: this ceremony was accessible upon prior registration, the wearing of masks and social distancing had to be respected.

Northern Macedonia

No reliable information found.

Malta

Religious ceremonies are allowed. A strict sanitary protocol has been put in place. Thanks to social distancing and the wearing of masks and a limited number of worshippers, to date, no contamination or clusters have occurred during religious ceremonies. (Source: <https://mt.usembassy.gov/covid-19-information/>)

Moldova

Religious ceremonies had been banned in April 2020, but the bans had not been followed by many prelates. It appears that now religious ceremonies are still permitted.

Montenegro

The Serbian Orthodox Church has for several months been fighting the government on issues of religious property and autonomy. Religious gatherings outside or outside places of worship are prohibited. Religious ceremonies are still possible, but the government recommends that congregants not physically attend ceremonies. Wearing masks and social distancing are also mandatory. (Source: <https://www.total-montenegro-news.com/news/5949-measures-and-recommendations-health-and-travel-update-november-2-2020>)

Norway

Public religious ceremonies are allowed within the limit of 200 people present. A strict sanitary protocol must be observed according to government requirements. (Distanciation, shielding gestures, etc.). Source: <https://www.fhi.no/en/op/novel-coronavirus-facts-advice/advice-and-information-to-other-sectors-and-occupational-groups/events-and-gatherings/>)

The Netherlands

Public religious ceremonies are permitted. As of October 5, the number of participants in a ceremony is limited to 30 people per place of worship. Singing, which could lead to infection, is prohibited.

Poland

Religious ceremonies are always open to the faithful and have never been forbidden. Restrictions on the number of congregants and distancing measures were taken. Access to cemeteries was prohibited on All Saints' Day to prevent overcrowding.

Portugal

Restrictive measures are in place as part of a semi-lockdown applied across the country: places of worship remain open at all times and the number of worshippers to attend

services is reduced to $\frac{1}{4}$ or $\frac{1}{3}$ of the building's normal capacity. The faithful must be separated by 2 square meters, unless they belong to the same family.

Romania

On October 5, 2020, the Romanian National Committee for Emergency Situations decided to ban pilgrimages. Public religious ceremonies are still allowed and access is simply limited to local populations. Wearing a mask is mandatory and a social distancing of at least 1.5m is compulsory in places of worship (Source: Romania-Insider.com)

On November 5, 2020, the Romanian President, Ludovic Orban, implemented very severe health restrictions for 30 days, including the closure of schools and a curfew. The Government did not specify specific rules for religious services, but it seems increasingly difficult to attend worship. (Source: MediaFax.ro)

Spain

Spain has never banned public religious celebrations at the national level. During the first lockdown, decisions were made at the level of each diocese.

On Sunday, October 25, 2020, the government declared a state of health emergency throughout the country. The Prime Minister, Pedro Sanchez, announced a curfew throughout the country (except the Canary Islands) from 11:00 pm to 6:00 am, with the possibility for regions to advance or delay its beginning by one hour. Regarding religious practice, the decree leaves to the competent authorities, that is the dioceses for Catholics, the autonomy to set the rules, taking into account the risks of contamination: "The presence of people in places of worship is limited by the determination, by the competent authority, of the capacity of reception for religious celebrations and meetings, taking into account the risk of transmission that could result from collective meetings. This limitation may in no case affect the private and individual exercise of religious freedom."

Serbia

The situation is a priori similar to that of Montenegro.

Slovakia

In the spring, during the first wave, all religious gatherings were banned for a few weeks, as part of the fight against Covid-19.

In order to test the entire population in one weekend (3.5 million people were tested), a complete lockdown was imposed. Now that this test has been carried out, religious ceremonies are again possible with a limit of only 6 people. This limitation seems to be questionable with regard to the rule applicable to shops, which imposes a maximum of one person per 15 m². Thus a cathedral should be able to accommodate more faithful according to this rule.

Slovenia

Slovenia went into a serious epidemic situation on October 19, 2020. Religious ceremonies are not prohibited but very limited to only 6 people.

Sweden

Public religious ceremonies are allowed within the limit of 50 people present and a social distance of one meter (Source: <https://www.folkhalsomyndigheten.se/the-public-health-agency-of-sweden/communicable-disease-control/covid-19-new-legislation-for-restaurants-bars-etc/>).

