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European Parliament re-establishes Intergroup on Freedom of Religion or Belief

[The European Times](#) (11.12.2024) - In a decisive move to enhance the protection of religious freedom across Europe and beyond, the European Parliament has re-established the [Intergroup on Freedom of Religion or Belief](#). This initiative, confirmed during the conference of parliamentary leaders on December 11, 2024, aims to address the urgent need for safeguarding the rights of individuals facing persecution due to their faith.

Co-chaired by Bert-Jan Ruissen (SGP, ECR) and Miriam Lexmann (EPP), the intergroup seeks to raise awareness about the plight of those persecuted for their beliefs. Ruissen expressed his optimism about the intergroup's revival, stating, *"This intergroup provides us with an important platform in the European Parliament to advocate for the persecuted church. I see that this work is desperately needed, as many remain unaware of the severity of the situation."* Lexmann added, *"From China to Belarus, the freedom of religion or belief continues to decline. It is crucial that the European Union, and particularly the Parliament, pays special attention to monitoring and actively supporting this fundamental freedom globally."*

The establishment of this intergroup comes at a critical time when violations of religious freedom are on the rise. A recent letter from various civil society organizations and

religious groups highlighted the alarming increase in attacks against individuals based on their [religion](#) or belief. The letter calls for the continuation and strengthening of the intergroup, emphasizing that the right to freedom of religion or belief is a cornerstone of democratic societies, as enshrined in Article 10 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union.

The letter outlined specific instances of persecution, including the use of blasphemy laws in northern Nigeria, the killing of Christians in Manipur, India, the closure of churches in Algeria, and attacks on Ahmadiyya communities in Pakistan. It also notes the plight of Yazidis in Iraq, Baha'is in Iran, and the discrimination faced by atheists and humanists in Nigeria and Pakistan due to apostasy laws. These examples underscore the urgent need for robust responses from the European Parliament and its members. While the letter did not mention violations within [Europe](#), it goes without saying that Europe must focus on practising what we preach, and the better we do inside the more leverage the EuParl will have when condemning situations outside Europe.

The intergroup, which has been active since 2004, comprises members from various political factions, reflecting a broad commitment to the cause. Following each election, the intergroup must be re-established with support from at least three different factions. Ruissen noted the collaborative effort that led to the intergroup's revival, stating, "We have come together with colleagues from diverse factions and successfully garnered support from my own faction (the ECR), as well as the liberals (Renew) and the Christian Democrats (EPP)."

One of the intergroup's key initiatives will be to appoint a new EU envoy for religious freedom, as the mandate of the [voluntary without salary and without team](#) current envoy, Frans van Daele, expired at the end of November. The group will also maintain communication with the [EU's](#) diplomatic services to prioritize religious persecution in global diplomatic discussions.

The letter from civil society organizations emphasizes that the continuation of the intergroup is essential for empowering MEPs to protect the right to freedom of religion or belief through their "on-the-ground" work in affected countries and faith communities. It calls for a united front among religious and belief groups, urging them to sign a letter addressed to the political groups in the European Parliament to highlight the persecution they face globally and the necessity of such a platform.

As the intergroup embarks on its mission, it faces the challenge of ensuring that the voices, also of minority religions, within [Europe](#) are heard and that their rights are protected. The commitment of MEPs from various political backgrounds to this cause is a hopeful sign that the European Parliament is ready to take a stand for diversity and inclusion.

In a world where freedom of religion or belief is increasingly under threat, the re-establishment of the Intergroup on Freedom of Religion or Belief is a crucial step toward safeguarding the rights of all individuals, regardless of their faith. The European Parliament must continue to champion this cause, ensuring that the principles of diversity and protection for minority religions are upheld not just in rhetoric, but in action.

“Time for an EU Coordinator on combating anti-Christian hatred,” COMECE says

COMECE (06.12.2024) - In the context of the 27th edition of the European Prayer Breakfast held at the European Parliament, in Brussels, on Wednesday, 4 December 2024, COMECE contributed to the conference on “Safeguarding Religious Freedom in Europe – Current challenges and future prospects”. COMECE: “The time is mature for the appointment of an EU Coordinator on combating anti-Christian hatred in Europe”.

Alessandro Calcagno, COMECE adviser for fundamental rights and [Article 17 TFEU](#), outlined several EU Bishops’ priorities in the area of freedom of religion. Calcagno highlighted the need to ensure equal protection to all dimensions of this core fundamental right, including the institutional one, allowing Churches and religious communities to function normally and without having to face bias or undue obstacles-interferences.

“Too often, freedom of religion is depicted as a ‘problematic’ right, and its collective dimension, compared to its individual dimension, is neglected. Tolerance cannot become a surrogate for the protection of the fundamental right to freedom of religion”, stated Alessandro Calcagno.

On religious symbols, messages and expressions, adviser Calcagno underlined that *“until they will be considered as potentially offensive to the sensibility of other believers or of non-believers, as well as a possible means of pressure on others, full protection of freedom of religion will not be ensured”.*

The conference also gave the opportunity to COMECE to stress the importance of better mainstreaming the protection of freedom of religion across EU policies – e.g. protection of places of worship, data protection.

The COMECE representative also highlighted that the right to freedom of religion, as well as provisions to fight against discrimination on grounds of religion, should not be seen as primarily concerning religious minorities. *“It is necessary to break the ‘majorities vs. minorities’ dynamic that underpins the approach of certain actors and policy-makers”,* explained Alessandro Calcagno.

In this context, he called on behalf of COMECE for the appointment of an EU Coordinator on combating anti-Christian hatred. *“We consider that the time is mature for this step, while not questioning the specificity of Jewish and Muslim communities, which are already covered by similar Coordinators. It is not a question of victimism, but equal access to tools of protection”,* he said.

COMECE reiterated the positive role that religious literacy can play to promote and protect religious freedom and counter discrimination on grounds of religion. *“This also applies to public authorities and institutions, so that they can craft well-grounded policies and legal measures”,* continued Alessandro Calcagno.

At the end of the conference, COMECE emphasised that [Article 17.3 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union](#) (TFEU), should be a tool to address concrete policy points as those discussed at the EP event, as opposed to general themes and principles.

The event was moderated by MEP Paulius Saudargas (Lithuania). It also featured high-level speakers like [EU Coordinator on combating antisemitism and fostering Jewish life](#), Dr Katharina von Schnurbein, MP and Vice-President of the [OSCE Parliamentary Assembly](#) Dr. Gudrun Kugler and the Executive Director of The Observatory on Intolerance and Discrimination against Christians in Europe ([OIDAC Europe](#)) Ms Anja Hoffmann.

During the European Prayer Breakfast, the President of COMECE, H.E. Mgr. Mariano Crociata, offered a [concluding prayer](#) and blessed all participants.

[Read OIDAC Press Release](#)

Religious persecution in Europe: VP Margaritis Schinas' vision of tolerance and solidarity

By [Juan Sanchez Gil](#)

[The European Times](#) (10.10.2024) - In a passionate and reflective speech delivered today at the European Parliament during the "[how to stop the rise of religious intolerance in Europe](#)" debate, Mr. Margaritis Schinas, Vice President of the European Commission, addressed the importance of religious freedom, tolerance, and the European way of life. His speech, rich in both historical context and forward-looking vision, called for a united European response to religious intolerance while affirming the values that define Europe today.

Schinas highlighted both the internal and external challenges facing the European Union and emphasized Europe's commitment to human rights, freedom of religion, and the protection of democracy. **However he failed to mention the lack of action and the amount of state sponsored discriminations** within [Europe](#), not just about historical religions, but specially against the new religious movements, often ostracized by the very European Commission.

A Union of Freedom and Democracy

Mr. Schinas began his address by acknowledging the importance of religious tolerance as central to what [Europe](#) stands for today. "It's a union of freedom. It's a union of democracy," he declared, emphasizing the need to preserve these core values within and beyond European borders. Schinas made it clear that addressing religious intolerance in all its forms is an essential part of maintaining Europe's identity as a beacon of democracy and freedom.

