



## EUROPEAN COMMISSION

Special Envoy for the Promotion of Freedom of Religion or Belief outside the European Union

Brussels, 21/11/2019

### REPORT

#### **The mandate of the Special Envoy for the promotion of freedom of religion or belief outside the European Union: activities and recommendations (May 2016-November 2019)**

*Disclaimer: This report drafted by the Special Envoy does not bind in any way the European Commission.*

#### **Summary of the Report**

Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) is a fundamental right to which everyone should be entitled, everywhere, which is increasingly under threat or denial in many parts of the world. In 2013 the EU Guidelines for the Promotion and Protection of Freedom of Religion or Belief were adopted by the Council. In doing so, EU member states reaffirmed and embedded the promotion of FoRB for all within their wider international commitment to human rights. Following a resolution adopted by the European Parliament (EP) in February 2016, the President of the European Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker, created the [function of the Special Envoy](#) (SE) for the promotion of freedom of religion or belief outside the EU and appointed Ján Figel' in May 2016. Since then, the Special Envoy has carried out 18 official country visits, has participated in international fora and engaged in constructive exchanges with government authorities, political leaders, civil society and religious leaders and actors.

The role of the SE has become influential and supported by the EP, by many Member States (MS) and the Council, by international organisations, religious actors and civil society organisations. Ján Figel' established good cooperation with the UN High Commissioner on Human Rights, M. Bachelet, and her predecessor, with the UN Special Rapporteur on FoRB A. Shaheed, with UN DSG A. Dieng, responsible for Genocide Prevention and with other UN bodies. During his mandate, several MS established similar positions. This proves the growing importance of the FoRB agenda and the innovative and inspirational role of the EU. Pakistani victim of persecution, Asia Bibi, publicly acknowledged the role of the Special Envoy in her first video release. Likewise, Czech national Petr Jašek, freed with the group of FoRB activists from jail in Sudan, acknowledged the SE role in his liberation from life-long imprisonment.

The SE engagement has been well received by all stakeholders in partner countries as well as in the EU and international fora. EU high-level political engagement “pays off” and the EU has a “unique” role to play in promoting FoRB worldwide. The EU is seen as a respected neutral broker also in countries facing serious problems (as Pakistan, Egypt, Nigeria, India) and has a duty and a historical responsibility to speak up for “FoRB for all” within its wider international commitment to human rights. In January 2019, the EP adopted a Resolution on the “EU Guidelines and the mandate of the EU Special Envoy on the promotion of freedom of religion or belief outside the EU”. The Resolution calls for a “more ambitious” EU political engagement on FoRB and for the Council and the Commission to adequately support the “mandate, capacity and duties of the Special Envoy” underlining the need to also engage in the broader area of religion and development in the context of the EU external action.

## Looking forward

Building on the lessons learned and recognizing that the FoRB global environment continues to deteriorate, the SE argues that the EU action on FoRB should be more ambitious, scaled up and designed more strategically, while mitigating the risks of excessive politicization of this agenda. The EU should seek to better combine EU political instruments with programs reinforcing the capacity of State and non-state actors to prevent and address FoRB violations. High-level political engagement can open closed doors, but it needs to be coupled with sustained efforts and initiatives on the ground. The SE puts forward **5 action-oriented recommendations**:

1. **Work on FoRB within a human rights framework and through the SDGs** – focusing on education (4), gender (5), and peace (16). The EU and MS should continue to anchor their support of FoRB within a broader human rights framework based on principles of universality, non-discrimination and indivisibility and explore operational linkages with the SDGs, to ensure quality education, achieve gender equality and build inclusive societies to advance FoRB and combat intolerance and discrimination. The intersection between FoRB and citizenship is key.
2. **Boost FoRB literacy.** The EU and MS should boost support to FoRB literacy at global, regional and country levels by supporting capacities within government, public sector and security officials, as well as within civil society organisations and religious actors to be FoRB champions. They should also encourage partnerships between academia, civil society organisations and religious actors to join forces and work on the “translation” of the FoRB language into local languages, incorporating local values, knowledge and practices.
3. **Support engagement with religious actors and interreligious dialogue.** The EU and MS should encourage cooperation between human rights and religious actors and support interreligious collaboration as a policy tool to combat intolerance and discrimination and advance FoRB. Collaborations among these human rights, religious actors and policy-making is important.
4. **Implement a more strategic and contextualized approach at the country level,** notably in selected countries. The EU and MS should jointly set in motion strategic partnerships on FoRB some countries, where stakeholders are eager to do so. This ambitious approach, addressing the root causes of violations and intolerance and combining political and operational dimensions, could fit well with the new priorities of the EU, notably in terms of “governance, peace and security”. It is suggested to apply it in countries where the SE and MS have already started constructive dialogues.
5. **Step up coordination among MS and the EU on FoRB.** The EU and MS should create a platform for coordination on FoRB, notably among EU Special Envoys/Representatives/contact points. This will operate as an informal well-resourced space, complementary with the work done in COHOM. This platform could support the recommendations outlined above and trigger initiatives at EU headquarter levels, at regional or country levels, including regular meetings, sharing of knowledge and joint initiatives in the area of training and literacy. The EEAS and EC should be actively engaged in the process as they strengthen their religious engagement capacities and toolboxes.

