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Report on the event on
How to scale up EU support to Freedom of Religion or Belief outside the EU

Presentation of the work and the recommendations of the Special Envoy, Jan Figel

15 – 16 October 2019, Stanhope Hotel – Rue du Commerce 9, Brussels, Belgium

Summary

On the 15th and 16th of October 2019, Special Envoy (SE) Jan Figel (JF) convened 16 EU Member States (MS) and 90 participants in Brussels to discuss how to expand the EU's support for Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) outside the EU. JF presented the past three years of his work and made recommendations for moving forward in front of the FoRB special representatives of EU MS, as well as a wide range of civil society organisations, including representatives of religious organisations, and experts. Denmark, Finland, France, Hungary, Lithuania, Netherlands, Poland and Sweden sent their Special Representative or Special Envoy in the area of FoRB or interreligious dialogue. Italy was represented by the Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation. Germany sent a video message. Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Greece, Romania, Slovakia were also represented. The event, organised by the European Commission, DG on International Cooperation and Development (DEVCO), was met with high interest and positively appreciated by all.

In the opening, **M. McGuinness, First Vice-President of the European Parliament**, thanked JF for the "incredible work done", setting the foundation on which the new Commission should continue to build. **E. Gilmore, EU Special Representative on Human Rights**, thanked JF for good cooperation, spoke highly of his work and expressed wish to cooperate more closely in the future.

Recognising the deterioration of the FoRB worldwide, SE argued that the EU has the responsibility to speak up and encourage **constructive engagement, international collaboration, and innovative partnership on the ground**. He emphasised that the EU should seek to better combine political instruments with programs that reinforce the capacity of State and non-state actors to prevent and address human rights violations. He presented five recommendations: working on FoRB within a human rights framework and through the SDGs; boosting FoRB literacy; supporting engagement with religious actors as well as interreligious dialogue; implementing a more contextualised approach through strategic partnerships in selected countries; setting in motion more ambitious EU coordination.

MSs unanimously commended the work of the SE and welcomed his report and recommendations. They urged the continuation and strengthening of the mandate so that EU engagement on FoRB be institutionalised and become more effective connecting the policy and operational dimensions. There was a frank exchange among

MSs on the risks of an excessive politicisation of the FoRB agenda but overall the discussion showed an **impressive emerging consensus** among MSs and other stakeholders that the EU has a historical duty and responsibility to advocate for “FoRB for all” and to do it with one voice. See in the report more details on the intervention of MS who took the floor.

A panel of civil society organisations and experts on “**Focus on the SDGs**” discussed **why and how to promote FoRB within the Agenda 2030**. They highlighted the importance of mainstreaming FoRB into the broader frameworks for HR, addressing the root causes of violations and building new partnerships (ranging from secular HR activists to faith actors). They rose awareness of the gender dimension and of the importance of building a shared language around FoRB accessible by different types of actors. In a second panel focused on **(inter)religious engagement**, experts suggested that policy makers view religious actors as partners in building long-term strategies to advance FoRB, as well as the need to frame conflicts properly and find ways to collaborate with wide-variety of actors. They recommended the joint creation of open space by governments and religious actors for the discussion of contentious issues, deepening knowledge and investment in research, and continuing the discourse on human dignity as bridge-builder for human rights.

In the last section, connecting policy with implementation at a country level, organisations implementing EU funded projects on FoRB and interreligious and intercultural dialogue spoke about their achievements, challenges and recommendations to the EU. They highly appreciated this opportunity to engage in a policy debate and recommended to meet annually.

On the 15th and 16th of October 2019, Special Envoy (SE) Jan Figel (JF) presented his work and recommendations in front of 16 EU Member States (MS) and a wide range of civil society organisations and experts, counting more than a hundred participants. The event was met with high interest and positively appreciated. MS expressed full support of the SE’s work and were positive about the renewal and strengthening of the mandate. Civil society, including religious representatives and experts concurred and asked the Directorate-General for International Cooperation and Development (DEVCO) to organise annual meetings focused on the same agenda.

Denmark, Finland, France, Hungary, Lithuania, Netherlands, Poland and Sweden sent their Special Representative or Special Envoy in the area of FoRB or interreligious dialogue. Italy was represented by the Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation. Germany sent a video message. Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Greece, Romania, Slovakia were also represented.