Joint Action Against Religious Intolerance

Religious intolerance remains a significant issue both within Europe and abroad. Schinas stressed the need for a united approach at the [EU](#) level, urging for collaboration among European institutions. He called for dialogue and understanding, cautioning against finger-pointing or fostering toxic divisions. "All of us work together at EU level, within the EU institutions, without pointing fingers, without cries of hatred, without toxicity, through dialogue and understanding," he said, signaling the importance of constructive engagement in tackling this sensitive issue.

The European Commission, according to Schinas, is committed to playing a pivotal role in addressing religious intolerance by providing funding, support, and catalyzing processes that foster togetherness among Europeans.

Promoting Religious Freedom Beyond Europe's Borders Just By Words

In addition to tackling issues within Europe, Schinas emphasized Europe's moral responsibility to defend freedom of [religion](#) and belief worldwide. "We have a moral duty to stand for religious freedom," he asserted. Europe must speak out wherever religions, including Christianity, are under threat, and where individuals are persecuted for their beliefs. To this end, Schinas announced ([as if it was almost new](#)) the appointment of [Frans van Daele](#) as the EU's envoy for promoting and protecting religious freedom across the globe (**in fact only for outside the European Union**), reaffirming Europe's commitment to championing these freedoms beyond its borders.

He shared details of van Daele's recent missions to Jerusalem and Pakistan, noting that these efforts are critical in spreading the European message of religious tolerance and freedom across the world. However, Schinas did not mention that the status of the EU Special Envoy is **not better than the one of a volunteer, with no salary, [no budget](#) and [not political weight](#).**

The European Way of Life: A Broken Mirror of Values

Schinas then turned to a theme that has defined much of his tenure as Vice President: the European way of life. Recalling his parliamentary hearing five years ago, where the European way of life was debated, Schinas underscored that this concept is not about exclusion or superiority. "**The European way of life is not a bulldozer. It's a mirror that reflects the richness, the diversity, the might, the values, the principles that unite us,**" he explained

The European way of life, as Schinas described, is a system where democracy flourishes, minorities' rights are meant to be protected, and [human rights](#) are respected (at least by some). It is a union where women play a central role in family, society, and the workplace, where education and health systems are universal and free, and where the elderly are cared for.

"**We are the world champions of [human rights](#), of data protection, and we don't have the death penalty,**" he affirmed as if no violations of these occur in the EU, noting that while pieces of this might be found elsewhere, the full picture of these values is unique to Europe.

Margaritis Schinas' speech at the European Parliament attempted to give a powerful reminder of the values that are meant to underpin Europe's identity: **freedom, democracy, tolerance, and unity.**

By addressing the challenges of religious intolerance and defending religious freedoms, both within Europe and abroad, Schinas reaffirmed the EU's commitment to upholding its core principles, **even if these kind and powerful words need still to be brought to visible and efficient action.** His message was clear: the European way of life is not about division or exclusion, but about inclusivity, diversity, and **respect for all.**

This should mean not just for Christians, Jewish, Muslims and Atheists, but also for Baha'is, Hindus, Scientologists, Sikhs, Buddhists, Freemasons, Jehovah Witnesses, members of the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter Day Saints and even Pagans.

As he concluded, "**You can find bits and pieces of this elsewhere in the world, but all this together you will only find here, and it's called the European way of life.**"

Now, let's see what the upcoming executives of the European Commission will have to say, and more importantly, what they will do... **Will the European Commission continue to not practice what they preach?**

Europeans cannot afford to ignore the plight of the Falun Gong

By Aaron Rhodes and Marco Respinti for *Human Rights Without Frontiers*

HRWF (23.09.2024) - Practitioners of Falun Gong gathered in Brussels on the morning of 20 September 2024. They came from all over Europe to hold a street parade in the European District. In these days, while the new European Commission chaired by Ursula von der Leyen is taking office, the eyes of the world are fixed on the Belgian capital, which is also the headquarters of many European institutions, and there is no better occasion for make an important case be heard.

After the parade, Falun Gong practitioners rallied at "Place Jean Rey." Local politicians and human rights activists on behalf of several NGOs took the floor to address the staggering situation of Falun Gong in the People's Republic of China (PRC), where the Communist regime violently persecutes them, committing one of the most egregious violations of human rights and religious freedom in the world today.

Falun Gong (also called Falun Dafa) is a large Chinese new religious movement, established by Li Hongzhi in 1992. It teaches both a variety of exercises of qi gong (the traditional Chinese gym) and is spirituality rooted in the so-called "Three Teachings", with some New Age distinctions and connotations. The "Three Teachings" refers to a common source of Chinese spirituality and religion that includes Taoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism.

Originally, Falun Gong was tolerated and even praised by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) as a movement offering good health for the good citizen, but things changed rapidly. Despite the regime's attempt to water it down in ideological propaganda, the spiritual nature of the movement could not be suppressed, and the rapid growth of its membership became worrisome as an alternative source of authority. Falun Gong was thus banned in 1999, and included in the list of the "xie jiao," an ancient expression meaning "heterodox teachings" and used by the government to condemn rival groups. The CCP resurrected the term in recent years, rebranded such movements as "evil cults" after a Western, non-academic and largely functional fashion, and used to justify persecution. No authoritative definition of the "xie jiao" exists, as no agreed-upon definition of "cult" exists; the CCP uses the expression to arbitrarily label all those it wants to target. To be categorized as "xie jiao" in the PRC, groups need only to be listed by the state among the directory of the "xie jiao," which Beijing periodically revises.

The practitioners of Falun Gong gathered in Brussels to sensitize European institutions, and through them the entire world, on the tragedy that has befallen their movement at the hands of the CCP. Indeed, Falun Gong has been decimated, and is a victim of the heinous practice of organ harvesting, whereby doctors and institutions remove organs of "political prisoners" or "prisoners of conscience", often when they are still alive, and sell them on a lucrative black market that goes far beyond China's borders.

Readers should keep in mind that the PRC sets world records in the death sentences it carries out yearly. While countries that Amnesty International lists as the worst in this

respect kill between 300 and 500 per year, the number executions in the PRC is estimated by observers to be around 8,000. The actual number is a state secret.

Speakers at the Brussels event included Annick Ponthier, a Belgian MP; Hans Noot, spokesperson for Brussels-based NGO Human Right Without Frontiers; Géraldine Monti, spokesperson for Nurses Against Forced Organ Harvesting; and Manyan NG, board member of the International Society for Human Rights and an expert on the PRC.

An important direct testimony was brought by Ding Lebin, a Falun Gong practitioner now residing in Berlin, Germany, for security reason, about his parents, Ma Ruimei (born October 7, 1967) and her husband Ding Yuande (born October 19, 1963). Early in the morning of May 12, 2023, more than ten law enforcement agents in disguise stormed the couple's tea plantation in Yanjiazhuang Village, Wu Lian County, Rizhao city, Shandong province, led by Xia Jingde, the CCP local secretary. They were first handcuffed and then abducted. Lebin was speaking with his mother by telephone at the time -- a dramatic 33-second call followed by silence.

The police confiscated many Falun Gong books and pieces of spiritual literature. Of course, owning those 'weapons' was deemed incriminating and resulted in the couple's detention in a unknown place. Lebin immediately made the detention public and, thanks to the efforts of a few NGOs, her mother was released on bail on May 24, 2023. But his father has remained in custody, since June 13, 2023, in the Rizhao City Detention Center and from March 20, 2024, in the Shandong Province Prison. His mother is now out of prison but constantly visited by intimidating policemen.

European institutions, and more importantly European citizens, owe it to the Chinese people, and to themselves, to be aware of China's intolerable oppression of Falun Gong, and other minority groups.