The draft of this Report and its recommendations were presented in the event on “[How to scale up EU support to FoRB](#)” held in Brussels on the 15th and 16th of October, gathering around 100 participants, MS, experts and civil society organisations. The discussion, as illustrated in the Report of the event, showed a strong consensus that the EU has a historical duty and responsibility to stand up for “FoRB for all” and must do so with one voice.

## 1. Context and Activities

Responding to the [EP Resolution on the Systematic Mass Murder of Religious Minorities by the so-called ISIS/Da'esh](#) of 4 February 2016<sup>1</sup>, the President of the European Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker, created the function of the Special Envoy for the promotion of freedom of religion or belief outside the European Union. I was appointed in May 2016 with the mission to reinforce an effective, visible and strategic EU engagement in the area of FoRB within the human rights and international cooperation policies of the EU<sup>2</sup>. My task has been to support the implementation of the EU [Guidelines for the Promotion and Protection of Freedom of Religion or Belief](#) adopted by the Council in 2013 and to promote this right in the framework of the EU dialogue and cooperation programs. I worked as Special Adviser to the Commissioner for International Cooperation and Development, Neven Mimica, with a part-time arrangement based on an annual external contract. DG DEVCO fully supported this function and appointed a full-time policy advisor, V. Manzitti, who also joined most of my missions (and a junior part-time intern). My mandate was renewed on a yearly basis until the end of the Juncker's Commission term.

The European Commission and the European External Action Service (EEAS) supported my work since the beginning. The promotion and protection of FoRB is part of the EU Action Plan on Human Rights and is mainstreamed in the EU external action. The EEAS has made use of its diplomatic tools to raise concerns for FoRB violations. Public statements have regularly been issued to condemn attacks and to express concerns. FoRB has been regularly raised in Human Rights Dialogues, in particular in Middle East and North Africa, Central, South and South East Asia. FoRB is also discussed in the context of GSP+ trade agreements. The Commission supports FoRB in many countries within its international cooperation. The European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights has been mobilised in all regions of the world with specific projects on FoRB, accounting for more than 22 million euros in the period 2007-18, in Asia, the Balkans and Neighbourhood South. Other relevant initiatives have been supported under other EU financial instruments, such as the Development Cooperation Instrument (DCI), the European Neighbourhood Instrument (ENI), the Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace (IcSP) and the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA).

To ensure complementarity with other EU initiatives, in coordination with the EEAS and EC services, I developed a work plan highlighting geographical and thematic priorities. Whenever possible, my work, notably at country level, was part of a "corporate EU effort" to reinforce our response in the area of FoRB. The EEAS and the EC actively supported my visits.

---

<sup>1</sup> See point 10 : “ Calls for the EU to establish a permanent Special Representative for Freedom of Religion and Belief”

<sup>2</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/special-envoy-jan-figel\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/special-envoy-jan-figel_en)

## 1.1 Engagement at country level and official visits

Since October 2016, I realised 17 official visits<sup>3</sup>. In 2016: Jordan, UAE; in 2017: Iraq, Sudan, Senegal, Pakistan; in 2018: Bosnia and Herzegovina, Pakistan, Nigeria, Lebanon, Burkina Faso, Malaysia, Egypt; in 2019: India, Israel and Palestine, Bahrain, UAE. I also joined various events in other countries such as: Russia, Northern Macedonia, Morocco, Thailand, South Korea, India, Vietnam, where I also had bilateral meetings with top government officials, as well as civil and religious leaders.

During my missions, meetings were held with high-level government officials, including Heads of State, Ministries in charge of Foreign Affairs, Human Rights, Endowment and Religious Affairs, Education and Justice. Among non-state actors, I met with human rights defenders and civil society organisations, academia, intellectuals, think tanks and cultural actors. I hold lectures and dialogues at several universities. I also had the privilege to build relations and trust with a diverse range of religious leaders and scholars. I always encouraged them to work for human rights reminding them of their double role of “duty bearers” and “right holders”.

