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## **The Intergroup FoRB welcomes appointment of new Special Envoy but regrets delay**

**European Parliament Intergroup on FoRB&RT (08.12.2022) - The Intergroup for Freedom of Religion or Belief and Religious Tolerance welcomes the appointment of Frans van Daele as new EU Special Envoy for religious freedom. However, for many persecuted believers, this action by the European Commission comes too late. According to Intergroup co-chairs Peter van Dalen (EPP) and Carlo Fidanza (ECR), it is now of utmost importance that the new Special Envoy will be effectively facilitated to start his mandate as soon as possible.**

The European Commission announced on Wednesday 7 December that it had appointed the Belgian diplomat Frans van Daele as its new Special Envoy for the promotion of freedom of religion or belief outside the EU. Van Daele is a former Belgian ambassador to both the US and the EU, and has served in many high ranking diplomatic positions. The appointment follows after a three years standstill, in which the only other Special Envoy, that was appointed in 2021, already returned his mandate after a few months to assume another position in a national government.

According to Van Dalen, the new appointment in itself is to be welcomed, but cannot take away the doubt that the European Commission has cultivated about its commitment to upholding religious freedom: 'By stalling the process of mandating a Special Envoy for religious freedom for almost three years, the Commission has shown that this topic has not had much priority for them. That is highly regrettable, as the space for religious freedom [is shrinking](#) in many places around the world. If the EU is really the value-based actor that it claims to be, it must step up its game with regard to defending this fundamental right.'

Fidanza said that the appointment is 'undoubtedly an important, long-awaited achievement that we claim as members of the European Parliament and its Intergroup on religious freedom.' According to the co-chair, the Special Envoy must work with national authorities in countries where people suffer discrimination, must support processes of intercultural and interreligious dialogue, and implement measures to counter radicalization and prevent extremism based on religion.

The Intergroup looks forward to working with the new Special Envoy and intends to invite him to discuss the plans and priorities for his mandate shortly. Van Dalen: 'Now that the appointment is there, it is also important that the Special Envoy is given adequate support, both in terms of funding and staff, to effectively exercise his mandate.' This position has been echoed by the European Parliament on multiple occasions, for example in its [resolution](#) on religious persecution of May 3rd of this year.

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## **EU hosts conference on good practices of ritual slaughter**

By M. Apelblat

**The Brussels Times (25.10.2022) - <https://bit.ly/3zdQj8H> - The European Commission organised last Thursday a conference with religious communities in the EU with focus on ritual slaughter, a sensitive issue which involves principles of religious freedom and animal welfare concerns.**

The conference was held in partnership with the Council of Europe, the OSCE and the UN. It brought together 100 representatives of EU Member States and other national authorities, special envoys and coordinators on combating antisemitism and anti-Muslim hatred, representatives of national Jewish, Muslim and Christian communities, international organisations and independent experts.

Among the participants were ambassador Deborah Lipstadt, the American Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Antisemitism and UN Under-Secretary-General Miguel Moratinos, holding the post of High Representative for the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations (UNAOC).

The conference was held under Chatham House rules, according to which information can be disclosed but statements cannot be attributed to the speakers, and no journalists were invited to it. However, a speech given by Vice-President Margaritis Schinas, Commissioner for Promoting our European Way of Life, was made available for journalists.

According to the Commission, the idea behind the event was to foster an open, frank and constructive discussion between the religious communities and the national authorities. A Commission source told The Brussels Times that it wanted to give space to the participants to talk freely, with the Commission acting as facilitator of the discussions.

### ***Controversial court ruling***

Vice-President Schinas reminded the audience that freedom of religion is a fundamental right which includes "freedom to change religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or in private, to manifest religion or belief, in worship, teaching, practice and observance".

"This Commission is determined to promote our European way of life – a model of society, where all citizens feel included irrespective of their belief, their ethnic origin, their cultural or religious background," he underlined.

"Jewish and Muslim communities are part of a diverse and vibrant Europe. It is our mission, our duty, to ensure that religious minorities feel at home in Europe and are able to live, practice and celebrate their faith like every other member of society."

On the issue at stake, slaughter based on religious traditions, he said that it is millennia old. "Finding balanced solutions that promote animal welfare while respecting religious

traditions has been the subject of many public debates over the past few years. We know workable solutions are possible within the framework of existing EU legislation.”

Referring to current EU legislation (Regulation No 1099/2009 on the protection of animals at the time of killing), he said that the regulation strikes a fair balance. “It gives each Member State a broad discretion regarding the need to reconcile the protection of the welfare of animals and respect for the freedom of religion.”

He also referred to the interpretation of the regulation by the European Court of Justice (ECJ) in its ruling of 17 December 2020. As [previously reported](#), the court ruled in favour of a Flemish ban of ritual slaughter. Slaughter without stunning is incompatible with Jewish and Muslim religious law and amounts to a ban in practice.

Member states might adopt stricter rules to protect animal welfare but not ban ritual slaughter completely. The court interpreted for the first time the EU legislation and concluded that interference by member states, requiring stunning also in ritual slaughter, meets “an objective of general interest recognised by the EU, namely the promotion of animal welfare.”