It is a window through which we can see the true character of the CCP regime. We should not avert our eyes.

Aaron Rhodes is president of the Forum for Religious Freedom-Europe. He as executive director of the International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights 1993-2007.

Marco Respinti is director-in-charge of "Bitter Winter: A Magazine on Religious Liberty and Human Rights."

EU-CHINA Human Rights Dialogue, a dialogue of the deaf

By Willy Fautré, director of Human Rights Without Frontiers

HRWF (12.07.2024) - On 16 June, the EU and China held the 39th session of joint Human Rights Dialogue in Chongqing which was criticized by major international human rights organizations in a [letter addressed to EU High Representative J. Borrell](#) on 12 June 2204 in which they recalled an [alternative plan of action](#) they had already proposed to the EU in February 2023.

The Dialogue was preceded by a side visit to Tibet between 13 and 15 June, an initiative which was not appreciated by Tibetan civic organizations abroad.

The monologue of China

On the occasion of this dialogue, the [Mission of China to the EU](#) wrote in a newsletter dated 2 July:

"From June 13 to 17, China and the EU held the 39th session of the [China-EU Human Rights Dialogue](#) in southwest China's Chongqing. On the margins of the dialogue, the EU delegation visited the Xizang Autonomous Region to gain understanding of the reality in the region. The dialogue was candid, profound and conducive to better mutual understanding. China stands ready to conduct exchange and cooperation on human rights with the EU on the basis of equality and mutual respect. In the meantime, China firmly opposes politicizing human rights issues and double standards, opposes interfering in China's internal affairs under the pretext of human rights issues, and opposes megaphone diplomacy on multilateral platforms."

In an article about the EU-China Human Rights Dialogue published on 18 June, the Chinese news agency [CGTN](#) insisted on the fact that the head of the Chinese delegation, Shen Bo, *"firmly refuted the groundless accusations made by the EU about China's human rights situation, including judicial procedures, the death penalty, labor rights, and ethnic and religious issues."*

On the one hand, Shen Bo, *"stressed that individual judicial cases and issues related to Xinjiang, Xizang and Hong Kong are China's internal affairs and tolerate no external interference. He asked the EU to respect China's human rights development path and stop using human rights issues to interfere in China's internal affairs."*

On the other hand, Shen *"raised the situation and treatment of refugees and migrants, and manifestations of racism, xenophobia, and violence against women in the EU, and asked the EU to earnestly resolve these issues."*

The monologue of the EU

On 17 June, the EEAS, the Diplomatic Service of the European Union, published the following statement:

"The agenda and programme allowed for in-depth discussions on a wide range of human and labour rights developments both in the EU and in China.

The EU reiterated its persistent concerns over the restrictions on fundamental freedoms, labour rights and the use of forced labour, limits on due process rights and the lack of judicial independence in China. The EU also raised the issues on the freedom of expression, the freedom of assembly, the freedom of religion or belief as well as the right to equality and freedom from discrimination, including women's and LGBTI rights.

Furthermore, the EU reiterated its unequivocal opposition to the death penalty in all circumstances. The EU urged China to introduce a moratorium on the death penalty and asked China to provide transparent data related to its use of capital punishment.

The EU also stressed that the selection of religious leaders should happen without any government interference and in respect of religious norms, including in the case of the succession of the Dalai Lama.

The EU recalled the particularly vulnerable situation of persons belonging to religious, ethnic and linguistic minorities across China, including Uyghurs and Tibetans. The EU also referred to the negative impact of Hong Kong's new national security legislation on the rights and freedoms of the people of Hong Kong, and the erosion of the high degree of

autonomy guaranteed by the Basic Law and China's international commitments towards the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region.

The EU reiterated its further concerns about the very serious human rights situation in China, in particular in Xinjiang, in the Tibetan areas and Hong Kong. In particular, the EU referred to reports on the crackdown on human rights defenders, lawyers and journalists in China. The EU urged China to investigate and stop human rights violations, expressing concern for cases of unlawful detention, enforced disappearance, torture and ill-treatment. The EU raised several individual cases, as included in its most recent Item 4 statement delivered at the 55th Session of the Human Rights Council on 20 March, and called upon China to immediately release those who are detained in violation of due process requirements:

- EU citizen Gui Minhai,*
- Uyghurs, including Sakharov Prize winner Ilham Tohti, Rahile Dawut and Gulshan Abbas,*
- Tibetan activists, writers and religious leaders, including Go Sherab Gyatso and Tashi Dorje,*
- Individuals deprived of their liberty for their exercise of the freedom of religion or belief, including Xu Na, Pastor Wang Yi, Zhang Chunlei and Ding Yuande,*
- Human Rights defenders and lawyers deprived of their liberty for having promoted and protected human rights, including Yu Wensheng and Xu Yan, who were detained on their way to the EU Delegation in Beijing to attend a meeting with senior EU officials,*
- Individuals deprived of their liberty for their exercise of the freedom of expression, including citizen journalist Zhang Zhan, stressing that the heavy surveillance still imposed on her and the restrictions on her movements are unacceptable,*
- Women's rights activist Li Qiaochu who was convicted for her advocacy against torture and her involvement in human and women's rights, and*
- Individuals deprived of their liberty for their exercise of the freedom of peaceful assembly or demonstration, such as Peng Lifa and Kamile Wayit.*

During the Dialogue, the EU also recognised China's development achievements which have resulted in significant poverty alleviation among its population.

China provided information on its laws and procedures which, in the view of the EU, clearly prioritise national security and counterterrorism over the protection of fundamental freedoms, including in Xinjiang and Tibet. The EU recommended the reassessment of China's national security framework to ensure China's compliance with international human rights law. The EU encouraged China to extend a general invitation to all UN Special Procedures and monitoring bodies to assess China's human rights record and address their recommendations for the improvement of the relevant policy and legislative frameworks, including in Tibet and Xinjiang. In this respect, the EU also underlined the importance of the work of the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights.

China raised the situation and treatment of refugees and migrants, and manifestations of racism and xenophobia in the EU. China also focused on economic, social and cultural rights, while, in the context of business and human rights, the EU updated on incoming European legislation that will introduce human rights due diligence requirements for companies, including in their value chains. The EU also referred to the regulation to prohibit products made with forced labour on the EU market.

The EU and China agreed on the importance of upholding the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The EU and China discussed how to achieve both globally and domestically the full realisation of economic, social and cultural rights. The EU highlighted that this realisation must happen on an equal basis with civil and political rights, and recalled that human rights, whether civil, cultural, economic, political or social, are interconnected, interdependent, equally important and equally necessary to protect human dignity. The EU reaffirmed that the full respect for all human rights is a pre-condition to achieve sustainable and inclusive development, economic growth and prosperity.

The EU and China will explore opportunities for cooperation in the multilateral framework on economic social and cultural rights, business and human rights, climate change and human rights, women and children rights, as well as the rights of persons with disabilities. The EU reiterated that any cooperation shall be in compliance with international human rights law.

The Human Rights Dialogue was followed by an exchange of views with the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and the Beijing Institute of Technology in Beijing on 17 June.

A side visit to Tibet took place before the Human Rights Dialogue, in Nyingchi and Lhasa. It was organised by the relevant Chinese authorities at central and local level. The programme included visits to boarding schools, municipalities, cultural and religious sites, relocated Tibetan families, as well as to a prison. The side visit reflected the majority of the EU's requests, except for meetings with individual prisoners. The short and dense programme provided an opportunity to gain a certain understanding of the reality on the ground and challenges in the Tibet Autonomous Region. Following the visit, the EU put forward several recommendations to ensure full bilingual education, the preservation of the cultural heritage, identity and fundamental freedoms of the Tibetan people. The EU would encourage more visits from the international community and civil society organisations.

At the end of the programme, the EU chair debriefed Assistant Minister of Foreign Affairs Miao Deyu on the outcome of the Dialogue.