The mandate of a Special Envoy is different from the mandate of a rapporteur and can more easily offer space for frank and genuine exchanges. I opted for a positive and constructive approach. My messages have included the following<sup>4</sup>: FoRB is about freedom of thought, conscience and religion or belief. It is not more or less important than other human rights, but serves as a litmus test for all of them. It is an essential element for equal citizenship. FoRB is a universal human right for all, and its protection has to be inclusive and apply beyond the specific reference to a religious minority or religious minorities in general. In fact, the EU strongly upholds a “human rights based approach to FoRB”, underscoring the importance of the B of Belief and protection of non-believers. I have also emphasized the positive connections and potential synergies with gender equality, education and culture while trying to deal with the more difficult violations caused by blasphemy and apostasy laws, with a context-sensitive approach.

Overall, the visits were positively appreciated by government authorities, political leaders, civil society and religious actors and especially by representatives of persecuted minorities. I sense that there is genuine readiness to cooperate, to design jointly new forms of pluralism in an interconnected world where religious radicalisation and violent extremism are a threat for many.

I believe that my visits also generated some genuine engagement among EU Delegations and missions in partner countries. They appreciated the political backing and were encouraged to engage also with religious actors around the human rights agenda and other issues, spanning from the prevention of violent extremism to education and women’s rights. My takeaway is that wherever I have been, EU political engagement in the soft areas of religious pluralism and peaceful co-existence is well received and generates tangible opportunities for further dialogue and action.

---

<sup>3</sup> See list of activities and persons met by country : [https://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/jan-figel-special-envoy-promotion-freedom-religion-or-belief-overview-country-visits-main-meetings\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/jan-figel-special-envoy-promotion-freedom-religion-or-belief-overview-country-visits-main-meetings_en)

<sup>4</sup> A selection of speeches is posted on: [https://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/jan-figel-speeches\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/jan-figel-speeches_en)

I also did my best to **support victims of violations**, Human Rights Defenders and persecuted persons. Prisoner release has been another area of work, notably in the case of Asia Bibi in Pakistan and Dr. Ibrahim Mudawi and the group of Petr Jasek in Sudan.

## **1.2 Bring the EU voice to the UN and in international fora**

In my work, I have always been supportive of multilateralism and efforts to strengthen EU-UN cooperation. EU action in the UN Human rights fora on FoRB is of utmost importance. We have been leading on the UN resolutions on FoRB for many years, calling States to step up their commitment to and increase implementation of FoRB. This same resolution supported the mandate of the UN Special Rapporteur (SR) on FoRB, currently Ahmed Shaheed, who has been doing tremendous work. I am proud of the good cooperation that I established with him, with his predecessor Heiner Bielefeldt, and with members of the Human Rights Council in Geneva, as with the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. I met officially with the High Commissioner twice and had regular contacts with the services of the UN SR on FoRB.

I spoke in various side events of the Human Rights Council, contributing to the rise in attention on FoRB issues. Close collaboration was developed with the UN-led initiative on [Faith4Rights](#), aiming at bringing religious actors closer to universal human rights. I supported the action of the UN Deputy SG on the role of religious leaders in Genocide Prevention. I was invited in many international fora, regularly engaged with the “International Contact Group on FoRB”, with the OSCE /ODIHR FoRB program and with the International Panel of Parliamentarians for FoRB, as well as with other relevant international and transatlantic initiatives.

Finally, I also supported initiatives on combating violence and discrimination based on religion or belief, thus working towards the systematic implementation of the Human Rights Council Resolution 16/18 and the implementation of the "Rabat Plan of Action". In this context, I express my sincere thanks to the Government of the Netherlands for hosting the 7<sup>th</sup> meeting of the Istanbul Process in The Hague on 18 and 19 November 2019. This is a very important event. The EU must continue to show its strong commitment to the implementation of this UN framework and its action plan.

## **1.3 Cooperation with other EU actors and institutions**

Since 2016 the interest among member states on the FoRB agenda has grown quickly and has generated political engagement and in some cases new funding. Many MS created positions similar to mine, with a focus either on FoRB or on intercultural and interreligious processes. I can quote Denmark, Germany the UK, Hungary, Finland, Poland, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Sweden, the Czech Republic. I established good collaboration with all of them as well with other member states as Italy, France, Austria and Romania. I reported twice in the Council (COHOM) and PSC.

I spoke on several occasions in the European Parliament (EP), notably in the Committee on Foreign Affairs and the Subcommittee on Human Rights (AFET and DROI). I also spoke in high-level events within Article 17. The EP has been very active on FoRB. I collaborated closely with Vice President M. McGuinness in charge of Article 17 and with the EP “Intergroup on FoRB and Religious Tolerance” and intervened in their annual events and I used their reports in my work. I also spoke at the event organised by the “EP Platform for Secularism in Politics” for the launch of the “Report on Freedom of Thought” which I also made use of.

