



# THE EU AND FREEDOM OF RELIGION OR BELIEF 2017-2021

Periodical report by the European  
Parliament Intergroup on Freedom  
of Religion or Belief and Religious  
Tolerance (FoRB & RT)



**FoRB&RT**  
European Parliament Intergroup

**“ EVERYONE HAS THE RIGHT  
TO FREEDOM OF THOUGHT,  
CONSCIENCE AND RELIGION;  
THIS RIGHT INCLUDES FREEDOM TO  
CHANGE HIS RELIGION OR BELIEF  
AND FREEDOM, EITHER ALONE OR  
IN COMMUNITY WITH OTHERS AND  
IN PUBLIC OR PRIVATE, TO MANIFEST  
HIS RELIGION OR BELIEF, IN  
WORSHIP, TEACHING, PRACTICE  
AND OBSERVANCE.**

European Convention on Human Rights, Article 9

## **THE EU AND FREEDOM OF RELIGION OR BELIEF**

This is a report by the European Parliament Intergroup on Freedom of Religion or Belief and Religious Tolerance. It does not officially reflect the views of the European Parliament or its Committees. The contents and views expressed in this report - unless directly referenced as stemming from a specific individual or organisation - are those solely of the Intergroup.



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# 1. FOREWORD & INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 THE FREEDOM OF RELIGION OR BELIEF

The right to freedom of religion or belief is a fundamental right that is enshrined as human right by the European Union (EU), the United Nations (UN) and other international bodies. The European Union's commitment to promoting and protecting the freedom of religion or belief is rooted in Article 9 of the European Convention on Human Rights, and Article 10 of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights, which recognize *'the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief, in worship, teaching, practice and observance'*<sup>1</sup>.

The right to freedom of religion or belief is a value of the EU and an important and undeniable pillar of dignity, greatly impacting on all individuals, with their personal identity and development, and on societies. The EU underscores the duty of states to guarantee this freedom and treat all individuals equally, without any discrimination based on religion or belief, in order to preserve peaceful, democratic and pluralistic societies that are respectful of diversity of beliefs. Besides protecting this right for its own citizens, the EU is also undertaking efforts through different channels to promote and protect this right outside its own territories.

## 1.2 THE INTERGROUP

The European Parliament Intergroup on Freedom of Religion or Belief and Religious Tolerance (FoRB & RT) gathers Members (MEPs) from different political groups to advocate the cause of religious freedom outside the European Union. Apart from advocacy within and outside the European Parliament, the Intergroup also supports and scrutinizes efforts by other EU actors. The Intergroup on FoRB & RT started formally on 11 December 2014, after having existed as a Working Group on FoRB. An Intergroup has a stronger mandate in the European Parliament than a Working Group and has more influence. An Intergroup can start when at least three presidents of three political groups in the Parliament have

signed the paper to set up the Intergroup. With the official formalisation of the Intergroup, its mandate renewed in December 2019, the political groups in the Parliament emphasize that the freedom of religion or belief is an important human right that is under pressure in many countries. Therefore, politicians from different political groups in the Parliament work together to protect and promote this right.

Freedom of religion or belief is quite high on the agenda of the Parliament. However, according to the Intergroup it deserves more attention. That is why we do everything to get freedom of religion or belief on top of the Parliament's agenda. We consider the Intergroup as a crucial platform to raise issues of freedom of religion or belief at the European level. MEPs work together on the opportunities provided by the Intergroup to build cross-party interest in upholding this freedom. In doing so, MEPs can draw on the lessons from the wider field of human rights. Furthermore, MEPs work on successful practices through connections between those who suffer from violations of the right to freedom of religion or belief and MEPs who could advocate on their behalf.

## 1.3 PURPOSE OF THIS REPORT

Since its establishment, the Intergroup on FoRB & RT has been drafting and publishing reports on a regular basis. These reports have focused on the state of freedom of religion or belief around the world, highlighting the situation in individual countries, as well as the role of the EU in promoting and protecting this freedom. The current report also combines these elements. Building upon existing data, it assesses the situation regarding religious freedom in a number of countries, especially those where the level of religious freedom is declining rapidly. Besides, this report gives an evaluation of the efforts that the EU is undertaking through different channels to protect and promote the freedom of religion or belief. This evaluation provides a useful basis for providing recommendations to the different EU institutions to further improve their efforts protecting and promoting religious freedom.

<sup>1</sup> Council of Europe. European Convention on Human Rights: [https://www.echr.coe.int/documents/convention\\_eng.pdf](https://www.echr.coe.int/documents/convention_eng.pdf); European Parliament, Council & Commission. EU Charter of Fundamental Rights: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:12012P/TXT&from=EN>

## 1.4 METHODOLOGY AND READING GUIDE

In order to collect the data that underpin the findings of this report, we approached a number of civil society organisations (CSOs) with diverse religious and non-religious backgrounds that are active in promoting and protecting the freedom of religion or belief, with a questionnaire. The questionnaire and a list of organisations that contributed can be found in Annex 1. The responses from these organisations, structured along the lines of the questionnaire, provided valuable input for evaluating the state of religious freedom around the world, and also the role of different EU institutions and programmes in this regard. In the next chapters, we regularly use the information that was delivered to us by the CSOs through the questionnaire. For reasons of confidentiality, we do not attribute specific findings to these sources, unless the information is publicly available. Besides this specific input, we also looked at a variety of reports issued by CSOs and governmental organisations from both inside and outside the EU, that describe the situation of freedom of religion or belief in a great number of countries.

For the second chapter, we selected the ten countries that were mentioned most often by the respondents to our questionnaire when asked in which countries the situation of freedom of religion or belief was deteriorating. Based on the input from the questionnaire as well as information from existing sources, we give a brief overview of the situation regarding religious freedom in these countries. The third chapter provides an assessment of the different efforts the EU is undertaking to promote and protect the freedom of religion or belief. Here we also use input from CSOs. Building on this assessment, the fourth chapter lists a number of recommendations to further strengthen the European Union's efforts to promote and protect the freedom of religion or belief.

## 1.5 STANDING UP FOR THE RIGHT TO FREEDOM OF RELIGION OR BELIEF

The purpose of this report is not only to provide an update on the state of the freedom of religion or belief around the world. Moreover, it is also a call for action to stand up for those whose right to freely believe is challenged, restricted or outright denied. Unfortunately, this report again shows that the situation of religious freedom has been deteriorating in many countries. We as a European Parliament Intergroup for the cause of religious freedom see it as our mission to address these issues, and give a voice to those believers and non-believers who do not have the opportunity to speak up if their fundamental rights are challenged. However, as we can only do so much, it is important that also citizens, civil society and not in the least political institutions join this cause. As our beliefs occupy the very core of our humanity, our commitment to defending the freedom of religion or belief must be unwavering. We hope that this report can be an inspiring contribution to this cause.

On behalf of the European Parliament Intergroup on FoRB & RT,

*Peter van Dalen MEP*  
*Carlo Fidanza MEP*  
Co-chairs

*February 2022*

## 2. STATE OF FREEDOM OF RELIGION OR BELIEF AROUND THE WORLD

### 2.1 GENERAL DEVELOPMENTS

In many places around the world, the situation with regard to the freedom of religion or belief has deteriorated over the last years. In the index for Freedom of Religion, the median score that captures freedom of religion in the world dropped with approximately 20 percentage points from a score around 0.8 to just below 0.6 between 2018 and 2019, the last year from which data are available<sup>2</sup>. The individual scores of the countries discussed in this chapter also show that the decline in the freedom of religion is often substantial, and can happen suddenly. One particular cause that is mentioned to explain this deterioration is the Covid-19 pandemic, as restrictions imposed by governments in some cases suppressed or discriminated against religious minorities. In general, when it comes to persecution on grounds of religion or belief, we can distinguish between three types of violator profiles:

- First of all, there are authoritarian governments controlling and repressing religious minorities that do not belong to a religion that is recognized by and registered with the state. One of the most obvious examples is China. In general, we can witness a rise in authoritarian governments, that do not abide by the Western, rule-based model of governance, including its human rights standards;
- Second, there are ethno-religious supremacists, representing a majority religion and/or ethnic group, pushing for the repression of minorities. The dominant role of Hinduism in India is a clear example of this;
- Finally, there are Islamist extremists who often violently persecute religious minorities, whether they are non-Muslim but also Muslim minorities. These can be militant groups, such as Boko Haram or ISWAP<sup>3</sup> in Nigeria, but also the state can play a role in this, as is

happening in countries like Pakistan and Iran<sup>4</sup>. Especially the expansion of Islamic State (IS) in Sub-Saharan Africa is a major reason for concern. Out of sight, the terrorist organisation is recovering the resources it lost in Syria and Iraq and pursuing the establishment of a new caliphate running through Sub-Saharan Africa all the way to the Indian Ocean.