The Human Rights Dialogue was co-chaired by Paola Pampaloni, Deputy Managing Director for Asia and the Pacific in the European External Action Service and by Shen Bo, Director General for International Organisations and Conferences, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China. EU Member States participated as observers to the Dialogue in Chongqing.

The EU and China agreed to continue their exchanges in view of the next Human Rights Dialogue in 2025."

The Dialogue had been preceded by an EEAS consultation of human rights NGOs.

The Human Rights Dialogue and religious issues

The EU system of consultation of NGOs provides for an in-person meeting before the human rights dialogues as well as the possibility to send a submission. Unlike the UN which posts the contributions of NGOs to the Human Rights Council sessions and other interactive review mechanisms, the EU does not publish the proposals filed by civic society organizations.

However, *Human Rights Without Frontiers* privately got a copy of the proposals made by [CAP/ Liberté de Conscience](#), a NGO with ECOSOC consultative status at the UN in Geneva.

CAP referred to the [Universal Declaration on Combating and Preventing Forced Organ Harvesting](#) and to the resolution passed by the [European Parliament](#) on 18 January 2024 denouncing the campaign of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) since 1999 to eliminate the Falun Gong movement.

"This persecution has led to deaths among Falun Gong practitioners with enduring arbitrary imprisonment, torture, psychological mistreatment and forced organ removal," CAP said. *In December 2023, [Mr. Ding Yuande](#) was sentenced to three years in prison for adhering to Falun Gong beliefs. It is imperative for the EU to demand Mr. Ding's unconditional release along with all other detained Falun Gong practitioners in China as outlined in the resolution."*

For years CAP has been actively monitoring the situation of Falun Gong practitioners and other religious groups in China and has raised the issue on various platforms like the [United Nations](#) to put an end to religious persecution.

CAP provided to the EEAS a [public letter from the International Coalition to End Transplant Abuse](#) in China addressed to EU High Representative Josep Borrell which contains the findings of the [China Tribunal](#) established in the UK in 2018 to examine the practice of forced organ harvesting in China

CAP also called on the EEAS to raise the Falun Gong issue and the persecution of other religious minorities in all its political and human rights discussions with Chinese authorities.

Last but not least, it proposed to use the [EU Global Human Rights Sanctions Regime](#) to target Chinese officials and entities accountable for egregious human rights violations.

European democracy too immature to address freedom of religion or belief?

By Jonathan de Leyser, CSW's Senior EU Advocate

[FoRB in Full](#) (30.04.2024) - While the situation of people in other countries is too rarely a priority electoral issue, some politicisation of human rights is nevertheless common. From the perspective of an advocate for freedom of religion or belief, when done correctly and appropriately, party-political engagement on this human right can of course be expedient. At its best, it can elevate public attention to often severe injustices occurring abroad, and lay a strong policy platform for how they will be addressed post-election. But, at its worst, political positions and electoral tactics can be employed that lack sincerity, nuance, and even basic good will.

Mistakes in this area are perpetrated by both conservatives and progressives. This piece summarises some of the things that these political blocs tend to get wrong and right, respectively. It is meant both for the benefit of voters, making them more aware of the calculations and strategies happening behind the scenes in party HQs; and also, to hold

up a mirror to those directly involved in campaigning, challenging them to think more critically, and constructively, about their approaches.

The unfortunate but apparent reality is that European democracy is not yet sufficiently mature enough to distinguish “religion” from the “human right to freedom of religion or belief” (FoRB). A symptom of this is that recent cross-party work on this fundamental right at the European level has been fractured and weak. Even though the promotion of one “religion”, and the promotion of “FoRB”, present different agendas, politically, they are too often confused and conflated. It is therefore a rare and valuable conservative politician who does not misuse the promotion of FoRB as a trojan horse for religious conservative issues; and it is a rare and equally valuable progressive politician who does not simply opt out of engaging with FoRB, given this reputational association which it has apathetically ceded to the political right.

This brings us to the respective strengths and weaknesses of many conservatives and progressives when it comes to political engagement on FoRB. Whereas conservatives tend to be stronger on intensity of engagement and weaker on conceptual understanding, progressives tend to be weaker on intensity of engagement and stronger on conceptual understanding.

The reasons for the strengths of each group are well-known, so let us focus on the explanation of their respective weaknesses – which is, after all, where the focus of reform needs to be.

For European progressives, weaker engagement stems from an under-developed consideration of the value and implications of FoRB, both in terms of its legal and moral quality as a human right, but also in terms of its potential political appeal. They have accepted the conservative fallacy that FoRB is, in fact, a trojan horse for conservative religious politics, rather than seeing it as a liberating force for the rights of the individual – every individual – to believe, not to believe, and to live as they choose. They should be reassured by the well-established place that FoRB has within the international human rights framework, and champion its indivisible and inter-dependent place therein. But sadly, this is a political territory that they have chosen not to contest. On numerous occasions in this term of the European Parliament, within certain legislative texts devoted to the issue, progressives have preferred to neglect opportunities to describe specific countries and cases of FoRB violations, to instead cover the issue only conceptually.

For European conservatives, weaker understanding stems, *also*, from an under-developed consideration of the value and implications of FoRB. They have consistently shown a bias toward highlighting the plights of Christians only or without appropriate consideration for any other religious or belief community. Without even appealing to any Christian theological (or moral philosophical) reasoning to counter this bias, this approach clearly fails on purely logical, utilitarian terms. Consider the implications of a non-universal reading and application of “human rights” – even, for the sake of argument, accepting an ideologically narrow concern for the rights of Christians only – if one does not stand for the rights of all (both domestically and internationally), on what grounds (politically and institutionally), can one expect the rights of Christians abroad to be respected?

It is unfortunate that conservatives have been too narrow in the boundaries of the communities for whom they have chosen to advocate; and it is unfortunate that the responses of progressives to FoRB violations have lacked prioritisation

and intensity of engagement. The good news is that both deficiencies, with the right consideration and political will, can be easily fixed.

Partly to support this process, CSW has worked with partners on a series of concrete actions that we would encourage all prospective and incoming Members of the European Parliament to take in this area. If these are considered and acted upon by all sides, we can look forward to a more mature democratic conversation about the promotion and protection of FoRB, toward greater justice for the victims of its violation.

Faith-based organizations making the world better through social and humanitarian work

A conference at the European Parliament to make the world better

[The European Times](#) (20.04.2024) - The social and humanitarian activities of minority religious or belief organizations in the EU are useful for European citizens and society but are too often ignored by political leaders and media outlets.

This was the message sent by a wide range of speakers with various religious and belief backgrounds at the [Faith and Freedom Summit III](#) hosted by **MEP Maxette Pirbakas (France)** at the European Parliament in Brussels on 18 April.

However, the work of these minority organizations with their awareness of climate change or anti-drug campaigns, their aid programs to refugees and homeless people, on the sites of earthquakes and other natural disasters, deserves to be highlighted, recognized and known in order to escape invisibility and sometimes unfounded stigmatization.

In the framework of this conference, I used the debate time to share some views and reflections from a human rights perspective that I summarize in a structured way hereafter.

Social and humanitarian activities of religious or belief organizations ignored and silenced

The numerous presentations by spokespersons of minority religious and philosophical organizations which enriched this conference highlighted the importance and the impact of their humanitarian, charitable, educational and social activities to make the world a better place to live. They have also shown that they are useful to the States of the European Union which cannot solve all social problems alone without the contribution of this segment of civil society.

However, there is practically no trace of their activities in the media. We may wonder about the underlying reasons for this situation. Social work is a form of public and visible expression of these organizations. Expressing one's personal faith through contribution to these activities does not bother anyone. However, doing so in the name of a religious entity is sometimes perceived by secular movements and their political relays as competitive with their philosophical convictions and as a potential danger of the return of

the influence of historic Churches which for centuries have dictated their law to States and their sovereigns. Media outlets are also permeated by this culture of secularization and neutrality.