#### **1.4 Networking with civil society, religious actors, academia, and media**

I established sound cooperation with a range of diverse actors, Human Rights Defenders and Faith-Based Organisations, humanist organisations, as well as with religious leaders and actors. They have substantially contributed to my work. I am also convinced that we need to enhance our cooperation with academia, which has a key role to play in promoting religious literacy at all levels, supporting informed and knowledge-based interreligious cooperation and dialogue. I supported actively the launch of the European Academy of Religion (EuARE, 2016) in Bologna.

I believe that language is important and contextualization is highly needed. I tested that the concept of Human Dignity is a meeting space for religious and secular humanists, is a useful bridge to connect different "territories" and to overcome resistance to a pure legal jargon. I helped to initiate and drive the preparation of the [«Punta del Este Declaration on Human Dignity for Everyone Everywhere»](#) drafted by a group of renowned academics and adopted in December 2018 to celebrate the 70<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the UDHR. The ethical principle of equal dignity of all can help us to promote the political and social principles of equal citizenship for all.

I also believe that media have a core responsibility for FoRB. Their engagement is essential. For the first time in 2017, a special FoRB prize within the Lorenzo Natali Media Prize was awarded. With active media and civil society organisations we should focus more towards elimination of widely spread “allies of evil” in our societies – indifference, ignorance and fear (when people do not care, do not know or they are scared to raise voice on behalf of the voiceless of the defenceless victims of persecution).

#### **1.5 From “FoRB stricto sensu” towards the promotion of the “religious social responsibility”**

FoRB is at a crossroads with many agendas. FoRB promotion cannot be isolated from the support to other civil and political rights, it is ultimately about good governance and equal citizenship. In many countries, FoRB is interwoven with the prevention of violent extremism, counter-radicalization and peacebuilding. Working on FoRB facilitates a privileged and transparent engagement with religious actors to advance their “religious social responsibility” in the public sphere, to enhance their contribution to sustainable development. I am convinced that engagement with religious actors and interreligious dialogue and collaboration can be crucial policy tools to promote FoRB and combat intolerance and discrimination based on religion or

belief. Overall, this area of work has a geopolitical dimension, with high potential to contribute to the EU foreign policy for justice and peace and reinforce its international cooperation.

## **1.6 The European Parliament Resolution on the “EU Guidelines and the mandate of the EU Special Envoy on the promotion of freedom of religion or belief outside the EU”**

The EP adopted this [Resolution](#) on the 15 January 2019 (with 576 votes in favor). The assessment is positive both on the work done so far and on the continuation of the function. It calls the Council and the Commission to adequately support the “mandate, capacity and duties of the Special Envoy”. The Resolution calls also for a “more ambitious” EU political engagement on FoRB and underlines the need to boost literacy and engage in the broader area of religion and development in the context of the EU external action.

## **2. Looking Forward. My recommendations**

There is a broad consensus that FoRB is a human right under pressure. Religious persecutions and discriminations appear to be on the rise in many parts of the world. FoRB is threatened by religious extremist movements, secular oppressive governments, and different combinations of actors and ideologies. This affects many religious believers, across all religious and belief communities, including atheists. Since 2007, social hostilities and governmental restrictions on religion have risen steadily. States are failing to protect this right and violence justified on the religious ground is taking new forms. Pluralism is increasingly threatened. Latest data from the Pew Research Centre (PRC) shows that 52 governments – including countries like China, India and Russia – impose either “high” or “very high” levels of restrictions, up from 40 in 2007. In 56 countries, the PRC finds “high” or “very high” levels of social hostilities involving religion, up from 39 in 2007. Conflicts with a religious dimension are increasing and this seems to be going hand in hand with a growing role of societal actors as FoRB violators, generating negative stereotyping, stigmatization, hate speech, intolerance and violence based on religion or belief.

For many years, FoRB was rarely a priority in foreign policy, development cooperation and human rights programmes and some have termed it “the orphan or abandoned right”. Recent years have witnessed an emerging consensus on its importance and the proliferation of various initiatives. Member States are increasingly active on this agenda. The US has organised the two first-ever ministerial summits on religious freedom in 2018 and 2019. Canada is also quite dynamic and co-chairs the International Contact Group on FoRB.