### ***Focus on good practices***

The Muslim and Jewish communities in Belgium largely disagree with the ECJ ruling and have joined forces to overrule the ban in the courts - until now without success. They did not respond to questions from The Brussels Times about the conference and its outcome.

Furthermore, the conference did not discuss the possibility of amending the EU regulation although some revision of the regulation is planned by the Commission, according to the source. The focus of the conference was on exchanging good practices of ritual slaughter in the EU member states and other countries.

According to the ‘readout’ after the event, the participants held an informative discussion, raising the importance of dialogue, education and exchange of best practice. They agreed that animal welfare is important, as well as freedom of religion or belief, recalling that freedom of religion constitutes one of the fundamental rights enshrined in the EU Charter of Fundamental rights.

They also discussed, that existing EU rules on the matter, which allow slaughter to the extent required for the needs of the concerned religious communities, strike the right balance between animal welfare and religious freedom. Stricter rules by the Member States need to be properly justified.

Asked about good practices, the Commission source highlighted France and The Netherlands, where ritual slaughter without stunning is allowed. According to the EU regulation, member states have freedom of discretion to allow ritual slaughter without stunning if it takes place in approved slaughterhouses.

The conference was foreseen in the Commission’s [EU Strategy](#) on Combating Antisemitism and Fostering Jewish life (October 2021), when it committed to facilitate the exchange of good practices. In this regard, the conference dispelled prejudices about ritual slaughter and might have laid the groundwork for educating the public that is not more painful to animals than other slaughter methods.

*Photo: The Grand Synagogue in Brussels. Quotation from the Book of Malachi: Do we not all have the same father? Didn't the same God create us? Credit: Wikimedia Commons*

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## Catholic Italian to be the new EU Commissioner for Religious Freedom

**CNE (04.07.2022)** - <https://bit.ly/3yYDPlm> - Mauro, a Roman Catholic, is currently the chairman of Pololari per l'Italia, the small Christian Democratic Party in Italy, [Idea](#) reports. He also works as a senior advisor and runs an [international relations study centre](#).

He was an MP between 1999 and 2013. During that time, he already drew attention to the situation of persecuted Christians in the Middle East. In 2011, he was critical of a motion of the EU ministers of Foreign Affairs. The bill was about religious freedom but did not specifically mention Christian minorities, [Domradio](#) reports.

In an earlier interview with L'Osservatore Romano, Mauro said that he saw the prevention of persecution of Christians as an important part of his political career with Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe, of he was also part at the time. There he was also active against discrimination and hate towards Christians, [Catholic News Agency](#) reports.

At another occasion, he said that religious freedom is a test for other freedoms and rights. "The persecution of Christians throughout the world is one of the greatest challenges to human dignity", he stated, according to [Catholic News Agency](#).

That Mauro is actively involved in combatting religious persecution, is shown by his actions for the Pakistani Christian Asia Bibi. She was sentenced to the death penalty, but is now free again.

### Political career

In 2013, Mauro became a member of the Italian Senate. The same year, he founded the Christian Democratic Party Popolari per l'Italia.

Mauro was Minister of Defense for ten months during the Enrico Letta administration.

Before becoming a politician, Mario Mauro was a history teacher. He graduated from philosophy and literary studies at the Catholic University of Sacro, [Do Rzeczy](#) writes.

Originally, the new Commissioner for Religious Freedom came from the Italian town of San Giovanni Rotondo. He belongs to the Catholic lay movement Comunione e Liberazione, [Domradio](#) writes.

Mauro is married to his wife Giovanna and has three children, his [website](#) reads.

Mauro succeeds Christos Stylianides, the previous Commissioner for Religious Freedom.

Stylianides resigned after only four months in office. He served from May 2021 until September of that same year. He then favoured the position of minister in Greece.

### **Preventing discrimination**

As Commissioner for Religious freedom, Mauro will be responsible for preventing discrimination, promoting peace-building contacts, inter-religious processes and initiatives to reduce radicalisation in countries outside the EU, according to Do Rzeczy.

However, his influence outside the EU as a special envoy will be limited, proponents of the function of the special envoy fear. An often-heard critique is that the commissioner needs more means to fulfil his job well. Domradio writes. The reason for that is the lack of financial and human resources.

### **Not a European priority**

The function of the Commissioner for Religious Freedom does not seem to be a priority for the European Commission. Before Mauro's successor, Stylianides, was appointed, the position had been vacant for ten months. Only after other politicians, among others, pressured the Commission it attempted to fill the vacancy.

However, after Stylianides resigned, it took another nine months before a successor was found.

### **Evangelical Focus Comment**

A sign of the low support this post has had in the EU institutions is that it has taken **10 months for the European Commission to appoint a new person** for the post.

In **September 2021**, the [Christos Stylianides left after only working five months](#) in the position. The Greek representative had been appointed in May 2021, after over half a year of vacancy, earning the [protests of human rights groups](#) and the [European Evangelical Alliance](#).

[Jan Figel was the first EU Special Envoy](#), appointed in May 2016. He completed his mandate in 2019 and was praised for his initiatives. Nevertheless, he was [not re-appointed](#). The European Commission did not appoint a successor for Figel until the [second half of 2021](#).

*Photo: Mario Maure. Photo Facebook, Mario Maure*