The European External Action Service (EEAS) and Directorate-General for Justice and Consumers (DG JUST) participated throughout the event, as well as Members of the European Parliament (MEP) and colleagues from the European Parliamentary Research Service (EPRS) office and of the Secretariat-General. Various civil society organisations and networks active on Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB), including non-confessional and humanist organisations, as well as religious representative across all different traditions, were also present.

To open, M. McGuinness, First Vice-President of the European Parliament in charge of Article 17 Dialogue with churches, religious associations or communities and philosophical and non-confessional organisations, thanked JF for the "incredible work done", setting the foundation on which the new Commission should continue to build. She endorsed JF recommendations, notably to boost literacy and the coordination among MS and the EU. The EU Special Representative for Human Rights (HR), E. Gilmore, thanked JF for good cooperation and friendship, spoke highly of his work and reflected on the key place of FoRB, which "form" the HR agenda, being a "litmus test" on how societies respect plurality and diversity. He expressed his wish to work even more closely with the SE. In both interventions, the Global Exchange on Religion in Society was mentioned, reflecting new EU engagement with Faith-Based organisations.

In his main speech, JF called for a “FoRB climate change”. He argued that the EU has the responsibility to promote FoRB outside the EU by encouraging constructive engagement, international collaboration, and innovative partnerships on the ground. The EU should seek to better combine political instruments with programs that reinforce the capacity of State and non-state actors to prevent and address FoRB violations and violent extremism. He presented five action-oriented recommendations: working on FoRB within a human rights framework and through the sustainable development goals (SDGs) agenda; boosting FoRB literacy; supporting engagement with religious actors as well as interreligious dialogue; implementing a more contextualised approach through strategic partnerships in selected countries; setting in motion a more ambitious EU coordination. He called for contributions to his draft report, which is meant to be an input in the FoRB debate and will integrate insights and conclusions of the event.

K. Manocha, Senior Adviser on FoRB at Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), set the scene noting that better strategies need to be grounded on better understanding of emerging trends, such as: the securitisation of religion, the repurposing of religion for nationalistic ends, and the broad rise of controls over civil society space. He called for more conceptual clarity around FoRB and to work on a common framework for action, which is severely lacking.

E. Del Re, Italy's Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation spoke on the "socio-political necessity" of interreligious dialogue, quoting many examples relating to the Middle East, and Iraq more specifically. She recommended full integration of FoRB into the SDG framework, of which she sees ending poverty, gender equality, and promoting peace as especially relevant to FoRB. She commended the report for focusing on contextualisation and suggested the EU to use it in its global approach. She emphasised the need for awareness of policies of exclusion and inclusion of religious actors, citing the Humanitarian Corridors model as a successful case of positive engagement with religious actors in supporting refugee arrival and integration in Europe. Del Re concluded by expressing full support of the Italian government for the renewal and expansion of the SE's mandate.

MSs welcomed this timely debate, unanimously commended JF's work, and showed appreciation for his report and policy recommendations. They all supported the strengthening of the mandate, so that the EU global engagement in the promotion of FoRB become institutionalised and more effective.

T. Azbej (HU) spoke on Hungarian support for the most vulnerable religious communities through humanitarian aid, noting that giving support to local churches helps them to reach out to other communities as well. He called upon to the European Commission to cooperate and involve the churches and the faith-based organisations to its international aid policy. He stressed that the Hungarian government has placed FoRB at the centre of its humanitarian policy, reaffirmed the government's position to see FoRB higher on the agenda of major HRs fora, seeing a strong role and capacity of the EU to address alarming trends of intolerance, and calling for joint action at the EU level.

P. Metso (FI) recommended transparency, complementarity and clear division of labour with the mandate of the EU SR for HRs and to build connections with the Political and Security Committee (PSC) and Working Party on Human Rights (COHOM). In his speech, he asked to take into account the multiple identities of minorities, including gender and sexual orientations. Intersectional thinking must be on the forefront of this work. He stated the need for external action by the EU to intervene effectively to improve the situation of minority religions vis-à-vis majority religions. He stressed that within the European Union, Federica Mogherini's recent initiative of a global exchange platform on religion in society can also serve this purpose.

M. Grübel (DE), by video message, confirmed that FoRB is a priority for Germany. More broadly, Germany has been investing on and supporting the role of religion in foreign policy. He sent a clear call for stronger joint EU action in this area, and fully endorsed JF's recommendations. He called for more work at the intersection of FoRB and SDGs, and emphasised that there should not be a hierarchical approach to human rights.