I believe that the EU should collectively grasp and build on the precious opportunities that this new interest around FoRB offers. The promotion and respect of human rights is at the heart of multilateralism. And the EU’s profound commitment to effective multilateralism must continue to translate into an increased engagement for a more peaceful, cooperative and just world based on respect to fundamental human rights. We should continue to play a key role in promoting FoRB in the UN and with other international organisations, and make use of the tools we have at our disposal, dialogue, actions in human rights fora and assistance for targeted actions.

There are also risks that should be managed, linked to misperceptions around FoRB and the misuse and manipulation of religion. It is also important to be aware that in some contexts FoRB is perceived with some skepticism or prejudice as a western agenda, dominated by Christian actors. We should also be aware that credible action to promote FoRB abroad must be backed by strengthening of FoRB at home.

In this moving context, my **recommendations** are the following:

- 1. Work on FoRB within a human rights framework and through the SDGs agenda – focusing on education (4), gender equality (5) and peace (16)**
- 2. Boost FoRB literacy**
- 3. Support engagement with religious actors and interreligious dialogue**
- 4. Implement a more strategic and contextualized approach at country level**
- 5. Step up coordination among MS and the EU on FoRB**

## **2.1 Work on FoRB within a human rights framework and through the SDGs agenda**

FoRB is not more or less important than other human rights. It requires and deserves, however, particular attention because it is core for building peaceful and inclusive societies. FoRB crisis is today a civilizational issue. EU action on FoRB should be more ambitious, scaled up and designed more strategically. The EU should seek to combine EU political instruments with programs reinforcing the capacity of State and non-state actors to prevent and address violations. High-level political engagement can break walls and open doors but needs to be coupled with sustained efforts and concrete initiatives on the ground.

I encourage the EU and MS to strongly anchor their support of FoRB within a broader human rights framework based on principles of universality, non-discrimination and indivisibility. FoRB is often misunderstood – or even misused – as a right that protects religion or a particular religious group, in some cases singling out support to one minority while overlooking others. FoRB is a right of all individuals, regardless of what religion or belief they adhere to or if they do not adhere to any religion or belief at all.

Due attention should be given to both the collective and individual dimensions of FoRB. Religious minorities are often vulnerable to FoRB violations, but violations also affect other vulnerable groups and individuals, in particular converts, atheists, women, homosexuals, refugees and children, as well as majority religions. The term "minorities" is in many contexts obsolete and could be usefully replaced by other terms.

Think and act through the Agenda 2030 and the SDGs. This is another message I would like to share. Support of FoRB goes beyond the human rights toolbox. FoRB is an expansive right, cutting across civil and political rights, gender equality and women rights, security, education while touching at the most intimate sphere of the human person.

I encourage to systemically considering the intersection between FoRB and citizenship. Citizenship and the construction of a civil state is the common ground shared by many political, civil and religious actors. FoRB is, in fact, a strong channel to foster inclusive citizenship, especially in diverse societies. In this sense, FoRB is also an essential part of the agendas

revolving around the prevention of violent extremism, promoting pluralism and countering discrimination and hate speech.

I call the EU and MS to work on the intersection between FoRB and gender equality. FoRB is the right of all individuals, including women, to interpret and practice their religion or belief, as they want, even when this goes against the orthodoxy of their religious or belief community. FoRB can be a powerful tool for the empowerment of women who fight for more gender-sensitive religious interpretations and practices.

Education is the most influential tool to change the human person and society. I call for investing in FoRB and education, which is essential for conflict prevention and to reconstruct peaceful and inclusive societies. It is key to support a culture of respect and ethics of responsibility.

## **2.2 Boost literacy on Freedom of Religion or Belief**

A correct understanding of this right today has critical implications for the human rights agenda and beyond. FoRB is still misunderstood, misused or underused in many sectors and many countries. Literacy on FoRB is always presented as essential but often is placed at the bottom of the “to do” list. As a matter of urgency, I recommend supporting the capacity of civil society, of government and public sectors and security officials. Let me also insist on the importance to support the capacity of religious actors to be “FoRB champions”, this is crucial.

FoRB literacy might require some degree of understanding of the religious/theological doctrines. More importantly, however, it should support the understanding of the socio-cultural dimension of religion and its complex embeddedness in the social fabrics of societies, as well as the historical development of their specific legal forms of state-religious arrangements. In addition to this, paying attention to language and “translation” is also essential: initiatives should aim to be context-relevant and -resonant, also “translating” the human rights language into the local language, incorporating local values, knowledge and practices.

I also encourage support for partnerships between academia, civil society organizations and experts to stimulate more research and evidence-based actions as well as for initiatives aimed at establishing national, regional and transnational networks to promote and propagate collaboration, best practices and new initiatives in the area of FoRB.