In the shadow of this distrust, religious or philosophical minorities are suspected by these same actors, but also by dominant Churches, of using their social and humanitarian activities as a tool for public self-promotion and to attract new members. Last but not least, some minorities have found themselves for more than 25 years in blacklists of so-called harmful and undesirable "cults" which were drafted and endorsed by a number of EU states and widely disseminated by the media. However, in international law, the concept of "cult" does not exist. Furthermore, the Catholic Church should remember that the famous Mother Teresa in India, despite her Nobel Peace Prize, was accused of wanting to convert the untouchables, and others, to Christianity in her Catholic hospitals and educational institutions.

What is in question here is the freedom of expression of religious or philosophical minority groups as collective and visible entities, which are not hiding their identity in the public space.

These faith-based organizations are seen as "undesirable" in certain European countries and considered a threat to the established order and right-thinking. The reaction is then in political circles and in the media to keep silent about their constructive social and humanitarian activities as if they had never existed. Or, through activism hostile to these movements, they are presented in a completely negative light, such as "it is undue proselytism", "it is to recruit new members among the victims", etc.

Towards more inclusive societies in the European Union

Double standards must be fundamentally avoided in the political and media treatment of civil society actors to avoid any damaging tension and hostility between social groups. Segregation leading to fragmentation of society and separatism breeds hatred and hate crimes. Inclusiveness brings [respect, solidarity and social peace](#).

Coverage of social, charitable, educational and humanitarian activities of religious and philosophical groups must be equitable. Justice must be done, at its fair value and without prejudice, to anyone who contributes to the well-being of the citizens of the European Union.

Faith and Freedom Summit III, "Making of this one, a better world"

[The European Times](#) (20.04.2024) – **The Faith and Freedom Summit III NGO coalition, concluded its conferences showing the impact and challenges of Faith-Based Organizations on serving the European community.**

In a welcoming and promising environment, within the walls of the **European Parliament**, a meeting was held last **April 18th** where nearly 40 participants with dignitaries from various **religious movements, journalists, politicians and activists** actively present on the social scene, were present.

The conference, the third one in a series that will number four in Panama next September, was organized by the **Faith and Freedom Summit NGO coalition**, and was hosted at the European Parliament by **French MEP Maxette Pirbakas**, who in addition to welcoming the participants, emphasized the attention that the European Parliament is giving to the role of religion in society, even if it has often been manipulated for speculative purposes.

The summit aimed to explore the social action of Faith-Based Organizations (FBOs) within Europe and their crucial role in building a more resilient society. After all, FBO's play a significant role in addressing societal challenges, promoting social cohesion, and advocating for the values of faith and freedom in the European Union (EU). The participants had the opportunity to use it as a platform to discuss the challenges they have, but also the opportunities and impact needed to make a more inclusive and sustainable society inside the old continent.

They gave interesting and educational speeches in which the words "**making of this one a better world**" and "**practicing what we preach**" echoed through the room several times, and willpower was a common denominator to the point that new alliances began to be defined on a lively and collaborative scene.

The event included Catholics, Hinduists from the Shiva tradition, Christian Adventists, Muslims, Scientologists, [Sikhs](#), Free Mason, etc, and nearly a dozen of speakers of top level within the different religions and thought movements.

During her inaugural speech, French **MEP Maxette Pirbakas** aimed to promote dialogue and understanding around religious freedom in the EU. She called for finding a "middle way" between the French model of secularism and the Anglo-Saxon approach, affirming individual identities.

After the introductory and thought-provoking presentation by MEP Pirbakas, the wheel of the conference was taken by **Ivan Arjona-Pelado**, Scientology's representative to the EU, OSCE and UN, who became the moderator of the session, swiftly bridging from one speaker to the next ensuring the timings would allow further discussion at the end.

MEP Pirbakas was followed by **Lahcen Hammouch**, co-organizer and CEO of the [Bruxelles Media Group](#). In a moving speech, community advocate and champion of dialogue and connecting people, Hammouch stressed the importance of unity, in a divided world, by emphasizing the concept of 'living together.' He encouraged individuals to move past biases and negative judgments towards fostering interactions and respectful disagreements. With a background in promoting peace, Hammouch committed himself to bridging gaps between people from diverse backgrounds and amplifying the voices of those marginalized. He criticized barriers set by countries like France on religious minorities and called for mutual acknowledgment and integration without prejudice. Hammouch's plea, for dialogue, shared values, and collective efforts to uphold coexistence struck a chord with many, underscoring everyone's role in progressing towards a more inclusive and accepting global community.

Arjona then gave the floor to **Joao Martins**, Europe's Regional Director for ADRA (**Adventists Development and Relief Agency**). Martins, in discussing ADRA's mission across Europe, emphasized the role of faith in driving their pursuit of justice. ADRA, a prominent faith-based NGO rooted "in Christian values of compassion and courage, employs a unique theological approach that integrates faith with proactive engagement in

addressing societal injustices through church partnerships". The NGO actively mobilizes church volunteers in disaster relief, refugee support, and community initiatives, transforming churches into shelters during crises and advocating for causes like education access. Martins highlighted ADRA's enduring commitment to biblical principles of justice, compassion, and love, showcasing how religious convictions can empower advocacy for the vulnerable and human rights over the course of decades, while calling for cooperation with other faiths.

Moving from Christianity to Hinduism, Arjona bridged then to **Bhairavananda Saraswati Swami**, President and Director of **Shiva Forum Europe**. The Swami, a Hindu spiritual leader from Oudenaarde, Belgium, emphasized interfaith unity, youth empowerment, and gender equality in his speech, drawing comparisons between Hindu beliefs and Scientology practices. Known as Bhairav Ananda, he highlighted Shiva's teachings on introspection and spiritual growth, advocating for personal development and collaboration across faiths during crises. Embracing joint male-female energy and inspired by other faith's initiatives, he stated wanting to establish an inclusive community, offer meditation workshops, and promote human rights.

It was then the turn of **Olivia McDuff**, a representative, from the **Church of Scientology International (CSI)**, who discussed the work carried out by faith based organizations and emphasized the importance of religious unity. McDuff, who oversees programs for Scientology, highlighted the unnoticed volunteer and charitable activities undertaken by religious groups globally, calling for an increased focus on these efforts. She showcased various initiatives led by Scientologists, such as drug prevention programs, educational campaigns, disaster response operations and moral values education programs that involve collaboration between Scientologists and non-Scientologists.

In quoting Scientology founder **L. Ron Hubbard**, McDuff stressed the role of religion in society and advocated for supporting other faiths to make a positive impact on the world. She concluded encouraging collaboration among faiths and highlighted Scientology's commitment, to working together for collective advancement and joint humanitarian projects.

Arjona then gave the floor to **Ettore Botter**, representing the **Scientology Volunteer Ministers of Italy**, who showed a video of rapid response and impactful relief efforts of the Volunteer Ministers in times of natural disasters. Botter emphasized the core mission of service at the heart of the Volunteer Ministers' work, highlighting their dedicated efforts in providing essential assistance following earthquakes, floods, and other crises across Europe and beyond. Through powerful visuals and firsthand accounts, Botter detailed the Volunteer Ministers' hands-on approach, from aiding overlooked villages in Croatia to supporting flood-affected communities in Italy and delivering humanitarian relief in Ukraine. The bright yellow shirts of the Volunteer Ministers "have become a symbol of hope and hard work", embodying their commitment to serving communities in need.