These are three distinct types of violator profiles that can be used to understand the situation with regard to religious freedom in a specific country. However, there are also countries in which all three types of violator profiles can be seen simultaneously, such as Iran and Saudi Arabia<sup>5</sup>.

We can identify a number of countries and specific challenges that deserve our special attention. Apart from the violator profiles, a number of developments with regard to the roots and types of persecution are especially concerning:

- Extraordinary measures due to the Covid-19 pandemic are used as an opportunity by governments to exercise more control over religious minorities; for example in India, Christians are skipped for emergency aid that is provided by the government, whilst Muslims are being scapegoated for causing the pandemic;
- There is an increasing use of technological means to conduct surveillance operations that also target religious minorities; with the unprecedented use of advanced surveillance technologies by the government in China as one of the clearest and most serious examples<sup>6</sup>;
- There are concerns about the lack of unbiased education materials, leading to children being taught from textbooks including hate speech towards certain minorities; this happens especially in certain Islamic countries such as Iran, Pakistan, Turkey and Saudi Arabia<sup>7</sup>;

<sup>2</sup> World Bank, GovData360, Freedom of Religion, World median: [https://govdata360.worldbank.org/indicators/hd6a18526?country=IND&indicator=41930&countries=CHN,NGA,IRN,PAK,VNM,TUR,ERI,MMR,DZA&viz=line\\_chart&years=2015,2019&indicators=944](https://govdata360.worldbank.org/indicators/hd6a18526?country=IND&indicator=41930&countries=CHN,NGA,IRN,PAK,VNM,TUR,ERI,MMR,DZA&viz=line_chart&years=2015,2019&indicators=944)

<sup>3</sup> Islamic State in West Africa Province

<sup>4</sup> United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF): Annual Report 2021, <https://www.uscifr.gov/annual-reports>, p. 31 (hereafter: USCIRF (2021))

<sup>5</sup> USCIRF (2021), pp. 26, 27

<sup>6</sup> USCIRF (2021), p. 16

<sup>7</sup> European Commission (19 October 2021). Turkey 2021 Report: <https://www.avrupa.info.tr/en/regular-reports-turkey-744>, p. 32



- There are reports that sexual violence is occurring more and more as a weapon against religious minorities; the abduction and sexual enslavement of girls and women does not only constitute egregious human rights abuses, but also has a huge impact on the minority communities they come from; a worrying example is Pakistan, where the abduction of girls and forced marriages can happen in a culture of relative impunity<sup>8</sup>;
- From a legal perspective, apostasy laws and blasphemy laws, as well as laws restricting freedom of expression and assembly remain a big problem; although 84 countries still had blasphemy laws as of 2020, 81% of cases of state enforcement of these laws comes from only ten countries, especially in the Asia-Pacific and Middle East regions<sup>9</sup>;
- Apart from violent and criminal forms of persecution, there are also more subtle, but not less concerning, ways that religious minorities are persecuted and discriminated against. This often has to do with social pressure, and access to social institutions or the labour market. For example, in Algeria, men who convert to Christianity run the risk of facing discrimination by their employer, and sometimes even dismissal<sup>10</sup>.

## 2.2 COUNTRY-SPECIFIC EVALUATION

Above is a rather general description of the most concerning developments. Below, we will list ten countries that the CSOs that contributed to this report identified as most concerning given the strongly deteriorating situation of freedom of religion or belief (starting with the countries mentioned most frequently). The abovementioned developments also play a role in most of these countries. Please note that we selected these countries based on the development of declining freedom of religion or belief, and not on the level of this freedom as such. That explains why a number of notorious human rights violators in this regard

(such as North-Korea) may not appear in the list. Apart from a qualitative description of the situation concerning religious freedom, we also mention the score for each country on the World Bank's index for Freedom of Religion between 2015 and 2019, as this is the most recent period on which data are available. The index is part of the broader index for the Global State of Democracy and combines a number of different indicators based on expert surveys. It evaluates the freedom of religion with a score between 0 and 1<sup>11</sup>. Besides, for each country we give a very brief overview of what the main religious groups are, based on estimations by the United States Commission for International Religious Freedom (USCIRF, 2021; please note that the 'other category' is only used to indicate multiple very small religious minorities).

### 2.2.1 INDIA

In the index for Freedom of Religion by the World Bank, the score of India dropped with almost 50% from 0.57 to 0.31 between 2015 and 2019<sup>12</sup>. India is perhaps the strongest example of a country where ethno-religious nationalism leads to social division and persecution of minorities. In the index of the Pew Research Center for social hostilities, India has the highest score of all countries being evaluated, with 9.1/10<sup>13</sup>. Although the constitution of India establishes the nation as a secular state, the government actively promotes Hindu nationalist policies, as a growing number of Indians found themselves drawn to the Hindu nationalist message that the culture and national identity of India are essentially Hindu. This results in ongoing violations of the freedom of other religious groups. Especially Muslims and Christians are a target<sup>14</sup>. On a state level, especially the new Citizenship

#### MAIN RELIGIOUS GROUPS:

Buddhism: 18%

Christian: 5%

Muslim: 2%

Source: USCIRF 2021

<sup>8</sup> Aid to the Church in Need: *Religious Freedom in the World, Report 2021*, p. 34

<sup>9</sup> USCIRF, *Violating Rights: Enforcing the World's Blasphemy Laws*: <https://www.uscifr.gov/publication/violating-rights-enforcing-worlds-blasphemy-laws>

<sup>10</sup> Open Doors, *Ranglijst 2021: Algerije*. <https://www.opendoors.nl/ranglijst/algerije/>

<sup>11</sup> World Bank, *GovData 360, Freedom of Religion*: [https://govdata360.worldbank.org/indicators/hd6a18526?indicator=41930&viz=line\\_chart&years=1975,2019](https://govdata360.worldbank.org/indicators/hd6a18526?indicator=41930&viz=line_chart&years=1975,2019)

<sup>12</sup> World Bank, *GovData360, Freedom of Religion, India*: [https://govdata360.worldbank.org/indicators/hd6a18526?country=IND&indicator=41930&viz=line\\_chart&years=2015,2019&indicators=944](https://govdata360.worldbank.org/indicators/hd6a18526?country=IND&indicator=41930&viz=line_chart&years=2015,2019&indicators=944)

<sup>13</sup> Pew Research Center (2021): *Globally, Social Hostilities Related to Religion Decline in 2019, While Government Restrictions Remain at Highest Levels*, <https://www.pewforum.org/2021/09/30/globally-social-hostilities-related-to-religion-decline-in-2019-while-government-restrictions-remain-at-highest-levels/>, p. 68 (hereafter: *Pew Research Center (2021)*)

<sup>14</sup> Aid to the Church in Need: *Religious Freedom in the World, Report 2021*, p. 23

Amendment Act (CAA) is a reason of major concern. Fears are that this law, in conjunction with the National Register of Citizens, will be used to deem minorities as illegal immigrants, possibly leading to statelessness, deportation or prolonged detention<sup>15</sup>. Especially worrying is the detention of human rights defenders, journalists and lawyers that spoke out against the CAA. International attention over the last years focused on the arrest and detention without bail of Stan Swamy, a then 83-year old Jesuit priest and human rights activist, on charges of allegedly assisting Maoist groups and playing a role in the violent incidents at Bhima Koregaon<sup>16</sup>. Stan Swamy died in July 2021 on the age of 84<sup>17</sup>.