I strongly encourage the [Global Campus on Human Rights](#) in Venice, funded by the EU, to lead by example and launch an award on FoRB to mobilize master students and facilitate their outreach. I also wish to praise and encourage further support to initiatives like the [FORB Learning platform](#), developed with Swedish and Norwegian support. This powerful tool disseminates learning resources in many languages and develops training capacities worldwide and for the International Panel of Parliamentarians for FoRB.

## **2.3 Support engagement with religious actors and interreligious dialogue to advance human rights**

Religious actors have long been distanced from the human rights agenda. FoRB should also be cultivated in the very territories of religion. The EU should encourage and support interaction and cooperation between human rights actors and religious actors. Religious actors should not only be seen as the victims or the perpetrators of FoRB violations but as partners in building long-term strategies to foster pluralism and sustainable peace. Connections between these two worlds do not happen alone, they need encouragement and a safe space to thrive.

I can confirm that most of the religious leaders and actors I met are ready to engage. I reminded them that they are “duty bearers” and not only “right holders”, that freedom requires also responsibility. They are or can be peace-builders and allies in promoting FoRB. But we should not be naïve, for many FoRB is not an easy concept to grasp. This is a long-term journey. In this respect, I reiterate my support to the "Faith4Rights" initiative sponsored by the UN High Commissioner on Human Rights.

Religious studies and history are also important resources as demonstrated by “HUDIRE”, the initiative organised in June 2019 by DG DEVCO in cooperation with the Fondazione per le Scienze Religiose – FSCIRE (Bologna) and the Adyan Foundation (Beirut) which gathered religious scholars and historians to discuss human rights, history and religion with policymakers, resulting in lively and genuine exchanges.

I also support the model of “interreligious engagement” put forward by a recent report of the FoRB & Foreign Policy Initiative of the University of Sussex, that is, the idea that States and international organisations should facilitate and support interreligious collaboration to combat intolerance and discrimination and advance FoRB – something that, for example, the participant States of the OSCE have already committed to.

This is a fascinating and very rich area of work: all believers affiliated to a diversity of religions today are confronted with pluralism, need to search their responses to their daily co-existence with other faiths and belief systems. Today interreligious dialogue and collaboration can help advance FoRB and human rights. However, there are risks and challenges that States and international organisations need to be aware of and mitigate.

Interreligious engagement strategies can include a variety of forms of interreligious dialogue and collaboration ranging from theological exchanges to day-to-day socializing and common social action by different religious, spiritual and philosophical groups and individuals. All these forms can be impactful in advancing FoRB, if the policy design and implementation have carefully joined up the local with the global levels and the secular with religious dimensions.

Overall, we need to “upgrade the very concept and practice of interreligious dialogue”. This area needs to be carefully handled. It is important to call for the contribution of researchers, theologians, religious scholars, multiplying exchanges and exposures, for interreligious engagement to bear fruit. Delicate and maybe uncomfortable, but well-informed conversations need to take place.

## **2.4 By 2024, set in motion strategic partnerships on Freedom of Religion or Belief in some countries**

In terms of concrete next steps, I think that the EU and MS could jointly set in motion “strategic partnerships on FoRB” in some countries where stakeholders are eager to do so. I am convinced that the report developed by Denmark on “The international promotion of freedom of religion or belief: sketching the contours of a common framework” could inspire and support an upgrade of the EU and international work in this area. The basic conditions for success are to engage in a medium and long-term perspective as it takes time to build broad and inclusive alliances with local actors and trust.

In the proposed framework, the first step would be to develop a good understanding of the country context including structural elements (as governance, the relation between State and religion, justice and legal system as well as broader political, economic and cultural context). The second step would be to develop articulated responses, including political and operational components. The political component should distinguish the “EU and international pressure” from what we can call a “constructive engagement”. Both are important.

FoRB should be mainstreamed through the broader human rights framework and the SDGs and supported via intervention in sectors such as governance, justice and rule of law, peacebuilding, education and culture. Culture and education should systematically include a FoRB lens.

FoRB should be seen as an ingredient to support the new priorities of the EU, notably the area of “governance, peace and security” and as tool to promote gender equality. The classic projects on FoRB (for example under the European Instruments for Democracy and Human Rights) should be further developed while being better integrated in well thought strategies.

I also recommend that in the next round of EU Human Rights and Democracy Country Strategies for the period 2021-2024, FoRB could be addressed more prominently and based on a thoughtful assessment.

Countries where these “strategic partnerships” could be offered should include the ones where the EU action is promising or important and countries where my visits were constructive and opened spaces for further engagement. I think of Pakistan, Malaysia, India, Egypt, Lebanon, Nigeria, and Sudan. In these countries, it is important to keep momentum. Other countries where tensions are on the rise and prevention is key, could be included (for example Indonesia, Sahel, Horn of Africa).