Switzerland

Several restrictive decisions were taken in recent days and it would appear that religious services are suspended everywhere now. In principle, such decisions are made at the cantonal level and vary greatly from canton to canton. The canton of Geneva is now semi-confined. The canton of Neuchâtel strictly prohibits public religious ceremonies. In Fribourg, Jura and Valais, public religious ceremonies may be still allowed. Health protocols also differ but apply everywhere. (Source: [rts.ch](https://www.rts.ch))

Turkey

Wearing a mask is mandatory almost everywhere. No other information.

The United Kingdom

As of November 5, public religious ceremonies are prohibited. Churches may remain open for individual prayers.

Funerals and weddings are permitted to a limited number of people. Several prelates have spoken out against this, including Cardinal Vincent Nichols of Westminster, who said he "sees no evidence at this time" that justify such a ban (Source: [Cruznor.com](https://www.cruznor.com))

In Scotland and Northern Ireland, religious ceremonies are still permitted and open to the faithful for the time being. In Wales, on the other hand, public religious ceremonies are banned and the police have already intervened to stop a service.

Ukraine

Religious ceremonies are allowed. The government allows excursions and pilgrimages for groups of up to 50 people, as well as indoor religious ceremonies, at a rate of 1 person per 5 square meters and provided that visitors maintain a social distance of 1.5 meters. (Source: <https://covid19.gov.ua/en/>)

The United States

Prolonged closure of prayer halls would be a serious and clear violation of the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution. The Dioceses of Brooklyn and San Francisco are conducting legal proceedings to that effect.

With the exception of a few states that prohibit public religious ceremonies or discriminate against certain churches, most states have provided religious exceptions to the lockdown, and attendance to religious ceremonies remains permitted. Again, health protocol varies in each state but exists virtually everywhere (Source: <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/04/27/most-states-have-religious-exemptions-to-covid-19-social-distancing-rules/>).

Interactive map of religious freedom in the United States: <https://www.becketlaw.org/covid-19-religious-worship/>

For example, the state of New Jersey is currently one of the most restrictive states in terms of authorizing religious ceremonies. It limits gatherings of this nature to either 150

people or 25% of the building's normal capacity, the lowest value applying. The faithful must wear masks and stand approximately 2 meters (6 feet) apart. (Source: <https://covid19.nj.gov/faqs/nj-information/reopening-guidance-and-restrictions/are-churches-and-other-houses-of-worship-offering-services-what-are-the-social-distancing-requirements#direct-link>)

48 MEPs call upon the EU to appoint a Special Envoy on FoRB

The European Times (15.10.2020) - <https://bit.ly/3IQVSAI> - The European Times has learned today about a letter that 48 MEPs from different political groups requesting the European Commission to bring to a done the appointment of an EU Special Envoy on Freedom of Religion or Belief, a role formerly tasked to Jan Figel:

"The appointment of a Special Envoy holding a permanent mandate focused primarily on freedom of religion or belief, with a multi-year term, full-time staff, and increased funding would send out the message that the EU is committed to protecting everywhere the victims of violence and persecution because of their religion or belief," the letter said, which was lodged on Wednesday 14th of October.

The position has been vacant since over one year when the term of Figel finished and after some lack of action on the part of the European Commission and strong requests specially from civil society last july the EU announced that they would renew the mandate, but without giving a name, potential names nor a date.

You can read the full letter and list of MEPs sign it below here:

To: Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Commission & Margaritis Schinas. Vice-President of the European Commission

Re: Mandate of the Special Envoy for the promotion and protection of freedom of religion or belief outside the EU

14/10/2020

Dear President von der Leyen, Dear Vice-President Schinas.

We, the undersigned Members of the European Parliament, write to welcome your decision in July of this year to renew the mandate of the Special Envoy for the promotion and protection of freedom of religion or belief outside the EU. Taking note that the EU has not had a Special Envoy for almost one year, we urge you to renew the position as soon as possible.

The Pew Research Center's study on global restrictions on religion found that in 2017, 83 countries experienced high or very high levels of restrictions. Moreover, persecution based on religion and belief is contributing to the migration crisis and related security challenges which threaten the EU. Promoting freedom of religion and belief, therefore, is not only in line with the values which guide EU external action, it is also essential in strengthening our role in addressing global challenges.

The appointment of a Special Envoy holding a permanent mandate focused primarily on freedom of religion or belief, with a multi-year term, full-time staff, and increased funding would send out the message that the EU is committed to protecting everywhere the victims of violence and persecution because of their religion or belief.