J.C. Peaucelle (FR) recalled that the EU has a special responsibility on FoRB, especially in regards to reminding “our allies” that the B (Belief) is essential. He regretted a lack of “ownership” of the EU Guidelines on FoRB among EU missions, and confirmed that the French government’s position is that States must support interfaith dialogue inside and between nations. He agreed with the SE’s recommendation that literacy is highly needed, and added that non-believers must be included, and a long-term perspective is necessary. He emphasised Europe’s duty to maintain the idea of universalism, avoiding a “tribal approach” in which different parts of the world seem to only support those who practice their own majority religion.

D. Wołosiuk (PL) said that FoRB is at the heart of Polish foreign policy, which stood behind the Polish initiative to establish the UN International Day on Commemorating the Victims of Acts of Violence based on Religion or Belief (22 August). She recommended the promotion of literacy for diplomats, as well as improving broader religious education in society as a conflict-prevention measure. This would ensure the building of peace and stability. She stressed that the EU needs alliances and wide outreach on FoRB to like-minded countries, potential new partners, local civil society, and religious communities. More joint actions, efforts and initiatives are needed as the problem is complex and large-scaled. She called for institutional and financial backing for the SE mandate in order to continue and strengthen its role in foreign affairs.

M. Suhr (DK) recommended working on FoRB through the SDGs, notably in regards to gender and peace, but also health and climate change. The new mandate should have a policy branch and an operational branch, more internal coordination within EU institutions to bridge funding, development aid, and foreign policy. Further, adequate funding should be ensured to support FoRB in the next financial framework and in the NDICI negotiations. He called for global engagement, involving the UN, FoRB literacy for religious leaders for prevention and reconciliation, and finding a balance in the translation of FoRB in local contexts.

L. Zakarevičienė (LT) asked for the EU to speak with a united voice to protect and promote FoRB, called on States to be “intolerant towards intolerance”, as well as religious organisations to promote HRs. She recommended building literacy, notably through youth education programs. She argued that FoRB, a keystone of HRs, should not be seen as divisive, but as a uniting factor through dialogue. She echoed JF in that it is time for “FoRB climate change” and warned of States still using religion to achieve their own internal and foreign policy goals.

J. Douma (NL) stated that religion should definitively be on the EU agenda. The Netherlands Parliament’s support to renewing the SE’s mandate is key to that. He argued, however, that MSs understand FoRB in quite diverse ways and more discussion is needed around its meaning: how the mandate is mainstreamed, its relation to DEVCO and EEAS, as well as its interaction with MS. He noted that the EU should contextualise, coordinate, and establish literacy and clear language, but remain critical while strengthening these processes and recognising risks in their implementation. The interest of non-believers, no matter their number, should be taken into account.

The panel, moderated by Dr F. Petit (University of Sussex) concluded with a lively Q&A session. Overall, there was an overwhelmingly positive reaction to the SE’s continued engagement and many recommendations came from a variety of diverse actors from the global south and Europe, representing different civil societies’ orientations and religious and belief systems. The key takeaway is that civil society supports further EU engagement on FoRB and recommends strengthening its implementation through bottom-up collaborative engagement and partnership on the ground.

In the closing of the first day, **H. Geiger, Director of People, Peace of the Directorate-General International and Development Cooperation (DEVCO)** conveyed DG DEVCO appreciation and gratitude for the courage and activism of JF and his professionalism and special human touch. She expressed the conviction that the way forward is through joint action and new partnerships. The EU is the main global donor in the area of HR and is called on to ensure its leadership role. She agreed with the need to mainstream FoRB in the Agenda 2030 and to

promote support through the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR) and other EU instruments and programmes. FoRB funding in the EIDHR has increased, but is still limited.

In his remarks, **Special Envoy** JF expressed gratefulness for feedback on the draft report, which he will share with the current Commission and the incoming President and HRVP. He called for FoRB to have “many owners” and use a clear language that preserves the human dignity of each person, stressed the importance of including and defending non-believers and to develop a balanced, inclusive approach that takes neither up extreme individualism nor enforced collectivism. The EU must keep the mandate’s agenda alive, while progressing in the articulation of its meaning and the effectiveness of its action. The mandate needs visibility but also credibility and efficiency. He concluded by suggesting that Europe, as the “cradle”, and thus protector, of democracy, must be a main stakeholder of global FoRB’s destiny and unite around its mission of universal solidarity, demonstrating humanitarian leadership. The protection of FoRB, he contended, is in line with Robert Schuman’s legacy.