## **2.5 Step up coordination among Member States and the EU on Freedom of religion or belief outside the EU**

Finally, I also strongly encourage the creation of a platform for EU and MS coordination on FoRB, notably among EU Special Envoys and Special Representatives working in this area. This is also in line with the EP resolution on the “EU Guidelines and the mandate of the EU Special Envoy on the promotion of freedom of religion or belief outside the EU” (section 18) of January 2019. Religion and FoRB are new and delicate areas of work for diplomats and development

practitioners. Overall there is limited expertise and some shyness or fear to engage. Having an informal and well-resourced space for coordination will be of great utility. The EEAS and EC should be actively engaged in this area as they strengthen their capacities and toolbox in the broader area of religious engagement. The objectives will be to boost coordination and consistency, promote informed policy-making and allow more complementarity, support better risk management.

The EU should follow a "joined-up approach", fully in line with the EU Guidelines on FoRB. One illustration of today's challenges is the divergence between policies with a narrow focus on selected minorities, singling out support to only one minority and policies promoting FoRB for all. This platform would be complementary to the work done in COHOM. It could include actions at EU/headquarter levels, training, sharing of knowledge and other joint initiatives.

### **3. Conclusions**

I presented the draft of this report in the event on ["How to scale up EU support to FoRB"](#) organized by the Directorate-General on International Cooperation and Development in October 2019, with around 100 participants including many MS. The discussion strengthened my belief that the EU has the responsibility to speak up on FoRB promotion outside the EU and to encourage constructive engagement, international collaboration, and innovative partnerships. I was greatly encouraged by the convergence of views of the different EU representatives across the political spectrum and the EC services. I was pleased by the participant MSs unanimous commendation of the impact of the SE role and work as well as their recommendations for the continuation and strengthening of the mandate. They agreed that EU engagement on FoRB should be institutionalized and become more effective, connecting policy and operational dimensions and maximizing the impact of EU tools and initiatives. There was a frank exchange among MSs on the risks of excessive politicization of the FoRB agenda but overall the discussion showed a clear emerging consensus among MS 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.

Similarly, there were overwhelmingly positive reactions to the SE's continued engagement and recommendations coming from a variety of actors from the global south and Europe, representing different civil society's orientations and belief systems. The key takeaway is that civil society supports and demands further EU engagement on FoRB and recommends strengthening its implementation through a bottom-up collaborative engagement and partnership on the ground.

The EU has a duty and a responsibility to act on the global FoRB crisis. We all agree on this. It is important to keep momentum, value the work done in close cooperation with EU staff, with a remarkable commitment from our Delegations in partner countries, capitalizing on knowledge, contact and lessons learned. The EU has now a voice in the UN and in other fora.

A precious network of contacts has been set up. The high-level dialogue was laboriously and successfully started with many stakeholders in partner countries such as Pakistan, Iraq, Egypt,

Malaysia, India, Jordan, Morocco, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Israel/Palestine, Nigeria, Sudan, including State authorities and religious leaders. In the current context, when other actors are entering the international scene, a mandate similar to mine would build on and increase the “value” of the initial investment done by the EU. It will also respond to the calls and needs of stakeholders. The EP in its Resolution of January 2019 expressed wishes for continuity and for adequate support as well. The EU must keep the mandate’s agenda alive while progressing in the articulation of its meaning and its effectiveness. The mandate needs visibility, credibility and efficiency. Europe, as the “cradle”, and protector, of democracy, must be the main stakeholder of global FoRB’s destiny and unite around its mission of universal solidarity, demonstrating humanitarian leadership. The protection of FoRB, is more than ever today in line with the spirit of Robert Schuman’s legacy.

**Jan Figel’**



### **Annex : Highlights from country visits**

*This box does not have any pretension to summarize conclusions or encapsulate the richness of contacts and exchanges but just to bring in focus the diversity of work done.*

Divisions and tensions are still profound in **Bosnia and Herzegovina** and cohabitation of the different religious communities is fragile. However, the SE mission underlined that responsible religious leaders can play a key role towards “one society” and shared citizenship. Religious actors are ready to offer their contribution to build an endogenous Islam in Europe, far from foreign influence, and play a positive role in the accession process to the EU.

In **Burkina Faso** religious diversity has traditionally been deeply rooted in its social fabric. The multiplication of terrorist attacks put in danger this culture, divisions and fears are rising. Promotion of FoRB today becomes important to reconstruct peace, including the legal aspects, education and cultural activities. The SE met with the Head of State, with many Ministries, with the Parliament and with traditional leaders as well with a broad range of civil society organizations. He visited koranic schools and EC funded activities in this area, exchanged with civil society and with cultural operators.