On numerous occasions, the European Parliament called for a stronger EU role in promoting freedom of religion or belief. In this spirit, and considering the commitments in the EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy, we recommend that the Special

Envoy's mandate is strengthened while remaining focused specifically on protecting freedom of religion or belief, since the targeted attacks on this freedom in recent years have proven the necessity of both a more targeted and urgent response. This is in line with the intent of the European Parliament, as expressed in the Resolution of 4 February 2016 on the systematic mass murder of religious minorities by the so-called 'ISIS/Daesh'. and the Report on EU Guidelines and the mandate of the EU Special Envoy, adopted by the European Parliament on 16 January 2019 with overwhelming support.

We thank you for your commitment to working to protect this fundamental right and look forward to working with you and the Special Envoy in furthering the protection of freedom of religion and belief.

Yours sincerely.

Miriam Lexmann MEP (Slovakia) – Zeljana Zovko MEP (Croatia) – Gyorgy Holveny MEP (Hungary) – François-Xavier Bellamy (France) – Milan Zver MEP (Slovenia) – Antonio Tajani MEP (Italy) – Anna Fotyga MEP (Poland) – Lukas Mandl MEP (Austria) – Antonio Lopez-Isturiz White (Spain) – Liudas Mazyliis MEP (Lithuania) – Ausra Maldeikicne MEP (Lithuania) – Isabel Benjumea MEP (Spain) – Karlo Rcssler MEP (Croatia) – Balazs Hidveghi MEP (Hungary) – Andrea Bocskor MEP (Hungary) – Ivan Stefanec MEP (Slovakia) – Radan Kanev (Bulgaria) – Leopoldo Lopez Gil MEP (Spain) – Rainer Wieland MEP (Germany) – Lorant Vincze MEP (Romania) – Tomislav Sokol MEP (Croatia) – Ryszard Legutko MEP (Poland) – TomaS Zdechovsky MEP (Czechia) – Michael Gahler MEP (Germany) – David Lega MEP (Sweden) – Roberta Metsola MEP (Malta) – Izabcla Kloc MEP (Poland) – Helmut Geuking MEP (Germany) – Margarita de la Pisa Carrion MEP (Spain) – Jorge Buxade Villalba MEP (Spain) – Salvatore De Meo MEP (Italy) – Adam Kosa MEP (Hungary) – Edina Toth MEP (Hungary) – Peter van Dalen MEP (Netherlands) – Rasa JukneviCiene MEP (Lithuania) – Romana Tome MEP (Slovenia) – Bert-Jan Ruissen MEP (Netherlands) – Markus Ferber MEP (Germany) – Eugen Jurzyca MEP (Slovakia) – Emmanouil Fragkos MEP (Greece) – Hermann Tertsch MEP (Spain) – Juan Ignacio Zoido Alvarez (Spain) – Anne Sander MEP (France) – Charlie Weimers MEP (Sweden) – Peter Poliak MEP (Slovakia) – Elzbieta Kruk MEP (Poland) – Cristian Terhes MEP (Romania) – Dominik Tarczyński (Poland)

EU-Vietnam Free Trade Agreement but 14 Protestants still in prison

HRWF/ The 88 Project (10.06.2020) - The National Assembly of Vietnam has ratified a free trade agreement with the European Union (EU), which over the next 10 years will cut or eliminate 99 per cent of tariffs on trade between the two sides.

Lawmakers of the Vietnamese Parliament approved the Europe-Vietnam Free Trade Agreement (EVFTA), which will come into effect in July.

Negotiations between the EU and Vietnam began in 2012 but remained stalled for several years over the latter's refusal to accept human rights and environmental clauses.

Reasons for the Persecution of Protestants in Vietnam

As of July 2018, the total population of Vietnam was estimated to be 97 million. According to statistics released by Vietnam's Government Committee for Religious Affairs (CRA), 26.4% of the population are religious believers: 14.91% identify as Buddhist, 7.35% as Roman Catholic, 1.09% as Protestant, 1.16% as Cao Dai, and 1.47% as Hoa Hao Buddhist.¹

¹ For more religious statistics, see <https://www.state.gov/reports/2018-report-on-international-religious-freedom/vietnam/>

² <https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/Vietnam.pdf>

Vietnam's Constitution stipulates that the government must defend and respect the freedom of religion or belief for all citizens. However, religious teachings are considered incompatible with communist ideology, and any form of assembly is perceived as a threat to the Communist Party's monopoly of power. Consequently, all religious groups are under strict surveillance and control by the Communist Party.