Besides these laws, there is also the Foreign Contribution Regulation Act (FCRA) which makes it harder for NGOs, including those advocating the freedom of religion or belief, to do their work following restrictions on foreign funding. The UN Commissioner for Human Rights, Michelle Bachelet, in October 2020 expressed her concern that the broad and vague wording of the law, prohibiting the receipt of foreign funds for activities that are prejudicial to the public interest, serves the goal of suppressing human rights advocacy. That this fear is not unjustified is demonstrated by the fact that a CSO like Amnesty International had to close its offices in India after being sanctioned for allegedly violating the FCRA<sup>18</sup>. There is also concern about the anti-conversion laws in the country, which often do not require any evidence to support accusations of wrongdoing<sup>19</sup>. Apart from the legal perspective, there are growing social tensions. Violence from radical Hindu groups against Muslims and Christians has increased over the last years. Mob violence is increasing, partly as a result of the spread of

disinformation and intolerant content. The police and state authorities are seen as complicit in incidents of mob lynching. On top of that, actions and particularly inaction from the government lead to a culture of impunity for such violations<sup>20</sup>.

### 2.2.2 CHINA

In China, the government is becoming more and more authoritarian in all its policies, forcing a complete sinicization ('Chinafication') of society, in which religion is seen as destabilizing the system<sup>21</sup>.

In the index for Freedom of Religion by the World Bank, the score of China steadily declined from 0.3 to 0 between 2015 and 2019<sup>22</sup>. This extreme score underlines the gravity of the situation in China. In the index of the Pew Research Center for global religious restrictions, China has the highest score of 9.3 out of 10 when it comes to government restrictions. At the same time, the level of social hostilities in the country is relatively low<sup>23</sup>. The Chinese government combines a social credit system that scrutinizes and sanctions individual behaviour with mass surveillance and brutal crackdowns on religious and ethnic groups that are suspected of disloyalty<sup>24</sup>. Probably the most well-known issue is the arbitrary detention and abuse of the Uyghur Muslim minority, as well as Ethnic Kazakhs and Uyghur Christians, on the grounds of alleged religious extremism. The so-called 're-education camps' in which Uyghurs are held, are actually detention camps where large-scale human rights

#### MAIN RELIGIOUS

##### GROUPS:

Buddhism: 18%

Christian: 5%

Muslim: 2%

Source: USCIRF 2021

<sup>15</sup> USCIRF (2021), p. 22

<sup>16</sup> European External Action Service (EEAS, 2021), *EU Human Rights and Democracy Country Reports, India* (p. 203)

<sup>17</sup> Al Jazeera (5 July 2021), *Indian activist Stan Swamy, jailed under terror law, dies*: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/7/5/indian-activist-stan-swamy-jailed-under-terror-law-dies>

<sup>18</sup> OHCHR (20 October 2020), *Bachelet dismayed at restrictions on human rights NGOs and arrests of activists in India*: <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=26398>

<sup>19</sup> UK All Party Parliamentary Group for International Freedom of Religion or Belief (APPG): *Commentary on the current state of Freedom of Religion or Belief* (March 2021), p. 29 (hereafter: UK APPG (2021))

<sup>20</sup> USCIRF (2021), p. 22; UK APPG (2021), p. 28

<sup>21</sup> Open Doors (2021). *Ranglijst 2021, China*: <https://www.opendoors.nl/ranglijst/china/>

<sup>22</sup> World Bank, GovData360, *Freedom of Religion, China*: [https://govdata360.worldbank.org/indicators/hd6a18526?country=CHN&indicator=41930&viz=line\\_chart&years=2015,2019&indicators=944](https://govdata360.worldbank.org/indicators/hd6a18526?country=CHN&indicator=41930&viz=line_chart&years=2015,2019&indicators=944)

<sup>23</sup> Pew Research Center (2021), p. 68

<sup>24</sup> *Aid to the Church in Need: Religious Freedom in the World, Report 2021*, p. 22

violations are committed and where detainees are subject to forced labour programmes. Last year, 380 detention camps in the Uyghur region were identified. Reports from former detainees speak about torture, rape and forced sterilization as abuses that are taking place in custody. Multiple countries have publicly accused the Chinese government of genocide because of their treatment of Uyghurs<sup>25</sup>. The EU has imposed sanctions on Chinese officials that are involved in the organization of the detention of Uyghurs. Counter-sanctions by China on EU parliamentarians were reason for the EU to provisionally suspend the ratification process of the investment agreement between China and the EU, that was struck in December 2020<sup>26</sup>.

The Chinese government is not only cracking down on the Uyghur population, but is also continuing its control of other religious minorities such as Tibetan Buddhists, Catholic and Protestant Christians and Falun Gong practitioners. Especially concerning are reports about forced organ harvesting practices conducted on prisoners, including those who are detained on grounds of religion or belief<sup>27</sup>. Conclusions of the China Tribunal state that it is beyond reasonable doubt that the Chinese government is complicit in this horrible practice<sup>28</sup>. However, the issue has remained underexposed in the arena of international media and politics, whilst also the EU has not been deliberating a clear response to it.

Furthermore, the Chinese government is also increasing its scrutiny of religious communities and their leaders,

partly through technology, leading to further restrictions and even the closure of places of worship<sup>29</sup>. The high level of scrutiny leads many religious communities to remain unregistered with the state<sup>30</sup>. Members of communities that are not connected to the state-recognized religious institutions (such as the Three-Self Patriotic Movement) run the risk of harassment, detention and torture<sup>31</sup>.

### 2.2.3 NIGERIA

Nigeria, like India and Pakistan, belongs to a select group among the most populous countries that combine a high level of government restrictions with a high level of social hostilities<sup>32</sup>. In the index for Freedom of Religion by the World Bank, the score of the country dramatically dropped from 0.74 to 0.42 over the period 2015-2019<sup>33</sup>. In November 2021, the US State Department decided to remove Nigeria from its list of countries of particular concern when it comes to religious freedom. This decision was met with scepticism, as the situation in the country is still very serious<sup>34</sup>. The country is being ravaged by multiple humanitarian crises, resulting from violence and human rights atrocities by security forces and Jihadist groups in the North, and criminal gangs and crime syndicates in the South<sup>35</sup>. In December 2020, the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court declared that there was a reasonable basis to

#### MAIN RELIGIOUS GROUPS:

Muslim: 53.5%

Christian: 45.9

Other: 0.6%

Source: USCIRF 2021

<sup>25</sup> BBC (21 June 2021): *Who are the Uyghurs and why is China being accused of genocide?*, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-22278037>

<sup>26</sup> Politico (4 May 2021), *EU trade chief says efforts to ratify China deal 'suspended'*: <https://www.politico.eu/article/eu-trade-chief-says-efforts-to-ratify-china-deal-suspended/>; Politico (18 May 2020), *European Parliament to vote on freezing China deal*: <https://www.politico.eu/article/european-parliament-to-vote-on-freezing-china-deal-trade-sanctions/>

<sup>27</sup> OHCHR (14 June 2021): *China: UN human rights experts alarmed by 'organ harvesting' allegations*, <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=27167&LangID=E>

<sup>28</sup> Nederlands Dagblad (21 June 2021): *Bredere aandacht voor orgaanroof bij gevangenen in China*, <https://www.nd.nl/nieuws/buitenland/1046752/bredere-aandacht-voor-orgaanroof-bij-gevangenen-in-china>

<sup>29</sup> Open Doors (2021). *Ranglijst 2021, China*: <https://www.opendoors.nl/ranglijst/china/>

<sup>30</sup> UK APPG (2021), p. 24

<sup>31</sup> USCIRF (2021), p. 17

<sup>32</sup> Pew Research Center (2021), p. 42

<sup>33</sup> World Bank, *GovData360, Freedom of Religion, Nigeria*: [https://govdata360.worldbank.org/indicators/hd6a18526?country=NGA&indicator=41930&viz=line\\_chart&years=2015,2019&indicators=944](https://govdata360.worldbank.org/indicators/hd6a18526?country=NGA&indicator=41930&viz=line_chart&years=2015,2019&indicators=944)

<sup>34</sup> Reuters (18 November 2021), *U.S. removes Nigeria from religious freedom list ahead of Blinken visit*: <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/us-removes-nigeria-religious-freedom-list-ahead-blinken-visit-2021-11-18/>

<sup>35</sup> EEAS (2021), *EU Human Rights and Democracy Country Reports, Nigeria*, p. 138

believe that war crimes and crimes against humanity had been committed in Nigeria. The decision to open a formal investigation is still pending<sup>36</sup>.