In **Egypt**, in a difficult context, the visit of the SE was considered very constructive by the authorities, religious institutions and leaders, who are ready for more cooperation and invited him to visit the country again. Al Azhar University proved particularly open to continue exchanging on religious issues. The SE was invited to speak on FoRB by Al Azhar and by the Ministry of Religious Affairs. An innovative project funded by the EU, and praised by all interlocutors, deals with “Providing Tools for critical Thinking in Islamic Studies” (IDEAO) and could be duplicated.

In **India**, civil society, faith groups and academics shared serious concerns about growing intolerance and discrimination. They expressed an appetite for further engagement on how to reverse this trend, The SE recommended keeping the dialogue running with authorities and proposed to consider support to interreligious initiatives as well as on culture, youth and education.

In **Iraq**, the SE received a top-level welcome. His visit confirmed that EU has acceptance and credibility and was seen as possible mediator and facilitator in the reconciliation and reconstruction process. Using additional religious and/or symbolic levers of power could have tangible benefits for both Iraq and the EU.

**Lebanon** has a unique capital of interreligious conviviality constructed through history. Some consider that Lebanon is “more than a country, it is a message of freedom and pluralism for the East and for the West.” In many respects, the Lebanese model may serve as inspiration in the region and beyond. However, the confessional arrangements generate structured discriminations and blockages. Religion is often misused as an entry ticket to access the economic and political system. The SE has very much underlined the need to maintain dialogue between political and religious actors to promote pluralism and inclusive citizenship.

**Jordan** was chosen for the first mission of the SE given its commitment to promote religious diversity. However, the model of peaceful coexistence is under pressure in society: religious extremism and hate speech are expanding. The SE confirmed that the EU stands ready to support Jordan to counter religious extremism and support Jordanian traditional role of champion of a peaceful Islam with a harmonious cohabitation with Christians and other religious and ethnic communities.

In the complex **Malaysia**, the government is interested in cooperating more with the EU. Muslim leaders asked the SE to facilitate connection with progressive scholars. An event gathering civil society and religious actors was proposed on the concept of human dignity as a space shared by various affiliations.

In **Morocco** the SE had important exchanges on the Moroccan tradition of promoting religious tolerance, the right of religious minorities and the country's strategy in countering radicalization. Possible follow up to this visit could take the form of a joint conference on freedom of religion and consciousness in Morocco that could bring together all the various initiatives in this field with a high level conference in Brussels.

In **Nigeria**, the SE's visit was constructive and confirmed the relevance of EU engagement in the field of FoRB and the readiness of Nigerian stakeholders to pursue dialogue and cooperation. Possible entry points discussed include a high level dialogue with political, civil and religious authorities on "FoRB for all"; support to interreligious studies and opportunities for religious actors to become "FoRB literate" and develop their own FoRB roadmap.

In **Palestine and Israel**, both sides noted that religion is increasingly present in politics and firmly expressed interest to see an EU engagement in this area. The SE recommended to scale up the EU support in the "broad area of FoRB" which is a key ingredient for pluralism and for equal citizenship. In addition, the SE underlined that the religious dimension of the peace process, traditionally excluded from reflections and peace discussions, deserves urgent attention. The SE proposed a mapping of the initiatives working on the religious dimension of the peace process and mobilising religious actors and resources for peace.

In **Pakistan**, as a follow-up to the first visit of the SE, an unprecedented "Roundtable on Pathways for Pluralism in Pakistan" was organized with high-level participation from government and the Army, religious leaders and scholars, civil society. There are important challenges and chances for positive changes in this important country.

**Senegal** continues to be a country of respect and even interreligious harmony in a region in tension. However, Senegalese Islam, of Sufi nature, is threatened by extremism. The teaching of religion is a very important issue. In addition, dialogue with religious actors and inter-religious cooperation are essential elements of an integrated strategy for sustainable security.

In **Sudan**, religious freedom is fragile. Apostasy and blasphemy laws are systematically and forcefully applied. Diversity is extremely challenged and civil society is facing a shrinking space. It is therefore very important to maintain and intensify dialogue with the Sudanese

authorities on FoRB and education, including as regards curricula and text books. The SE succeeded to visit in prison Dr Ibrahim Mudawi, a well-known human rights defender.

**UAE** tries to be at the forefront of religious tolerance, freedom of religion and protection of minorities. The visit of the SE offered the perspective that FoRB is a potential entry point to discuss more sensitive human rights issues, and to actively support objectives of tolerance and peace in Muslim societies (implementation of Marrakesh Declaration of 2016).