To that end, Vietnam's Law on Belief and Religion went into effect on 1 January 2018. This law, which requires religious groups to formally register with the government, has been used by authorities as justification for persecuting religious minorities, including Protestants. There are reports of authorities: harassing church members and leaders; refusing to issue identity documents which effectively leaves members stateless; raiding and shutting down churches; detaining members who attended overseas conferences or spoke to foreign officials; destroying or expropriating property or places of worship; exerting pressure on members to renounce their faith; and arresting and detaining religious leaders.²

Members of the Montagnard ethnic group are especially targeted and are often sentenced to lengthy prison terms on the alleged grounds of undermining the national unity policy. Due to missionary activities before Vietnam became communist, it is estimated that over half a million Montagnards are now Protestant Christians.³ The Vietnamese authorities perceive this ethno-religious group as a potential threat to the territorial integrity and the security of the country.

Protestants in Prison in Vietnam

In Vietnam, only religious organisations that are state-sanctioned can operate. Pastors and believers of Evangelical and Pentecostal house churches that are not state-sanctioned can be arrested at any time and charged with spurious offenses such as disruption of public order, undermining state security, illegally operating a business or leaking state secrets.

Protestants behind bars: some statistics

As of 1 April 2020, HRWF documented **14 cases** of Protestants in its Prisoners' Database. These individuals were all sentenced to between five to 17 years in prison. They are all Montagnards and five are Evangelical pastors. In 2019 there were 24 cases recorded in HRWF's database, in 2018 there were 27 and in 2017 there were 32.

There have been reports of religious prisoners experiencing torture during pretrial detention and imprisonment, as well as poor living conditions in prisons and suspicious deaths occurring while in custody.⁴

Articles of the Penal Code

Prisoners are typically charged under this Article of the Vietnamese Criminal Code:

³ <https://asiatimes.com/2018/10/say-a-prayer-for-vietnams-forgotten-montagnards/>

⁴ <http://webtv.un.org/search/consideration-of-viet-nam-contd-3581st-meeting-125th-session-of-human-rights-committee/6013104672001/?term=viet%20nam&lan=english&sort=date>

⁵ <https://the88project.org/profile/88/a-quyn/>

⁶ <https://the88project.org/profile/86/a-dao/>

Article 87 which is “undermining the unity policy”.⁵

Additionally, one of the Protestants in HRWF’s FoRB Prisoners’ Database was charged under **Article 275**, which includes “organizing and/or coercing other persons to flee abroad or stay abroad illegally”.⁶

Some international advocacy

On 12 March 2019, the **UN Human Rights Committee** held a review of Vietnam’s fulfilment of its obligations under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). In the Committee’s concluding observations, it highlighted concerns that had been raised related to freedom of religion or belief, especially regarding imprisonment: allegations of torture, poor living conditions, deaths while in detention and unjust pretrial detentions. The Committee also reiterated alarm at the government’s repression of indigenous ethnic communities and lack of freedom of expression for civil society organisations.⁷

In its November 2018 resolution on Vietnam, the **European Parliament** noted that religious freedom is repressed in the country and non-registered religions, such as Protestant churches and ethnic minority Montagnards, “continue to suffer severe religious persecution”. It called on the government to “remove all restrictions on freedom of religion and to put an end to the harassment of religious communities”. It further urged the government to bring its legislation in conformity with international human rights standards and obligations.⁸

The **United States Commission on International Religious Freedom** (USCIRF) has recommended that Vietnam be designated as a Country of Particular Concern (CPC) every year since 2002. The U.S. Department of State designated Vietnam as a CPC in 2004, but lifted this designation in 2006 after a bilateral agreement. At the time, USCIRF cautioned that it was too soon to ensure that progress regarding religious freedom would continue. In its 2020 report, USCIRF still found cause for Vietnam to be designated as a CPC.⁹

Some conclusions

The current situation of Protestants in Vietnam must also be viewed within the framework of international norms of freedom of religion or belief. These norms include ‘the freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his [or her] religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance’ (UDHR, Article 18). States must find ways to balance the need for societal stability with their commitment to ensure democratic freedoms for all its citizens.