The largest concern regarding the freedom of religion or belief in Nigeria is the violence of militant Islamist groups towards Christians. According to USCIRF, violent Islamist groups in northern Nigeria are some of the deadliest jihadist groups in the world<sup>37</sup>. Christians are probably more at risk of a violent attack in Nigeria than in any other country in the world<sup>38</sup>. Militant organisations such as Boko Haram and ISWAP are feared for abducting and executing Christians that refuse to (re)turn to Islam. A recent example is the attack on the Nigerian village of Pemi, for which ISIS claimed responsibility stating they had killed many Christians<sup>39</sup>. Only in the first half of 2021, an estimated 3462 Christians have been killed by Islamic jihadists<sup>40</sup>. Since December 2020, more than 600 people have been abducted, often children being kidnapped at schools. The incentive for groups like Boko Haram to do this, is their opposition to what they consider Western-style education<sup>41</sup>.

Due to the Islamification of the country since the rule of president Buhari in 2015, and the failure of the Nigerian government to effectively investigate and fight the Jihadist groups, the latter operate in a climate of impunity. Military operations by the government against Boko Haram and ISWAP have so far not been very successful, and state authorities deny that jihadi motivations are a central driver

of the kidnappings<sup>42</sup>. Besides the Islamist extremism, there is also persecution by both state and non-state actors through discrimination, arbitrary detention and strict enforcement of blasphemy laws through capital sentences<sup>43</sup>. As a result of this discriminatory climate, Christians are often subject to social exclusion, even within families<sup>44</sup>.

#### 2.2.4 IRAN

The score of Iran in the index for Freedom of Religion by the World Bank was divided by half in the period 2015-2019, dropping from 0.41 to a concerning 0.21 in that last year<sup>45</sup>. In Iran, the main responsibility for persecution mainly lies with the government<sup>46</sup>. The

Islamic Republic of Iran is a theocratic, authoritarian state in which 95% of the population are Shi'a Muslim. All laws and regulations must be based on Islamic criteria and the Sharia is strictly applied. This results in religious minorities, especially Christians, Baha'i and non-Shi'a Muslim minorities, to be persecuted by the government<sup>47</sup>. Christians in Iran are subject to assault and unjustified prison sentences. Persecution of this group escalated over the last years. There is the death sentence for proselytizing and attempting to convert Muslims. Muslims themselves are prohibited to change or renounce their religious beliefs<sup>48</sup>. Members of the Sufi Muslim group are considered

#### MAIN RELIGIOUS GROUPS:

Shi'a Muslim: ±95%

Sunni Muslim: ±5%

Other: 0.3%

Source: USCIRF 2021

<sup>36</sup> International Criminal Court: <https://www.icc-cpi.int/nigeria>

<sup>37</sup> USCIRF (February 2021). Factsheet Northern Nigeria: <https://www.uscifr.gov/publication/factsheet-violent-islamist-groups-northern-nigeria>

<sup>38</sup> UK APPG (2021), p. 43

<sup>39</sup> AP News (22 January 2022). Witnesses: Extremists abduct 17 girls in northeast Nigeria: <https://apnews.com/article/boko-haram-nigeria-government-islamic-state-group-nigeria-west-africa-118664491e8b2384c84cd969630ab248>

<sup>40</sup> Zorzi, K. (20 August 2021). We cannot ignore Nigeria's human rights abuses. [https://www.realclearreligion.org/articles/2021/08/20/we\\_cannot\\_ignore\\_nigerias\\_human\\_rights\\_abuses\\_790790.html](https://www.realclearreligion.org/articles/2021/08/20/we_cannot_ignore_nigerias_human_rights_abuses_790790.html)

<sup>41</sup> Aid to the Church in Need: Religious Freedom in the World, Report 2021, p. 16

<sup>42</sup> Open Doors (2021). Ranglijst 2021, Nigeria: <https://www.opendoors.nl/ranglijst/nigeria/>; USCIRF (2021), p. 31

<sup>43</sup> USCIRF (2021), p. 30

<sup>44</sup> Open Doors (2021). Ranglijst 2021, Nigeria: <https://www.opendoors.nl/ranglijst/nigeria/>

<sup>45</sup> World Bank, GovData360, Freedom of Religion, Iran: [https://govdata360.worldbank.org/indicators/hd6a18526?country=IRN&indicator=41930&viz=line\\_chart&years=2015,2019&indicators=944](https://govdata360.worldbank.org/indicators/hd6a18526?country=IRN&indicator=41930&viz=line_chart&years=2015,2019&indicators=944)

<sup>46</sup> Open Doors (2021). Ranglijst 2021, Iran: <https://www.opendoors.nl/ranglijst/iran/>

<sup>47</sup> UK APPG (2021), p. 30; USCIRF (2021), pp. 26, 27

<sup>48</sup> UK APPG (2021), p. 30; USCIRF (2021), p. 26

to be heretics and the government has been responding to Sufism with repression including arrest, intimidation, destruction of places of worship and violence<sup>49</sup>.

The longstanding policy in Iran to deny the Baha'i community access to education still continues<sup>50</sup>. Policies discriminating and persecuting Baha'i are rooted in the perception that Baha'i worship and religious practice constitute heresy and are a threat to national security or the holy regime of the Islamic Republic of Iran<sup>51</sup>. Persecution of Baha'i takes place through government policies that control the community in many aspects of life. Besides, the community faces economic strangulation, as the confiscation of properties is another tactic of the authorities to suppress the Baha'i. The fact that the state is sponsoring campaigns of hate speech and propaganda against the community has a demonizing effect that contributes to a climate of hate and disinformation.

Overall, the situation in Iran has deteriorated in recent years, with an escalation of persecution through high government surveillance, arrests, imprisonment, torture and harassment against religious minority groups<sup>52</sup>. Especially concerning in this regard is the continued use of the death penalty, which also applies to juvenile offenders, protestors, dissidents and LGBTI people. Iran has carried out executions at a very high rate over the last years<sup>53</sup>. Furthermore, the Iranian government is actively promoting anti-Semitism. When several submissions to a state-sponsored cartoon contest on Covid-19 asserted that the pandemic was a Jewish conspiracy, the Health ministry, that backed the contest, did not take any action to reject these assertions. Moreover, Iran recently organized its third Holocaust denial cartoon contest and state media and political leaders are advancing false ideas about the Jewish community worldwide<sup>54</sup>.

<sup>49</sup>. *Human Rights Without Frontiers (2020). In Prison for Their Faith, pp. 141, 142.*

<sup>50</sup>. *USCIRF (2021), p. 26*

<sup>51</sup>. *Human Rights Without Frontiers (2020). In Prison for Their Faith, p. 14*

<sup>52</sup>. *USCIRF (2021), p. 26*

<sup>53</sup>. *EEAS (2021), EU Human Rights and Democracy Country Reports, Iran (p. 199); USCIRF (2021), p. 26*

<sup>54</sup>. *USCIRF (2021), p. 27*

<sup>55</sup>. *Pew Research Center (2021), p. 42*

<sup>56</sup>. *World Bank, GovData360, Freedom of Religion, Pakistan: [https://govdata360.worldbank.org/indicators/hd6a18526?country=PAK&indicator=41930&viz=line\\_chart&years=2015,2019&indicators=944](https://govdata360.worldbank.org/indicators/hd6a18526?country=PAK&indicator=41930&viz=line_chart&years=2015,2019&indicators=944)*

<sup>57</sup>. *USCIRF (2021), pp. 36, 37*

<sup>58</sup>. *Idem*

## 2.2.5 PAKISTAN

As mentioned before, Pakistan is one of the other countries that combines high levels of government restrictions with high levels of social hostilities<sup>55</sup>. In the index for Freedom of Religion by the World Bank, the country's score declined from 0.46 to 0.28 between 2015 and 2019<sup>56</sup>. Apart from severe legal restrictions including blasphemy and apostasy laws, there is a climate of extreme social hostility and mob violence against religious minority groups such as Christians and Ahmadi. Pakistan is an Islamic Republic, in which Sunni Muslims constitute a large majority of the population. The conditions for freedom of religion or belief for other religious groups have been deteriorating in the last years. There is a systematic enforcement of blasphemy laws and anti-Ahmadi laws<sup>57</sup>.