Thierry Valle, President of the NGO **CAP Freedom of Conscience**, was next and enlightened the participants tracing the historical impact of faith-based organizations and religious minorities on European society. Valle highlighted the pivotal roles played by these groups from the Renaissance to the present day, emphasizing their contributions to peace, social equality, and individual rights. From the Catholic Church's diplomatic efforts during the Renaissance to the Quakers' advocacy for peace and justice in the 17th century, Valle illustrated how religious movements have championed human rights and

social justice causes. He also noted the influence of newer religious movements in the 20th century, such as Evangelical Churches and the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter Day Saints, in shaping societal discourse and advocating for global issues like environmental stewardship and poverty alleviation. Valle's speech underscored the enduring power of faith in promoting peace, justice, and social progress, highlighting the ongoing relevance of faith-based organizations in addressing contemporary challenges and shaping a more inclusive and compassionate future for Europe.

Willy Fautre, Founder of **Human Rights Without Frontiers**, introduced by Arjona-Pelado into the discussion, brought a unique perspective to the conference, focusing on the challenges faced by religious organizations when their humanitarian efforts are viewed as a guise for proselytizing or disrupting the status quo in certain regions. Fautre delved into the complexities religious groups encounter when conducting charitable work under the banner of a religious entity. He highlighted instances where humanitarian aid by religious groups was misconstrued as covert conversion tactics, leading to hostility and segregation. Fautre called for a nuanced discussion on granting religious organizations the freedom to carry out charitable activities without unwarranted suspicion or prejudice, emphasizing the importance of safeguarding religious expression in the public sphere.

After that was the turn of **Eric Roux**, Member of the Executive Committee of **United Religions Initiative** (URI) (and Co-Chair of the **EU Brussels FoRB Roundtable**), who advocated for increased collaboration among faith groups through URI's interfaith coalition.

Highlighting URI's role as an international organization promoting interfaith cooperation and societal enhancement, Roux emphasized the importance of working together across diverse religious and spiritual traditions. Roux's impassioned plea underscored cooperation as the key to combating religious extremism and fostering solutions to global conflicts, positioning URI as a platform to amplify the impactful work of various faith communities.

As the last speaker before the discussion and the conclusion by the host of the event, the participants listened to **Dr. Philippe Liénard**, a lawyer, former judge, author and prominent figure in **Freemasonry** at the European level, who shared insights into the centuries-old organization during his speech at the conference. Liénard expressed gratitude for the event's organization and highlighted Freemasonry as a diverse entity, with 95% adhering to theistic beliefs under the United Grand Lodge of England and 5% embracing liberal principles allowing for varying beliefs. He emphasized Freemasonry as a platform for free thought and moral improvement, promoting virtues like wisdom and tolerance to benefit humanity. Liénard underscored Freemasonry's core values of respect for all religions and philosophies, emphasizing the importance of honesty, freedom of thought, and good character for membership. He called for the construction of bridges between diverse communities and philosophies, aligning with Freemasonry's ethos of openness and service to others.

Others attending the summit and expressing their views were jurist and author Marianne Bruck, Khadija Chentouf from Kaizen Life ASBL, Raiza Maduro of HWPL, Prof. Dr. Liviu Olteanu, Refka Elech of Peacefully Connected, Patricia Haveman of MundoYoUnido, and others.

MEP Maxette Pirbakas expressed gratitude to attendees from various countries at the conference, emphasizing the importance of learning from each other's religious

perspectives. Pirbakas, who identifies as both Hindu and Christian, raised concerns about the politicization of religion in the European Parliament, noting a shift towards focusing on religious and immigration issues. She called for understanding and cooperation among different faiths, highlighting the need to combat stereotypes and promote unity. Pirbakas underscored the significance of sharing experiences and organizing seminars to foster dialogue and mutual respect, advocating for a more inclusive and harmonious society. Despite facing challenges as a female politician, Pirbakas remains committed to advocating for human rights, and peaceful coexistence.

Resolution on attacks against Christians in Nigeria

COMECE (09.02.2024) - COMECE welcomes the resolution of the European Parliament adopted on Thursday, 8 February 2024, condemning recent attacks against Christians in Nigeria. COMECE: "The resolution, however, downplays the religious dimension of the conflict".

The [Resolution adopted](#) by the European Parliament condemns the massacre committed on 23-25 December 2023, when gunmen launched a large-scale attack in more than 160 villages in the Bokokos, Barkin Ladi, and Magu authority areas of Plateau State, causing the deaths of at least 200 Christians.

In the adopted text, MEPs acknowledge *"the role of climate change, competition for scarce resources, and the disappearance of effective mediation schemes"*. Despite these contextual drivers of the conflict, there is a religious dimension, [as highlighted](#) by Cardinal John Olorunfemi Onaiyekan, which was downplayed in the EP resolution.

Moreover, according to a [statement](#) of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria, *"the continued havoc caused by armed herdsmen in various parts of our country, can no longer be treated as mere clash between pastoralists and farmers. Their activities [should be] treated as acts of terrorism"*.

Commenting on the recent vote at the European Parliament, Fr. Manuel Barrios Prieto, General Secretary of COMECE, states that *"environmental and economic pressures cannot sufficiently explain the ferocity of the attacks and their coordinated and systematic patterns committed by Fulani Islamist terrorists"*.

The 2023 Christmas Eve attacks mentioned in the EP Resolution are not isolated cases. In a January 2024 attack, [Fulani infiltrated terrorists](#) killed more than 30 persons, and destroyed several houses and worship centres. Last September, seminarian Na'Aman Danlami Stephen from the Diocese of Kafanchan was burned to death in a heinous terror attack. In addition, over 2 million Christians in Benue State have been internally displaced due to violence.

The perpetrators of these crimes, Islamist extremists, including jihadists, enjoy impunity, as they are rarely prosecuted and condemned.

Already in 2020, the European Parliament [denounced](#) that *"over 6,000 Christians have been murdered since 2015 by jihadist groups or have perished as a result of the 'your land or your blood' policy carried out by Fulani militants"*.

COMECE expresses its grave concern over the persecution faced by Christian communities in Nigeria and recalls the EU institutions to give a more decisive and robust response to Islamist terrorism in Nigeria. *"It should no longer be tolerated that all these crimes remain unaccountable. The Nigerian government has a responsibility to protect its citizens, including systematically persecuted Christian communities"*, states COMECE General Secretary Fr. Manuel Barrios Prieto.

COMECE urgently calls upon the European Union to take robust measures in line with its legislation and employ diplomatic channels to ensure the protection of all citizens in Nigeria. In this context, the EU Special Envoy for Freedom of Religion or Belief and the EU Special Representative for Human Rights could also give a valuable contribution.

Already in [May 2020](#), COMECE called on the international community to stop the growing persecution of Christians in Nigeria. In [May 2023](#), COMECE received H.E. Mgr. Matthew Hassan Kukah, Bishop of Sokoto, and facilitated a dialogue meeting with representatives from the EU and its Member States.

A Resolution of the European Parliament condemns the persecution of Falun Gong in China

The ongoing persecution of Falun Gong in China, notably the case of Mr Ding Yuande - [Bitter Winter](#): In 2023 1,188 practitioners sentenced, 209 killed

[EU Parliament \(18.01.2024\) - European Parliament resolution of 18 January 2024 on the ongoing persecution of Falun Gong in China, notably the case of Mr Ding Yuande \(2024/2504\(RSP\)\)](#)

The European Parliament,

- having regard to its previous resolutions on China,
 - having regard to Rules 144(5) and 132(4) of its Rules of Procedure,
- A. whereas since 1999, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has engaged in systematic persecution to eradicate the Falun Gong religious movement; whereas freedom of religious belief is deteriorating across the People's Republic of China (PRC); whereas technology-based censorship and surveillance are central to this repression; whereas Article 36 of the PRC's Constitution stipulates that its citizens must enjoy freedom of religious belief;
- B. whereas it is documented that thousands of Falun Gong practitioners have died as a result of the CCP's persecution since 1999; whereas practitioners are frequently detained and reportedly subjected to torture, psychological abuse and organ harvesting so that they renounce their faith;
- C. whereas on 12 May 2023 Falun Gong practitioners Mr Ding Yuande and his wife Ms Ma Ruimei were arrested without a warrant; whereas Ms Ma was released on bail, but was then intimidated by police because of a rescue campaign launched by their son abroad;