He also proposed to act in the short term on three points: i) put forward a joint initiative to promote FoRB literacy in close cooperation with the EEAS, ii) reinforce the coordination among MS Special Envoys and Special Representatives on FoRB or related topics; iii) consider how to scale up joint action in three countries reflecting a more contextualised and strategic and approach (e.g. starting with Nigeria, Indonesia, Iraq). Finally, he called for support to the Faith for Rights initiative, promoting joint efforts of the EU with the OHCHR.

Overall, the discussion showed a strong consensus among MS and other stakeholders that the EU has a historical duty and responsibility to speak up for "FoRB for all" and must do so with a unified voice. Renewal and strengthening of the mandate and capacity of the SE’s role will guarantee the continuation of this work and further support FoRB outside the EU while mitigating the risk of any politicisation of the agenda. That message was strengthened by moving testimonies of persecution that were shared during the dinner (Baha’is in Iran, Ahmadis in Pakistan, and atheists globally).

Panel on “Focus on the SDGs: How can promotion of Freedom of Religion or Belief be linked-up with the Agenda 2030, including governance, education, culture, peace and gender?”

- **M. J. Petersen**, Danish Institute for Human Rights, highlighted why it is important to mainstream FoRB into the broader frameworks for human rights, into peace-building and in the Agenda 2030. First, it is key to ensure attention to the interrelatedness between FoRB and other human rights; approaches that do not recognise this are deeply problematic and can result in protection gaps. Second, it is important to mainstream FoRB within development and peace-building to address the root causes of FoRB violations, shaped by webs of factors, including conflict and poverty, authoritarianism, state religion and exclusionary societal norms and practices. Finally, the mainstreaming can contribute to building new partnerships, bringing on board actors who have not engaged explicitly, including secular human rights activists, faith-based NGOs, and national human rights institutions.
- **F. Daou**, Adyan Foundation, noted that FoRB needs to be approached within the HR framework, while focusing attention and refining understanding of its “specificity”. Funding research around this specificity is important. Citing programs in Iraq and Lebanon, he stressed making FoRB also a “faith-based value”, which can be introduced in religious literacy and education, in addition to the importance of having universal standards of FoRB, and inclusive citizenship as a means to ensure social cohesion. FoRB is “a social public value”, we need to develop a non-dogmatic approach about it, aiming at building one shared language on FoRB accessible by different types of actors.
- **M. Yildirim**, Norwegian Helsinki Committee, addressed how manifestations and limitations of FoRB have gendered elements. Manifestations of religion or belief may have gendered forms - like the headscarf or

kippa. When limitations are imposed their gendered impact needs to be considered. When certain religious manifestations that are only practiced by a certain gender are restricted, this may amount to discrimination based on gender. Certain religious practices that seem neutral can in fact be harmful or may violate rights of others, including women. These must be restricted by states. There are grey areas or “lesser infringements”, such as in the case of restrictive traditions within religious and belief communities. Here the evaluation must be more careful as these practices may be considered part of the autonomy of these groups. She recommends mobilising different actors through hosted debates which the SE could support and supporting women's initiatives to overcome the "lesser infringements".

- **E. O’Casey**, Humanists International, noted that states, playing a key role for FoRB, must separate religion from state, recognise the multiple identities of every individual, and treat all as equal citizens and should not privilege any particular communities. She emphasised that FoRB should never be used to discriminate or undermine the equality of others. She also highlighted the extremely broad nature of FoRB, to include all sorts of non-religious beliefs. Speaking on blasphemy laws, she praised the EU guidelines on this, thanked JF for his engagement, and called for the abolition of anti-blasphemy laws – whilst strengthening anti-hate legislation - as integral to promotion of human rights and tolerance..
- **T. Lawo**, International Partnership on Religion and Sustainable Development (PaRD), spoke on the efforts and challenges to make FoRB strategic and structured within PaRD by establishing an informal interest group. This initiative received strong backing from JF.
- **I. Salama**, Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights, drawing on his experience of working on the Beirut Declaration and the UN "Faith for Rights" outlined six “missing elements” that would strengthen global FoRB promotion: synergies, adapted narratives, shift from dialogues to project implementations, further anchoring FoRB in HR, finding commonalities between all religions and beliefs, and a rights based approach. He advised that effective projects should meet all six for success. Training for faith actors is a strategic priority, through a rights based approach, to enhance the mutual reinforcement between religions and human rights. This would empower faith actors to assume a more impactful positive role in societies, to make them more inclusive and respectful of equal rights for all, resisting populism, xenophobia and discrimination.