⁷ <http://webtv.un.org/search/consideration-of-viet-nam-contd-3581st-meeting-125th-session-of-human-rights-committee/6013104672001/?term=viet%20nam&lan=english&sort=date>

⁸ https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/RC-8-2018-0526_EN.html

⁹ <https://www.uscirtf.gov/sites/default/files/Vietnam.pdf>

¹⁰ <https://the88project.org/profile/97/siu-bler/>

CASE STUDIES

Pastor tortured while serving 17-year sentence, now partially paralysed

Siu Bler is a pastor at the Amoi Evangelical Church who was previously arrested in 2001 after his community protested years of harassment by the government. When he was released in 2013, he was placed on probation for two years. On 27 August 2004, he was arrested again for defending his Church's right to freedom of religion. He was sentenced to 17 years in prison, which is to be followed by three years of probation.

While in detention, he was tortured until half of his body became paralysed.

Siu Bler is a member of the Ba Na ethnic minority group of the Montagnards.¹⁰

Evangelical pastor sentenced to 12 years in prison under unknown charges

Y Yich is an Evangelical pastor from the Gia Lai Province who was previously arrested for "plotting against the government" and sentenced to four years in prison. After his release in 2011, he was placed on probation for three years. He resumed proselytising within his community and was subsequently arrested on 13 May 2013. He was sentenced to 12 years in prison, but the exact charges against him are unknown.

While in detention, he has been subjected to torture and his health has been deteriorating as a consequence. The prison authorities have denied him medical treatment despite him suffering from high blood pressure, rheumatism, and stomach inflammation. Additionally, his family has not been allowed to send him medicine.

Y Yich is a member of the Ba Na ethnic minority group of the Montagnards.¹¹

Sentenced to 8 years in prison for advocating for religious freedom

On 6 January 2012, **A Yum Balk** was arrested for speaking out against the government's suppression of religious freedom. He was sentenced to eight years in prison under Article 87. His expected release date was 6 January 2020, but there has been no confirmation that he is now free.

A Yum Balk is a member of the Ba Na ethnic minority group of the Montagnards.¹²

¹¹ <https://the88project.org/profile/105/y-yich/>

¹² <https://the88project.org/profile/90/a-yum/>

EU Statement on the situation of Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia

OSCE Permanent Council No. 1262 Vienna, 12 March 2020

EU Delegation to the OSCE (12.03.2020) - https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/vienna-international-organisations_en - The European Union continues to be deeply concerned about the situation of Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia who continue to face systemic persecution, including home raids, arbitrary detentions, criminal investigations and sentences up to seven years of prison time. Furthermore, we are deeply concerned about recent specific reports of torture and other ill-treatment of several members of Jehovah's Witnesses in detention or prior to being taken into custody by either prison guards or law enforcement officers.

According to reports from the European Association of Jehovah's Witnesses, echoed also by Forum 18 and media articles, on 6 February 2020, in Orenburg, five individuals (Aleksey Budenchuk, Gennadiy German, Roman Gridasov, Feliks Makhammadiyev, and Aleksey Miretskiy) were beaten by prison officials of Penal Colony No. 1. All suffered severe injuries and one needed hospitalization. In addition, on 10 February 2020, Vadim Kutsenko was reported to be tortured before being taken into custody, as law enforcement officers repeatedly beat and choked him and applied electric shocks, while demanding information on other Jehovah's Witnesses.

Torture and other ill-treatment are among the most abhorrent violations of human rights, human integrity and human dignity. Torture breaches international human rights law, in particular the UN Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the European Convention on Human Rights, all of which the Russian Federation is a State Party to. Torture violates the principle of ensuring human security, upon which the OSCE concept of comprehensive security is founded. OSCE and international commitments are abundantly clear: the prohibition of torture is absolute and unconditional. Torture is never justified. All participating States have an obligation to

euoffice@osce.org • eeas.europa.eu/delegations/vienna • PAGE 1/2 take effective measures to prevent acts of torture, prosecute perpetrators of such acts, identify victims and ensure effective redress. We therefore call on the Russian Federation to conduct prompt, effective and thorough investigations into all reports of such acts, in order to ensure that anyone responsible or complicit is brought to justice. Furthermore, we call on the Russian Federation to take effective measures to protect the victims and ensure effective redress. We would appreciate an update on these cases from the delegation of the Russian Federation.