In Pakistan, it is possible to be sentenced to death on blasphemy charges although a real execution has never taken place so far<sup>58</sup>. However, there are numerous cases where this verdict was indeed passed, including the cases of Asia Bibi and Shagufta Kausar & Shafqat Emmanuel. Although these individuals were, also following international pressure, eventually acquitted after many years of detention, the blasphemy laws in Pakistan still enjoy a lot of support and are systematically enforced. A further complication is that these laws are often used with ulterior motives, such as settling personal vendetta's or seeking financial gain, which leads to false accusations. The current blasphemy laws are vaguely formulated and do not require a high standard of evidence. On top of that, the police can arrest

### MAIN RELIGIOUS GROUPS:

Sunni Muslim: 85%

Shi'a Muslim: 10%

Christian: 1.6%

Hindu: 1.6%

Ahmadi: 0.22%

Source: USCIRF 2021

and investigate alleged offenders without a warrant or permission from a magistrate. These circumstances make that persons can be convicted to very severe sentences based on false and unsupported accusations<sup>59</sup>.

The blasphemy laws are still widely supported in Pakistan. There are examples of how government officials who defended those charged with blasphemy, or who spoke out against the blasphemy laws, were assassinated and the assassinator became a hero of the people<sup>60</sup>. Anyone who calls for the reform of the blasphemy laws is threatened by radicals and labelled as a traitor who deserves death<sup>61</sup>. This shows that it is not only the existence of the laws themselves, but also a culture of severe social hostilities that feed the human rights abuses in Pakistan. Those who support or defend persons charged with blasphemy are often not safe<sup>62</sup> and also judges are under pressure from society. Even in absence of an official verdict, the accused can become targets of extrajudicial violence and killings<sup>63</sup>.

The social hostilities are also fuelled by growing hate speech targeting religious minorities. For example, Shi'a Muslims were blamed by radical Sunnis for bringing the coronavirus to Pakistan<sup>64</sup>. Radical groups are often very influential and have the power to mobilize hundreds of thousands of people, predominantly youngsters aged under 25<sup>65</sup>. Such developments have contributed to a sharp rise in targeted killings, blasphemy cases, forced conversions and hate speech<sup>66</sup>.

Also Ahmadis face severe persecution. Although they consider themselves to be Muslim, they are officially prohibited from identifying as such. They have been denied identity cards, and are forced to sign statements that go against their belief<sup>67</sup>. Basically, Ahmadis have to swear that they are non-Muslim in order to obtain basic civil rights. Besides official persecution through these legal obligations, Ahmadis are also under strong social pressure. They continue to face violence and discrimination. The Pakistani Minister for religious affairs and interfaith harmony stated that whoever sympathises with Ahmadis could never be loyal to Pakistan. Also the State Minister for Parliamentary Affairs published a tweet inciting violence against Ahmadis<sup>68</sup>.

Forced marriages and forced conversions are another serious problem in Pakistan. Often, Christian and Hindu underage girls are kidnapped and forced to marry a Muslim man, also leading to forced conversion to the Islam<sup>69</sup>. Authorities often do not take action and courts fail to protect and provide justice to victims. Victims are often forced to testify that the marriage or conversion was voluntarily<sup>70</sup>. Although marriage under 16 is banned, prosecution is very rare, which leads to a culture of impunity<sup>71</sup>. A glimmer of hope is that in November 2020, Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan ordered an investigation into the forced conversion of women and girls<sup>72</sup>.

<sup>59</sup> Amnesty International (2016): "As Good as Dead". *The Impact of Blasphemy Laws in Pakistan*, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/ASA3351362016ENGLISH.pdf>, pp. 11-13

<sup>60</sup> Amnesty International (2016), p. 9

<sup>61</sup> Open Doors (2021). *World Watch List 2021, Profile of Religious Freedom for Christians, Pakistan*: <https://www.opendoorsusa.org/christian-persecution/world-watch-list/pakistan/>, p. 4

<sup>62</sup> For example Saif Ul Malook, a Pakistani lawyer defending suspects of blasphemy such as Asia Bibi and Shagufta Kausar and Shafqat Emmanuel. Mr. Malook is facing real security risks because of his work. Also the Endangered Lawyers foundation provides accounts of lawyers being killed in Pakistan, for various reasons including standing up for human rights (<https://endangeredlawyers.org/>)

<sup>63</sup> Amnesty International (2016), p. 13

<sup>64</sup> USCIRF (2021), p. 37

<sup>65</sup> Open Doors (2021). *World Watch List 2021, Profile of Religious Freedom for Christians, Pakistan*, p. 4

<sup>66</sup> USCIRF (2021), p. 36

<sup>67</sup> Open Doors (2021). *World Watch List 2021, Profile of Religious Freedom for Christians, Pakistan*, p. 9

<sup>68</sup> UK APPG (2021), pp. 46, 47; USCIRF (2021), p. 37

<sup>69</sup> UK APPG (2021), p. 47

<sup>70</sup> USCIRF (2021), p. 36

<sup>71</sup> Open Doors (2021). *World Watch List 2021, Profile of Religious Freedom for Christians, Pakistan*, p. 8

<sup>72</sup> *Aid to the Church in Need: Religious Freedom in the World, Report 2021*, p. 34

## 2.2.6 ALGERIA

Algeria is another country in which the situation of freedom of religion or belief is deteriorating. In the index for Freedom of Religion by the World Bank, the country maintained a steady, but still concerning, score of 0.42 between 2015 and 2018, but suddenly dropped to 0.32 in the year after that<sup>73</sup>. Furthermore, the country scores very high on the government restrictions index of Pew Research Center<sup>74</sup>. The country saw the rise of the Hirak protest movement in 2019, standing up against corruption and demanding democratic reform and judicial independence. Although president Bouteflika resigned, also under the new government the repression of civil society and independent media has continued and even increased. Security restrictions introduced in the light of the Covid-19 pandemic have led to tightening control and affecting protest movement demonstrations. In general, restrictions to fundamental freedoms, also targeting independent media, have increased over the last years<sup>75</sup>.

The Algerian government is enforcing laws to restrict forms of worship that are non-Islamic. This leads to the closure of churches, and the persecution of Christians and minority Muslim communities, such as Ahmadis. The government enforces blasphemy laws, and considers conversion from Islam to another religion as blasphemy<sup>76</sup>. This does not only constitute persecution on a formal level, but also has social and economic repercussions as converts and religious minorities often face discrimination and exclusion in their families and occupation<sup>77</sup>. Ahmadis are persecuted through the refusal of the government

### MAIN RELIGIOUS GROUPS:

Sunni Muslim: 99%

Other: 1%

Source: USCIRF 2021

to register their community as an association, and hence prosecuting the community for unauthorised worshiping<sup>78</sup>. There are multiple recent cases of Ahmadis who were being detained and questioned, whilst their passports were taken away from them<sup>79</sup>.

Apart from the blasphemy laws and exclusion, also the closure of churches is an effect of the persecution of religious minorities in Algeria. This situation deteriorated during the pandemic, when restrictions on churches lasted longer than restrictions for mosques for example<sup>80</sup>. Other reasons why churches were closed is the alleged lack of registration, despite churches applying to register but not receiving any response from the government. On a legal level, there are some mixed developments. Following demands from civil protesters, the government adopted a new constitution after a constitutional referendum. On the one hand, the new constitution does include language that protects places of worship from political or ideological influences. On the other hand, it excludes language on protecting the freedom of conscience, thereby downgrading the previous constitution<sup>81</sup>. Furthermore, there are concerns about a new law (20-06) which is amending the Penal Code. The amendments lead to restrictions on the exercise of fundamental rights such as freedom of expression and association where they are considered to be fake news that is undermining the Algerian state<sup>82</sup>.