- D. whereas Mr Ding was detained with no family visits for eight months; whereas on 15 December 2023 he was sentenced to three years in prison with a CNY 15 000 fine; whereas he appealed the judgment;
1. Strongly urges the PRC to immediately end the persecution of Falun Gong practitioners and other minorities, including Uyghurs and Tibetans; demands the immediate and unconditional release of Mr Ding and all Falun Gong practitioners in China;
 2. Calls for the PRC to end domestic and transnational surveillance and control and the suppression of religious freedom; urges the PRC to abide by its obligations under international law and its own constitution to respect and protect human rights;
 3. Calls on the EU Member States to suspend extradition treaties with the PRC;
 4. Stresses that respect for human rights, democracy and the rule of law should be at the centre of the EU's relations with China; calls for the EU and its Member States to support and facilitate an international investigation into the persecution of Falun Gong practitioners and raise the persecution of religious minorities during all political and human rights dialogues with the Chinese authorities; calls on the Member States and the EU Delegation to the PRC to monitor trials;
 5. Calls for the EU and its Member States to publicly condemn organ transplant abuses in China and to use the EU Global Human Rights Sanctions Regime and national human rights sanctions regimes against all perpetrators and entities that have contributed to the persecution of Falun Gong practitioners in China and abroad; stresses that EU measures should include refusing visas, freezing assets, expulsion from EU territories, criminal prosecution, including on the basis of extraterritorial jurisdiction, and bringing international criminal charges;
 6. Instructs its President to forward this resolution to the EU institutions, the governments and parliaments of the Member States, and the Government and Parliament of the PRC.

HRWF Foonote

Other Resolution of the European Parliament on China (17 January 2024):
[Security and Defence Implication of China's influence on critical infrastructure in the EU](#)

TV Channel of an Orthodox oligarch under EU sanctions

Konstantin Malofeev's Tsargrad TV spread Russian disinformation and the anti-cult hate speech of the notorious Alexander Dvorkin.

By Dr Ievgeniia Gidulianova with Willy Fautré

[Bitter Winter](#) (12.01.2024) - On 18 December 2023, the Council of the European Union imposed restrictive measures on Tsargrad TV Channel (Царьград ТВ) belonging to and financed by the so-called "Orthodox oligarch" Konstantin Malofeev, as part of the [12th Package of Sanctions](#) targeting an additional group of [61 individuals and 86 entities in](#)

[Russia](#) responsible for actions undermining or threatening the territorial integrity, sovereignty, and independence of Ukraine. On that occasion, the [SPAS TV Channel of the Russian Orthodox Church](#) was also put under EU sanctions.

Tsargrad TV Channel was created in 2015. In the fall of 2017, Malofeev created the "Two-Headed Eagle," which he defined as the "society for the development of Russian Historical Enlightenment." From the end of 2017, it stopped broadcasting and completely switched online.

In 2020, Tsargrad TV was [blocked](#) on You Tube due to violation of sanctions legislation and trade rules, as reported by [Ukrainska Pravda](#). Before that ban, Tsargrad TV had 1.06 million subscribers.

Tsargrad TV positions itself as a conservative information and analytical TV channel that covers events in Russia and the world from the point of view of the Russian Orthodox majority in the spheres of Russia's domestic and foreign policy, geopolitics, international relations, culture, traditions, and religion. Among its aims, the promotion of monarchism and the history of pre-revolutionary Orthodox Russia.

Malofeev's "Society for the Promotion of Russia's Historical Development" is suspected by the United States of involvement in espionage in favor of Russia. The organization, among other things, advocates "the return of the Russian Empire to its historical borders."

Tsargrad TV channel also became known for its harsh, and sometimes insulting, statements against other religions in the Russian Federation, in unison with the state policy of restricting the freedoms of non-Orthodox religions and their members.

Alexander Dvorkin's hate speech against Jehovah's Witnesses and Scientology on Tsargrad TV

Commenting on the decision of the Supreme Court liquidating and banning the activities of Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia in 2017, [Tsargrad TV wrote](#) on 19 July 2017: "The Russian state has finally realized that it is not only the suicide attacks that pose a danger to it, but also the prayer meetings of cults... The Jehovah's Witnesses' cult in Russia was finally and irrevocably banned... From now on, stunted adherents of the heretical doctrine will no longer cling in pairs to passers-by or knock on the doors of apartments in multi-story buildings, asking the stunned Philistines whether they know about God"

With regard to the Church of Scientology also liquidated by a court and banned in Russia, Tsargrad TV Channel [calls it](#) a totalitarian cult. On 7 June 2017, one day after a wide-scale police crackdown on the Church of Scientology in St Petersburg, Tsargrad widely opened its microphone and its columns to the Alexander Dvorkin, a member of the board of directors of the international anti-cult organization FECRIS and its former vice-president for many years, well-known for fueling hostility and hatred towards religious minorities, especially of foreign origin.

Dvorkin was then quoted as saying: "*Once, Time Magazine published a large collection of materials on Scientology, under the general title: 'Scientology is a cult of greed and power.' You can't say it better!*"

According to Dvorkin, Scientology is a totalitarian cult and a threat to state security as it is also an international intelligence service that collects information about everyone: *“Especially purposefully, Scientologists collect information about politicians, show business figures, security forces and, of course, about the enemies of the cult against whom it fights with the most dishonest, dirty and often criminal methods. And they purposefully collect compromising information. And all the information collected about each member of the cult, all his relatives and loved ones, everyone they mention, remains in the local Scientology organization and is also sent to the Scientology headquarters in Los Angeles. All basic procedures of Scientology, during which information is extracted from a person—the so-called auditing—are recorded under audio and video, often without the knowledge of the person himself. In addition, since 1993, Scientology enjoyed the special patronage of the U.S. Department of State. It is quite reasonable to assume that the support agreement that was concluded that year includes the consent of Scientologists to provide part of the collected information to the intelligence community of the United States.”*

These statements on Tsargrad regarding the Church of Scientology and Jehovah’s Witnesses were completely consonant with the Kremlin’s policy and coincided with the time when the FSB officers searched the central office of the Church of Scientology in Russia and inspected the Church of Scientology of St. Petersburg.

Sanctions against Tsargrad TV and Malofeev by the US, Australia, Canada, the EU, Japan, New Zealand, the UK and Ukraine

The reason for the inclusion of the TV channel in the sanctions list of the European Union on 18 December 2023 was the dissemination of pro-Kremlin propaganda, justification of the Russian war of aggression in Ukraine, and funding by the Russian government.

The Religious Information Service of Ukraine ([RISU](#)) also emphasizes that the sanctions were imposed for the fact that Tsargrad spreads disinformation and Russian propaganda about the war in Ukraine, supports nationalist narratives, justifies the occupation of Ukrainian territories and the removal of Ukrainian children to Russia, including their further adoption. As noted, the TV channel also financially supports the aggression.

According to the Telegram channel [Christians Against War](#), Konstantin Malofeev helped pro-Russian separatists foment the war in the Donbas. While all of Malofeev’s initiatives in Ukraine were, formally, privately organized and funded, intercepted phone calls between him and his lieutenants on the ground in Ukraine, as well as hacked email correspondence, showed that he closely coordinated his actions with the Kremlin, at times via the powerful Orthodox Bishop Tikhon whom Malofeev and Putin (in their own words) share as “spiritual adviser.”

Konstantin Malofeev himself has been under US sanctions since the end of 2014 in connection with the events in Eastern Ukraine. He is also on the sanctions list of Canada.