Panel on “Focus on (inter)religious Engagement: What are the conditions to make it an effective tool to promote Freedom of Religion or Belief and inclusive societies? “

- **F. Petito**, University of Sussex, recommended that to counteract growing trends of social hostility and the related difficulty of the State in protecting FoRB, new bottom-up approaches are needed. Policy makers should start looking at religious actors as partners in building long-term strategies, using interreligious engagement strategies as a policy tool. He highlighted the need for better understanding of: 1) the different forms of interreligious dialogue and collaboration and their impact in strengthening the FoRB environment; 2) the role governments and international organisations can legitimately and safely play in supporting, facilitating and encouraging these processes.
- **C. Burton**, Search for Common Ground, emphasised how framing conflict properly is needed and called on the EU and MS to ensure there is nuanced understanding of the role of religion in conflict. She stressed the critical need to include women in decision and peace-making processes. Highlighting the necessity to find the commonalities in conflicts, from which people from different religious backgrounds can work on together to solve, she quoted JF, “common ground to common victories”.
- **M. Elsanousi**, Network for Religious and Traditional Peacemakers, noted interreligious dialogue, collaboration, and understanding has progressed substantially in recent years. To be further strengthened, they

require more trust building with reluctant actors and inclusivity. Collaboration is key with wide-variety of actors involved in these processes. As to what States should and should not support and engage in, it must be approached with caution. Here the independence and neutrality of religious leaders is crucial. Youth engagement should also be promoted.

- **Rev. K. Sugino**, Religions for Peace, emphasised the importance of interreligious mechanisms for concrete action. These mechanisms, locally built, create open spaces for dialogue among diverse religious communities as well as other stakeholders. Conflict can be prevented and tensions and grievances better managed with such multi-stakeholder dialogues.
- **P. Morel**, Observatoire Pharos, called for a deepening of knowledge and understanding of religion and politics, along with further investment in research and deepening mutual recognition. He fully supported JF's report, to improve our wording, particularly by including not only interreligious, but also interfaith. EU approach to FoRB, he said, must be based on both citizenship and dignity of the person.
- **B. Scharffs**, International Centre on Law and Religion Studies, Brigham Young University, spoke on the relevance of the concept of Human Dignity for FoRB, both as a building block of the HR agenda and indicating its final aim. He related on how to commemorate the 70th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Centre decided to focus on human dignity. The commemoration culminated in the Punta del Este Declaration for Human Dignity for Everyone Everywhere, signed by many renowned scholars and experts. The declaration emphasised human dignity as a tool to build bridges and have productive conversations around human rights. Scharffs strongly supports to continue the work on the global discourse of human dignity.

Working session on: Zooming into concrete programmes supporting to Freedom of Religion or Belief and interreligious dialogue

In the last session, organisations implementing EU funded projects on FoRB and interreligious and intercultural dialogue in different countries spoke about their achievements and challenges. Their recommendations include: involvement and engagement of youth and women, and importantly to go beyond the 'usual suspects'; continued empowerment of women; more contextualisation of FoRB and interfaith dialogue in regional and local contexts; fostering alliances between "FoRB engaged MS" and civil society organisations; creating more opportunities to bring diverse actors in the field together and to allow for joint action; promotion of activities that "re-humanise" the "other"; and the need for long-term investment and vision. Listening and attention to local languages, in order to be better informed and knowledgeable, was emphasised as being fundamental to strengthening these partnerships and processes. The request was put forward that the EU and MS organise annual meeting of organisations working on FoRB and interreligious dialogue, creating inclusivity and more opportunities to bring diverse actors together as well as direct connections with EU staff and representatives.

Two guest speakers intervened in this session. **Maria Lindhardt** (Danmission) reflected on the importance of inclusion, trust building, ownership and long-term commitment, recommending supporting women platforms and female religious leadership. **Erin Wilson** (Groeningen University) drew attention on how does the concept of FoRB translate and resonate in different cultures and recommended to listen more and give more space in policy discussions to actors coming from the field.