## 2.2.7 MYANMAR

In Myanmar there have been two extremely concerning developments. First, there is the extreme and persistent persecution of the predominantly Muslim Rohingya community, resulting in violence and an exodus of Rohingya's into neighbouring country Bangladesh, which has been going on since 2016<sup>83</sup>. Second, last year saw a coup by the

<sup>73</sup> World Bank, GovData360, Freedom or Religion, Algeria: [https://govdata360.worldbank.org/indicators/hd6a18526?country=DZA&indicator=41930&viz=line\\_chart&years=2015,2019&indicators=944](https://govdata360.worldbank.org/indicators/hd6a18526?country=DZA&indicator=41930&viz=line_chart&years=2015,2019&indicators=944)

<sup>74</sup> Pew Research Center (2021), p. 61

<sup>75</sup> EEAS (2021), EU Human Rights and Democracy Country Reports, Algeria (p. 56); European Parliament Resolution of 26 November 2020 (2020/2880(RSP): [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2020-0329\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2020-0329_EN.pdf)

<sup>76</sup> USCIRF (2021), p. 57

<sup>77</sup> Open Doors, Ranglijst 2021, Algerije: <https://www.opendoors.nl/ranglijst/algerije/>

<sup>78</sup> USCIRF (2021), p. 57

<sup>79</sup> Amnesty International, Algeria 2020: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/location/middle-east-and-north-africa/algeria/report-algeria/>

<sup>80</sup> USCIRF (2021), p. 57

<sup>81</sup> Idem

<sup>82</sup> European Parliament Resolution of 26 November 2020 (2020/2880(RSP): [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2020-0329\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2020-0329_EN.pdf)

<sup>83</sup> Aid to the Church in Need: Religious Freedom in the World, Report 2021, p. 23; UK APPG (2021), pp. 20, 21

Tatmadaw, the military junta in the country, that declared a state of emergency until August 2023<sup>84</sup>. Fears are that the rule of the military will make matters worse, as violations of the freedom of religion or belief and other human rights are being perpetrated against religious and ethnic minorities in Myanmar, and measures taken in light of the Covid-19 pandemic are used as a pretext to further crack down on civil society and journalists<sup>85</sup>. According to recent data from Pew Research Center, in 2019 Myanmar was one of few countries in which more than 10.000 cases of government force against religious groups were reported (this was before the military coup)<sup>86</sup>. These developments exacerbate the ongoing humanitarian crisis in Myanmar, with estimations of 210 000 people being internally displaced in 2021 alone, whilst 3 million people are in need of humanitarian aid and half the population living below the poverty line<sup>87</sup>.

Furthermore, the score of the country in the index for Freedom of Religion by the World Bank declined from 0.49 to 0.30 between 2015 and 2019, with a very sharp drop in the last year<sup>88</sup>. Since the coup by the Tatmadaw, churches have been shelled and raided, whilst pastors and priests were being arrested. Military troops have set up their camps in church compounds, thereby undermining the role of churches as sanctuaries and shelter for people in need<sup>89</sup>. The government of Myanmar has utilized an existing citizenship law to bar Rohingya's from citizenship. Many Rohingya's have been killed or put in internment camps by government forces. There are reports of Rohingya children being used as a human shield by the military. That same military grabbed the power in the country du-

ring the last year, and it is fuelling a movement of Burmese Buddhist nationalism, that leads to violence and discrimination towards religious minorities, especially Muslims and to a lesser extent Christians<sup>90</sup>.

Besides the outright violence against Rohingya's, religious minorities are often struck by clashes between military and ethnic groups. Further restrictions occur in the Religious Conversion Law which requires approval from a Registration Board to change religion. The international community is considering whether the actions of the state authorities and the military in Myanmar against the Rohingya's meet the legal definition of genocide or crimes against humanity. The International Court of Justice in The Hague is also investigating the matter<sup>91</sup>.

### 2.2.8 TURKEY

Turkey is seeing the rise of increasing religious nationalism, which is also propagated by the government<sup>92</sup>. Religious freedom is therefore declining, with the country's score in the index for Freedom of Religion by the World Bank steadily declining from 0.52 to 0.26 over the period 2015-2019<sup>93</sup>. Under president Erdoğan, the laicism introduced by the former leader Atatürk is replaced by a desire to position Turkey as a Sunni Islamic power<sup>94</sup>. The work and influence of the Religious Affairs Presidency (Diyamet) is increasing, whilst its president is publicly targeting atheists<sup>95</sup>. The Islamification of the country leads to governmental hostility towards reli-

#### MAIN RELIGIOUS GROUPS:

Sunni Muslim: 77.5%

Alevi: 12-30%

Other: 0.2%

Source: USCIRF 2021

<sup>84</sup> European Parliament Resolution of 7 October 2021 (2021/2905(RSP)): [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2021-0417\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2021-0417_EN.pdf)

<sup>85</sup> UK APPG (2021), p. 21; European Parliament Resolution of 7 October 2021 (2021/2905(RSP))

<sup>86</sup> Pew Research Center (2021), p. 14

<sup>87</sup> European Parliament Resolution of 7 October 2021 (2021/2905(RSP))

<sup>88</sup> World Bank, GovData360, Freedom of Religion, Myanmar: [https://govdata360.worldbank.org/indicators/hd6a18526?country=MMR&indicator=41930&viz=line\\_chart&years=2015,2019&indicators=944](https://govdata360.worldbank.org/indicators/hd6a18526?country=MMR&indicator=41930&viz=line_chart&years=2015,2019&indicators=944)

<sup>89</sup> European Parliament Resolution of 7 October 2021 (2021/2905(RSP))

<sup>90</sup> USCIRF (2021), p. 14; UK APPG (2021), p. 20

<sup>91</sup> USCIRF (2021), p. 14; UK APPG (2021), pp. 20, 21

<sup>92</sup> Open Doors (2021). Ranglijst 2021, Turkije: <https://www.opendoors.nl/ranglijst/turkije/>

<sup>93</sup> World Bank, GovData360, Freedom of Religion, Turkey: [https://govdata360.worldbank.org/indicators/hd6a18526?country=TUR&indicator=41930&viz=line\\_chart&years=2015,2019&indicators=944](https://govdata360.worldbank.org/indicators/hd6a18526?country=TUR&indicator=41930&viz=line_chart&years=2015,2019&indicators=944)

<sup>94</sup> Aid to the Church in Need: Religious Freedom in the World, Report 2021, p. 31

<sup>95</sup> European Commission (19 October 2021). Turkey 2021 Report: <https://www.avrupa.info.tr/en/regular-reports-turkey-744>, p. 32



religious minorities, such as Christians and Jews. This hostility comes in the form of lacking protection and government support for minority religious sites. The famous Hagia Sophia in Istanbul was even converted from an Orthodox Christian church into a mosque. Furthermore, the government is implementing a ban on foreign religious workers, such as Christian evangelists<sup>96</sup>, which is also leading to expulsion. Besides, there is discrimination and social exclusion of Christians, including on the labour market and in the education system<sup>97</sup>. According to the European Commission, school textbooks need to be revised in order to get rid of discriminatory elements against all religions and faith groups<sup>98</sup>.

The Turkish government has become especially repressive since the attempted coup in 2016, leading to the detention of numerous people who are perceived as political opponents<sup>99</sup>. The fight against terrorism also leads to abuses. The Aramaic priest Aho Sefer Bileçen in 2021 was convicted to a prison sentence of over 2 years, for unknowingly giving food to passers-by at his monastery, who later turned out to be fighters for the PKK. Although this act is framed as helping a terrorist organisation, underlying motives of the government to banish the Aramaic community also play a role<sup>100</sup>. There is a broader trend of detaining certain groups including journalists, academics and human rights defenders, on overly broad definitions of terrorism and terrorist activities<sup>101</sup>.

