EU guidelines and the mandate of the EU Special Envoy on the promotion of freedom of religion or belief outside the EU

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The European Parliament adopted by 576 votes to 46 with 73 abstentions a resolution on EU Guidelines and the mandate of the EU Special Envoy on the promotion of freedom of religion or belief outside the EU.

Parliament stressed that freedom of religion or belief (FoRB), is a universal human right, a value of the EU and an important and undeniable pillar of dignity, greatly impacting on all individuals, their personal identity and development and on societies. It took note of the creation of the post of Special Envoy for the promotion of FoRB outside the EU in 2016 by the President of the Commission, in response to the resolution of Parliament of 4 February 2016.

Members expressed deep concern that recent years have seen a dramatic rise in violations of FoRB worldwide and persecution of believers and non-believers. They stressed that violations of FoRB undermine democracy, impede development, and negatively affect the enjoyment of other fundamental freedoms and rights. Therefore, this obligates the international community, the EU and its Member States to reaffirm their determination and strengthen their actions in promoting FoRB for all.

Parliament condemned the instrumentalisation of religious issues for political ends, and violence, harassment or social pressures against any individual or group of people on grounds of thought, conscience, religion or belief. It also condemned attacks against individuals based on their sexual orientation.

EU strategy to promote FoRB through international relations

Parliament called on the European External Action Service (EEAS) and the EU Delegations to identify with their various interlocutors a set of **common objectives to advance FoRB through human rights dialogue.** It called for increased cooperation to prevent persecution of minorities on grounds of thought, conscience, religion or belief, and deplored the fact that some countries have penal laws providing for the **punishment of blasphemy**, conversion or apostasy, which aim generally to limit FoRB. It urged the EU to include a human rights dialogue covering respect for FoRB in all negotiations undertaken with a view to the **conclusion of any agreements with non-EU countries**.

Special Envoy for the promotion of freedom of religion or belief outside the EU

Members encouraged the Special Envoy to continue his cooperation and complementarity of actions with the EU Special Representative for Human Rights, including the promotion of the EU Guidelines.

They welcomed the fact that the Special Envoy has developed effective working networks within the Commission as well as with the Council, the European Parliament, and other stakeholders. They called on the Special Envoy to report annually on the countries visited and his thematic priorities.

The Council and the Commission are called on to:

- carry out a transparent and comprehensive assessment of the effectiveness and added value of the position of the Special Envoy in the process of the renewal of his or her mandate;

- adequately support the Special Envoy's institutional mandate, capacity and duties, by exploring the possibility of a multi-year term subjected to annual review and by developing working networks within all relevant EU institutions.

Parliament recommended that the role of the Special Envoy could include competences such as:

- enhancing the visibility, effectiveness, coherence and accountability of the EU's FoRB policy outside the EU;

- providing the European Parliament, the Council, the Vice President of the Commission / High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security and the Commission with an annual progress report and a comprehensive report on the Special Envoy's mandate;

- working in close cooperation with the Council Working Group on Human Rights (COHOM);

Parliament noted that a number of Member States have recently created new posts of responsibility for FoRB, whose role is akin to the Special Envoy's. It underscored the need for a consistent approach that encompasses the rights of all religious communities as well as non-believers. It recommended considering the possibility of setting up an informal advisory working group consisting of representatives of Member States' FoRB and other relevant institutions as well as European Parliament representatives and experts, scholars and representatives of civil society, including churches and other faith-based organisations as well as non-confessional organisations.

EU Guidelines on the promotion and protection of freedom of religion or belief

Members considered that the EU Guidelines present a clear set of political lines and themes for priority actions, as well as a toolkit for monitoring and démarches by EU representatives in third countries, that enable the EU to exert an effective role in promoting freedom of thought, conscience and religion outside the EU, and called for effective implementation.

Parliament wanted to see a FoRB-dedicated chapter to be included in the EU Annual Reports on Human Rights and Democracy in the World, as well as progress reports in respect of the implementation of the EU Guidelines, to be communicated to Parliament and the Council.

EU financial instruments

Parliament noted the increase of EIDHR funding allocated to FoRB-related projects since the adoption of the EU Guidelines and expressed their satisfaction that FoRB is identified as a priority of the European Instrument of Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR). It called on the Commission and the EEAS to ensure that EU diplomatic work for the promotion of human rights, including FoRB and EIDHR-funded projects, is mutually reinforcing, and to respect the principles of pluralism, neutrality and fairness in allocating funds.

Sufficient funding for FoRB-related projects should be made available under the EU external financial instruments, within the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) for 2021-2027. However, Members called for an effort to ensure transparency in the allocation of funding and to monitor the use thereof by religions and their activities.