On April 20, 2017, the Supreme Court of the Russian Federation banned the Administrative Center of Jehovah's Witnesses and all local entities on grounds of "extremism". Following this, we have heard the Russian delegation claim more than once in the Permanent Council that Jehovah's Witnesses are, and will continue to be, able to practice their religion freely, and that freedom of religion or belief is guaranteed. However, we continue to see numerous reports about home raids, arbitrary detentions, and criminal investigations concerning Jehovah's Witnesses. Since the liquidation of all local religious organisations of Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia, reportedly 869 houses have been searched, 26 individuals are in pre-trial detention, 23 under house arrest, 316 are charged and 29 already convicted.

As we have stated previously on numerous occasions, all people, including members of the Jehovah's Witnesses, must be able to peacefully enjoy their human rights, including the right to freedom of religion or belief, freedom of association and peaceful assembly and freedom of expression, without discrimination, as guaranteed by the Constitution of the Russian Federation, Russia's OSCE commitments and international obligations. In light of this, we call upon the authorities to drop all charges against individuals who have been unjustifiably prosecuted or imprisoned for exercising their human rights. We call upon the Russian Federation to live up to its international human rights commitments, to respect the freedoms of expression, association, peaceful assembly, religion or belief, as well as the rights of persons belonging to minorities and to guarantee a fair trial.

The EU will continue to follow closely the developments concerning Jehovah's Witnesses across the OSCE region.

The Candidate Countries REPUBLIC of NORTH MACEDONIA, MONTENEGRO* and ALBANIA, and the EFTA country ICELAND, member of the European Economic Area, as well as UKRAINE and GEORGIA align themselves with this statement.*

** Republic of North Macedonia, Montenegro and Albania continue to be part of the Stabilisation and Association Process.*

Churches-EU Dialogue: COMECE and CEC meet with the Croatian EU Presidency

COMECE Press release (21.01.2020) - An ecumenical delegation composed of representatives from Commission of the Bishops' Conferences of the European Union (COMECE) and the [Conference of European Churches \(CEC\)](#) met in Zagreb on Monday, 20 January 2020 with [Mr. Andrej Plenković, Prime Minister of Croatia](#), to exchange on the priorities of the [Croatian Presidency of the EU Council](#), which started on 1 January 2020.

The delegation led by [H. Em. Card. Jean-Claude Hollerich SJ](#), President of COMECE, and [Rev. Christian Krieger](#), President of CEC, [shared a contribution](#) of Churches in Europe on key issues that the Croatian Presidency will address in the following six months. The meeting included the participation of representatives of the [Croatian Catholic Bishops' Conference](#) and CEC Member Churches from Croatia.

In the COMECE and CEC Contribution to Croatia's EU Council Presidency Programme "A strong Europe in a world of challenges", a section was devoted to religious freedom:

Religious freedom in third countries

The exercise of the fundamental and inalienable right to freedom of religion may be «subject only to such limitations as are prescribed by law and are necessary to protect public safety, order, health, or morals or the fundamental rights and freedoms of others» (Art 18(3) ICCPR). As it is grounded in the inherent dignity of the human person, all dimensions of this right - individual and collective; private and public; as well as institutional - should be properly and fully protected. Churches in Europe note that the issue of freedom of religion has become an increasing concern in a number of EU Member States. This is related to the current sensitivity to presence of religion in the public space, as well as to a growing number of attacks on faith communities in recent years, many of them targeting Christian communities. (6) The EU holds a unique role in ensuring the implementation of its legal framework in this area. In January 2019, the

European Parliament adopted the resolution supporting the strategic relevance of the function and calls on the Council and the European Commission to adequately support the “mandate, capacity and duties of the Special Envoy.” (7)

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Adopt targeted measures to protect highly vulnerable religious minorities in countries and regions where they are at risk of disappearing (e.g. Christians in the Middle East), collect evidence in case of international crimes committed against them, and promote and endorse national or international mechanisms to prosecute the perpetrators.
- Grant full political, social and financial support to make effective the right of Christians and other persecuted minorities, in particular in the Middle East, to remain in their home countries, and to return to them in dignity and safety as soon as possible; establish an international targeted fund to implement both basic rights.
- Ensure that the portfolio of the EU Special Envoy for the promotion of freedom of religion or belief outside the EU is continued and strengthened in its resources.
- Monitor the implementation of the EU action plan on public spaces, include religious communities in the dialogue with the Member States and provide the EU funding for the training of religious communities on the matter of public safety.