Furthermore, government rhetoric encourages hate crimes against religious minorities and contributes to increasing hate speech in the media. In general, the protection of human rights in Turkey has been deteriorating and the country is lagging with the enforcement of numerous jud-

gments by the European Court on Human Rights on conscientious objection<sup>102</sup>. Also recommendations by the Venice Commission on the legal status of non-Muslim religious communities have yet to be implemented<sup>103</sup>. Furthermore, the Uyghur community in Turkey is concerned about developments in the direction of a bilateral extradition treaty between Turkey and China, which may possibly lead to the deportation of Uyghurs to China, where the government is severely persecuting and abusing this group<sup>104</sup>.

### 2.2.9 ERITREA

Although conditions regarding the freedom of religion or belief are slightly improving in Eritrea, the situation in the country still remains particularly concerning. The index for Freedom of Religion by the World Bank showed a minimal improvement between 2015 and 2018, but a sharp decline in the year after that. The country's already low score of 0.28 over that entire period declined to a very concerning 0.09<sup>105</sup>. Although the constitution of Eritrea promotes the freedom of religion or belief, this is not protected in practice, and there is a systematic persecution of religious groups other than the four official religions that are allowed in the country. Members of these groups, including Protestants, Salafi Muslims, Jehovah Witnesses and Baha'is, face harassment, arrest and violations of their civic and human rights. For example, Jehovah Witnesses who refuse military service for conscientious reasons, find themselves to be detained indefinitely without formal criminal charges, trial or sentencing<sup>106</sup>.

#### MAIN RELIGIOUS GROUPS:

Christian: 49%  
Muslim: 49%  
(predominantly Sunni)  
Source: USCIRF 2021

<sup>96</sup> ADF International. *Evangelist banned from entering Turkey*: [https://adfinternational.org/david\\_byle](https://adfinternational.org/david_byle)

<sup>97</sup> Open Doors (2021). *Ranglijst 2021, Turkije*: <https://www.opendoors.nl/ranglijst/turkije/>

<sup>98</sup> European Commission (19 October 2021). *Turkey 2021 Report*, p. 32

<sup>99</sup> USCIRF (2021), p. 83

<sup>100</sup> European Parliament, *Question for written answer E-001982/2021/rev.1* [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/E-9-2021-001982\\_EN.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/E-9-2021-001982_EN.html)

<sup>101</sup> EEAS (2021), *EU Human Rights and Democracy Country Reports, Turkey*, p. 17

<sup>102</sup> UK APPG (2021), p. 59; USCIRF (2021), p. 83

<sup>103</sup> European Commission (19 October 2021). *Turkey 2021 Report*, p. 32

<sup>104</sup> USCIRF (2021), p. 83

<sup>105</sup> World Bank, *GovData360, Freedom of Religion, Eritrea*: [https://govdata360.worldbank.org/indicators/hd6a18526?country=ERI&indicator=41930&viz=line\\_chart&years=2015,2019&indicators=944](https://govdata360.worldbank.org/indicators/hd6a18526?country=ERI&indicator=41930&viz=line_chart&years=2015,2019&indicators=944)

<sup>106</sup> Human Rights Without Frontiers (2020): *In prison for their faith*, pp. 65, 66

Another example is the interference of the government in the Eritrean Orthodox Church, where the Patriarch, Abune Antonios, was deposed and placed under house arrest in 2007 without access to decent medical care, whilst the government appointed a new Patriarch that would be more obedient to them. In 2017, the European Parliament adopted a resolution condemning these events and called for the release and rehabilitation of the Patriarch<sup>107</sup>.

At the same time, there are some positive developments, as some restrictions for Baha'i, Jews and Greek Orthodox believers were eased, making it possible for them to worship openly. Also, a significant number of prisoners of conscience who were being detained for their religious belief have been released from prison over the year 2020. At the same time the fate of many political prisoners and prisoners of conscience remains unknown<sup>108</sup>. There remains serious reason for concern, as the conflict between Eritrea and the Tigray People's Liberation Front is used as a pretext by the government to further limit the freedom of expression, including religious freedom. Many Eritreans have fled to neighbouring countries Ethiopia and Sudan, in order to escape the persecution and inhumane treatment of the Eritrean government<sup>109</sup>.

### 2.2.10 VIETNAM

In Vietnam, the government is actively persecuting religious minority groups, in particular those which are unregistered. In 2018, the government started implementing the country's first ever law on religion and belief, which obliges religious groups to register with

#### MAIN RELIGIOUS GROUPS:

Buddhist: 8%

Catholic: 7%

Other: ±5%

Source: USCIRF 2021

state authorities and also provide information about their activities. The state reserves the right to reject applications from religious groups, and ban their activities, on the ground of national interest, public order or national unity<sup>110</sup>. Christians from the Hmong and Montagnard minorities face de facto statelessness as they are denied household registrations and national identification documents. Also, Buddhists from the An Dan Dai Dao and the Hoa Hoa groups are being persecuted for refusing to declare loyalty to the Communist Party<sup>111</sup>.

Other issues include the appropriation and destruction of religious sites by government authorities, a practice that is particularly affecting Catholic communities. There are also reports of Falung Gong practitioners being detained or punished<sup>112</sup>. Apart from these forms of persecution, the government is also actively contributing to hate speech and defamation, by backing and working with the Red Flag Association that is promoting discrimination and intolerance against religious groups and individuals by means of online propaganda<sup>113</sup>. These developments contribute to the decline of religious freedom in Vietnam, which is quantified in the decreasing score of the country in the index for Freedom of Religion by the World Bank, which went from 0.45 to 0.27 in the period 2015-2019<sup>114</sup>.

There are also developments in a positive direction. State authorities are undertaking efforts to resettle stateless residents who belong to the Hmong Christian community. Also, there are efforts to streamline administrative procedures related to religion by introducing a one-stop-shop online platform. However, concerns remain as at the same time, the government is actively enforcing the Law on Belief and Religion, which is contravening international human rights standards<sup>115</sup>. Concerns about human rights also apply to the trade agreement between the EU and Vietnam that

<sup>107</sup> Human Rights Without Frontiers (2020): *In prison for their faith*, p. 90; European Parliament, 2017/2755(RSP) Resolution on Eritrea, notably the cases of Abune Antonios and Dawit Isaak. [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-8-2017-0309\\_EN.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-8-2017-0309_EN.html)

<sup>108</sup> EEAS (2021), *EU Human Rights and Democracy Country Reports, State of Eritrea*, p. 101

<sup>109</sup> USCIRF (2021), p. 21

<sup>110</sup> European Parliament Resolution of 21 January 2021 (2021/2507(RSP)): [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2021-0029\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2021-0029_EN.pdf)

<sup>111</sup> Human Rights Without Frontiers (2020): *In prison for their faith*, p. 29

<sup>112</sup> USCIRF (2021), p. 52

<sup>113</sup> USCIRF (2021), p. 53

<sup>114</sup> World Bank, GovData360, Vietnam: [https://govdata360.worldbank.org/indicators/hd6a18526?country=VNM&indicator=41930&viz=line\\_chart&years=2015,2019&indicators=944](https://govdata360.worldbank.org/indicators/hd6a18526?country=VNM&indicator=41930&viz=line_chart&years=2015,2019&indicators=944)

<sup>115</sup> USCIRF (2021), pp. 52, 53

was negotiated in recent years, as human rights defenders fear that the Vietnamese government is given an opportunity to forgo its commitments through the weak human rights provisions in the agreement.

Special concerns are the continued use of the death penalty, without any transparent data on capital punishment, and restrictive measures for civil society organisations through the revision of legal and administrative measures<sup>116</sup>. Vietnam has one of the highest numbers of political prisoners in South-East Asia, and many of these prisoners are being detained on grounds of vaguely worded national security clauses, which makes their detention in violation of international conventions on human rights<sup>117</sup>.