On 20 April 2022, the United States introduced a new package of sanctions against Russia, which included 29 individuals and 40 legal entities, including the Tsargrad TV channel. This was reported by the [US Treasury](#). In its [press release](#), the US Treasury was saying “Russia-based company Tsargrad OOO (Tsargrad) is a cornerstone of Malofeyev’s [sic] broad malign influence network. Tsargrad spreads pro-Kremlin propaganda and disinformation that is amplified by the GoR. Tsargrad served as an intermediary organization between pro-Russian European politicians and GoR officials, and recently

pledged to donate more than \$10 million to support Russia's unprovoked war against Ukraine."

US authorities also accused Konstantin Malofeev of trying to circumvent sanctions, as it was [stated by](#) US Attorney General Merrick Garland at a press conference on 6 April 2022. Garland said the US Department of Justice confiscated "millions of dollars" from an account related to Malofeev. According to the U.S. Attorney General, Malofeev created a scheme that allowed media outlets controlled by the businessman to operate in Europe. The founder of Tsargrad is also suspected of financing Russians who contributed to the separation of Crimea from Ukraine and its annexation by Russia.

On 2 September 2022, the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine adopted sanctions against the Russian propaganda Tsargrad Group of companies. This was [reported by](#) the press service of the Ministry of Reintegration of Ukraine.

In February 2023, President Joe Biden's administration seized Konstantin Malofeev's assets.

On 4 February 2023, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Canada announced the imposition of new sanctions against Russia, under which the Russian TV channel Tsargrad fell for spreading disinformation and propaganda.

On 23 June 2023, the European Union approved the 11th package of sanctions against Russia. Among the sanctions aimed at stopping the systematic international campaign of the Russian Federation to manipulate the media, aimed at increasing the destabilization of neighboring countries [licenses have been suspended](#) for broadcasting five media resources, including the Russian TV channel Tsargrad.

The EU pointed out that these media outlets are under constant direct or indirect control of the Russian leadership and have been used for constant propaganda aimed at political parties, especially during elections, civil society in the EU and neighboring countries, asylum seekers, Russian ethnic minorities, gender minorities and the functioning of the EU's democratic institutions.

However, according to the Charter of Fundamental Rights, the restrictions imposed by the 11th package of sanctions did not prevent the Tsargrad TV channel and its employees from carrying out activities in the EU, except for broadcasting, such as research and interviews.

The 12th package of sanctions strengthened the restrictions imposed earlier. The assets of sanctioned persons are frozen, and EU citizens and companies are prohibited from providing them with funds.

As the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borrell on the new restrictions against the Russian Federation: "In this 12th package, we propose a powerful set of new lists and economic measures that will further weaken the Russian war machine. Our message is clear, as I stated when I chaired the informal Foreign Affairs Council in Kyiv: we remain steadfast in our commitment to Ukraine and will support its struggle for freedom and sovereignty."

In addition to the US, the EU and Ukraine, other countries—Australia, Canada, Japan, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom (UK)—imposed sanctions on Tsargrad TV channel and its owner, the Orthodox oligarch Konstantin Malofeev.

TV channel of the Russian Orthodox Church under EU sanctions

Alexander Dvorkin, member of FECRIS board of directors and former vice-president, is linked to the TV Channel SPAS of the Russian Orthodox Church under EU sanctions

Willy Fautré, Director of Human Rights Without Frontiers



The Court of Appeal of Aix-en-Provence. [Credits](#).

HRWF (30.12.2023) – On 18 December 2023, [SPAS](#) (СПАС), the official TV channel of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC), was included in the [12th package of sanctions of the European Union](#) of [EU sanctions](#) as part of a separate list of “Russian media outlets which have engaged in a systematic, international campaign of disinformation, information manipulation and distortion of facts in order to enhance its strategy of destabilising both its neighbouring countries and the EU and its member states.”

To counteract this, the EU has suspended the broadcasting activities and licenses of a number of Kremlin-backed disinformation outlets.

SPAS TV Orthodox Channel under EU sanctions

In its programs, SPAS (Savior) justified the military attack on Ukraine with religious and spiritual arguments. The TV channel supports actions that violate and threaten the territorial integrity, sovereignty and independence of Ukraine, says the Council of the European Union.

The YouTube video platform already blocked it in March 2022 together with Russian state media outlets. However, SPAS can still be viewed through its own site.

The TV channel started broadcasting in 2005 and according to the Moscow Orthodox Patriarchate is one of the 20 most important TV programs in Russia. It mainly broadcasts documentaries, live broadcasts and church services delivered by the head of the Russian Orthodox Church, Patriarch Kirill, close to the Kremlin and its secret services.

SPAS describes itself as "the largest Christian TV channel in the world". Its owner is the Russian Orthodox Church. The government financially supports the television program. According to the EU, the management of the channel maintains close relations with the state leadership.

Alexander Dvorkin and SPAS TV Channel in Russia & FECRIS in France

[Alexander Dvorkin](#) (Александр Дворкин), the Russian Orthodox propagandist, who is well-known for his hate-fueling speeches against Jehovah's Witnesses, Evangelical and Protestant Churches, Hare Krishna devotees and Scientologists both in Russia and abroad, has very close links with the SPAS TV, which has posted [dozens of videos](#) of the notorious propagandist. Until Russia's war on Ukraine, he was banned by Ukraine for being one of the voices of Russia's propaganda.

Until 2023, Dvorkin was still a member of the board of directors of FECRIS (European Federation of Research and Information Centres on Sectarianism), an anti-cult organization based in France and funded by public money. Until 2021, he was even the vice-president of FECRIS.

In a bailiff's deed dated 10 September 2022, CAP-LC (Coordination of associations and individuals for freedom of conscience), which defends freedom of religion or belief throughout the world, summoned FECRIS to appear before the [Marseille Magistrates' Court](#), seeking to have the organization dissolved for what it claimed are its illegal activities.

CAP-LC, which has ECOSOC status at the UN, points out that it was founded to defend peaceful religious minorities and new religions, which FECRIS has repeatedly stigmatized for numerous years as dangerous, harmful and totalitarian "cults."

The request for dissolution of FECRIS is based on its dissemination of discriminatory and defamatory statements in 2006, 2009 as well as at conferences in 2015, 2016, 2018, 2019 and 2021 against a number of law-abiding minority religious and belief movements. CAP-LC also denounces the misuse of public subsidies received by FECRIS from the French Prime Minister.

Each of the accusations of CAP-LC was supported by concrete evidence, twenty-seven documents in all filed with the Court of Appeal of Aix-en-Provence.

On 12 December 2023, the Court of Appeal of Aix-en-Provence confirmed a previous judgment forcing FECRIS, despite its attempts to escape court proceedings, to defend itself against a request of dissolution filed by the French association with ECOSOC status at the UN.

About EU sanctions against Patriarch Kirill vetoed by Orban in 2022

On 7 April 2022, the European Parliament adopted a [Resolution](#) in which it condemned the role of Patriarch Kirill in providing theological cover for Russia's aggression on Ukraine.

In the same year, 26 EU member states decided to impose sanctions on the head of the church, Patriarch Kirill but President of Hungary Viktor Orban vetoed the imposition of EU sanctions on him.

In July 2022, the French association *CAP Liberté de Conscience* and [Human Rights Without Frontiers \(Brussels\), which filed a documented complaint against Patriarch Kirill with the ICC \(International Criminal Court\)](#), made a joint statement at the 50th Session of the UN Human Rights Council to share their deep concerns about the grave responsibility of Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia in the outbreak and extension of Russia's war on Ukraine.

The possible prosecution of Patriarch Kirill falls within Article 25 of the Rome Statute which provides that *"a person shall be criminally responsible and liable for punishment for a crime within the jurisdiction of the Court if that person for the purpose of facilitating the commission of such a crime, **aids, abets or otherwise assists** in its commission or its attempted commission."*

At a lower level, Alexander Dvorkin should be put on a further EU sanctions list as a banned person in Ukraine and a propagandist of the pro-war Russian Orthodox Church.