Brussels, January 2020

(6) E.g. murder of Fr. Jacques Hamel in Normandy in July 2016, the bombing of churches on Easter Sunday March 2016 in Lahore, the narrowly-averted church massacre in October 2018 in Louisville Kentucky, terrorist attacks against churches in Sri Lanka during the April 2019 Easter Sunday Mass, periodic attacks on Koptic churches in Egypt etc.

(7) http://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-8-2018-0449_EN.html#title1

The EU must work for Freedom of Religion or Belief for all

By Mairead McGuinness

New Europe/ Our World (18.12.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2FQuCPN> - In promoting Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB), the European Parliament seeks to defend a right that is universal, indivisible and inalienable. It is a right which is enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and of course our own EU Charter of Fundamental Rights. It includes the right to hold any religious belief or none.

Some 79% of the world’s population today live in countries that have either restriction on the right to religion or belief or a high level of social hostility involving religion or belief. Faced with such threats to this most basic of rights, the EU over the past five years has increased its efforts to promote FoRB for all.

The European Parliament – in particular through our Human Rights Committee, and our Intergroup on Freedom of Religion or Belief – has been at the forefront of these efforts. With the creation of the EEAS, we pushed for FoRB to be mainstreamed into EU

diplomatic efforts; we also urged the creation of the post of Special Envoy for FoRB in order to underline the importance of the issue and give it some focus.

Five years ago, the Foreign Affairs Council responded by adopting Guidelines for the Promotion of Freedom of Religion or Belief. These ensure that EU Delegations around the world monitor the situation on the ground, including by outreach to faith-based and humanist organisations, and are ready to intervene with national authorities to raise breaches.

Three years ago, the President of the European Commission appointed the EU's first ever Special Envoy for FoRB. The current holder of that position, Jan Figel, has done an outstanding job in a short period of time, including raising awareness among national diplomacies of the scale of the problem and seeking to coordinate responses. Currently, seventeen Member States have created similar posts and I recently had an opportunity to meet with them in Brussels when the Commission brought us all together to stocktake our joint efforts on FoRB.

Within the European Parliament, I am responsible for our institution's official dialogue with churches, religious and philosophical organisations, a function provided for by Article 17 of the Treaties. Article 17 TFEU covers a wider range of policy issues than FoRB. But naturally, this freedom is very dear to each of the stakeholders in our dialogue. Without full respect for this core freedom in all its dimensions, churches, religious communities and philosophical organisations would not be able to play a meaningful role in society.

In our work to defend FoRB, we do not consider the merits of different religions or beliefs, or align ourselves with any specific religion or worldview. The EU is dedicated to ensuring respect for the beliefs of each person and every community.

The question is sometimes asked why the EU pays particular attention to FoRB among human rights. It is true that FoRB is not a stand-alone right but closely connected with a number of others: freedom of expression, of association, of assembly. At the same time, FoRB is often the "canary in the coal mine". In places where FoRB starts to be curtailed, we can be sure that other rights are also, or will soon be violated too. We only have to look at the list of the worst offenders for evidence of this: North Korea, Pakistan, China, Saudi Arabia.

If we are going to preach the FoRB message outside the EU, we need to ensure that our own house is in order. These countries will be the first to point the finger if there is any slip on the European side.

The Parliament campaigned for the release of the young Pakistani Christian woman Asia Bibi, imprisoned and sentenced to death under that country's blasphemy laws. In the course of our efforts, the issue of blasphemy laws on the books of a number of EU Member States was sometimes raised. In the past couple of years, Denmark and Ireland removed the blasphemy provisions from their statutes; I hope that others will follow.

Earlier this month, on the holiest day in the Jewish calendar, a terrible attack was carried out on that community in Halle, Germany.

It is shocking to realise that 75 years after the liberation of the Auschwitz Nazi death camp, that we still have anti-Semitic attacks being carried out in our cities.

FoRB includes the right "alone or in community, in public or private, to manifest one's religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance." And yet we know that here in Europe people can fall victim to hate crimes because of their religious clothing or symbols.

We have a lot to do both inside and outside the EU, and those policies need to be joined-up and coherent. The EU's recently-launched Global Platform on Religion in Society is an important contribution.

As with Article 17, the new platform reaches out to both religious and non-confessional voices. Both in foreign and domestic policy, the EU has come to recognise that the issue of religion, or lack of it, is crucial to understanding many societies.



Mairead McGuinness
First Vice President of the European Parliament