### 2.2.11 AFGHANISTAN

Although Afghanistan was initially not part of the above list of countries put together based on our inquiries, the Intergroup has noticed that events in the country since then, with the return to power of the Taliban, have led to large concerns with regard to

the freedom of religion or belief. We therefore considered it appropriate to also briefly discuss this country. Even before the shift in power that last year witnessed, religious minorities were already heavily restricted in the predominantly Muslim country. Islamic doctrines are incorporated in the country's laws, which leads to criminalization of blasphemy and apostasy with the possibility of the death penalty as a result. Apart from these official forms of persecution, religious minorities, including Hindus, Sikhs, Baha'i and Christians, often suffer from violent attacks by non-state actors, including ISIS and the Taliban<sup>118</sup>.

#### MAIN RELIGIOUS GROUPS:

Sunni Muslim: 84,7%

Shi'a Muslim: 15%

Other: 0.3%

Source: USCIRF 2021

The situation has become ever more concerning since the Taliban reclaimed power after the allied forces left the country in the summer of 2021. In January 2022, the renowned World Watch List by Open Doors put Afghanistan as first on the list of countries where persecution of Christians was most severe, thereby pushing North Korea from the top of the list for the first time in 20 years. According to Open Doors, Christians in Afghanistan have no choice but to live a double life in which their true faith remains a secret. The Taliban are severely monitoring all citizens and persecuting Christians. As apostasy is punished by capital sentence, converting away from the Islam is really dangerous and can lead to expulsion, being declared insane, or even death<sup>119</sup>. Shortly after the power shift in Afghanistan, the UN human rights chief Michelle Bachelet expressed her concern about the situation of religious minorities in Afghanistan, stating that the reputation of the Taliban regime justifies severe concerns and fears of violence and repression of these minorities<sup>120</sup>.

<sup>116</sup>. EEAS (2021), *EU Human Rights and Democracy Country Reports, Vietnam*, p. 230

<sup>117</sup>. European Parliament Resolution of 21 January 2021 (2021/2507(RSP))

<sup>118</sup>. USCIRF (2021), pp. 54, 55

<sup>119</sup>. Open Doors (January 2022). *Ranglijst 2022, Afghanistan*. <https://www.opendoors.nl/ranglijst/afghanistan/>

<sup>120</sup>. NBC News (29 August 2021). *Afghanistan's religious minorities live in fear of Taliban, brace for persecution*.

<https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/afghanistan-s-religious-minorities-live-fear-taliban-brace-persecution-n1277249>

## 2.3 STORIES OF HOPE

Amongst all the concerns listed in this chapter so far, we should not forget that there is also reason to rejoice and be grateful when conditions for freedom of religion or belief are improving. Although improvements are often very subtle and do not take away all concerns in specific countries, we must also acknowledge and cherish developments that contribute to a growing respect for religious freedom:

- **Egypt** is continuing to approve registration of churches and church buildings, although the rate of approvals has been declining over the last years. By now, approximately one third of all applications that have been submitted under the Church Building Law have been approved<sup>121</sup>; also the Cairo Court of Appeal in July 2020 ruled in support of the right for Christians to use their own Christian inheritance traditions instead of being required to use Islamic inheritance laws which put female heirs at a disadvantage. Furthermore, in 2020 President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi attended the Christmas Eve mass at the Cathedral of Christ's Nativity, wishing Coptic Christians a merry Christmas;
- **Sudan** is another country that shows progress in the field of freedom of religion or belief. The country's interim constitution adopted in 2019 includes provisions that protect religious freedom. Furthermore, the apostasy law that was used to arbitrarily arrest Christians and ex-Muslims was repealed in 2020 and a commission on religious freedom was established. However, at the time of writing of this report, the situation in Sudan is uncertain, as the military has reclaimed power from the transitional government and detained a number of its members<sup>122</sup>. It is not yet clear how this will affect the situation of religious freedom in the country;
- **Uzbekistan** also shows some improvement in the field of religious freedom. The government is engaging with officials from the United States to promote religious plurality, and the recently adopted Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations provides a simplified track for the registration of religious communities, whilst also establishing the professional status of religious education. Furthermore, measures against foreign Muslims have been loosened and the number of reported police raids against unregistered religious groups has dropped significantly. In general, religious freedom is slightly increasing. However, there remain concerns about the country's Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations, as the government keeps scrutinizing and harassing religious groups<sup>123</sup>. Uzbekistan in 2021 obtained the EU's GSP+ status, granting the country significant tariff preferences in exchange for commitment to international conventions regarding human rights<sup>124</sup>. This also brings new obligations for Uzbekistan with regard to the freedom of religion or belief, the compliance with which the EU should carefully monitor.

<sup>121</sup> USCIRF (2021), p. 66

<sup>122</sup> European Council (26 October 2021): Declaration by the High Representative on behalf of the EU on Sudan.

<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2021/10/26/declaration-by-the-high-representative-on-behalf-of-the-eu-on-sudan/>

<sup>123</sup> USCIRF (2021), p. 84; Kom over en Help, Oezbekistan: <https://www.komoverenhelp.nl/landen/oezbekistan/>

<sup>124</sup> European Commission, DG TRADE (9 April 2021): Uzbekistan joins EU's GSP+ arrangement. <https://trade.ec.europa.eu/doclib/press/index.cfm?id=2263>

**“ AMONGST ALL THE CONCERNS LISTED IN THIS CHAPTER SO FAR, WE SHOULD NOT FORGET THAT THERE IS ALSO REASON TO REJOICE AND BE GRATEFUL WHEN CONDITIONS FOR FREEDOM OF RELIGION OR BELIEF ARE IMPROVING.**

# 3. THE ROLE OF THE EU IN PROMOTING AND PROTECTING FREEDOM OF RELIGION OR BELIEF AROUND THE WORLD

The European Union contributes to the promotion and protection of freedom of religion or belief and around the world in different ways. Multiple institutions and organisations are involved in this, including the European Parliament Intergroup on FoRB & RT. This chapter not only gives an overview of the different channels that the EU employs to promote and protect the freedom of religion or belief, but moreover evaluates actions taken by the EU, also following findings from our inquiries. It thereby serves as input for the recommendations that will be presented in the next chapter.

## 3.1 THE INVOLVEMENT OF THE EUROPEAN COUNCIL AND THE COUNCIL OF THE EU IN PROMOTING AND PROTECTING THE FREEDOM OF RELIGION OR BELIEF

Identifying the direct involvement of the Council (including both European Council and the Council of the EU) with the issue of religious freedom is not always easy. There are some individual instances. For example, the Council explicitly condemned attacks on the freedom of religion or belief in its conclusions of 10/11 December 2020, in the light of a number of terrorist attacks that happened in Europe<sup>125</sup>. Another instance is the declaration that the Council issued through the EU High Representative (who is a full Member of the Council) on the International Day Commemorating Victims of Acts of Violence Based on Religion or Belief in 2020. In this declaration, the Council reiterated the European Union's commitment to the freedom of religion or belief, including the financial commitments through the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (over the past ten years, more than €22 million euro has been used to fund projects related to the freedom of religion or belief)<sup>126</sup>.

More often, the situation of freedom or belief is mentioned in a variety of different Council conclusions, that often concern broader human rights related subjects. Examples are the annual Council Conclusions on EU Priorities in UN Human Rights Fora, or the Conclusions related to the Annual report with priorities for the EU's foreign policy<sup>127</sup>. Besides, the EU through the Council is also promoting the freedom of religion or belief in multilateral fora. In December 2020, the General Assembly of the United Nations passed an EU-led resolution, calling to step up efforts to protect and promote religious freedom<sup>128</sup>.

Besides such statements, the Council also indirectly promotes the freedom of religion or belief through its sanction regimes. In December 2020, the Council adopted the new EU Global Human Rights Sanction Regime (based on the United States' Magnitsky Act). This new sanctions regime makes it possible to horizontally target individuals on the basis of human rights offenses. In the past, sanctions were only possible within a regime that targeted an entire country, so called geographical sanctions. The new regime applies thematic sanctions, which allows the EU

<sup>125</sup> European Council Conclusions 10 and 11 December 2020: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/47296/1011-12-20-euco-conclusions-en.pdf>

<sup>126</sup> Council of the European Union declaration 21 August 2020: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2020/08/21/international-day-commemorating-the-victims-of-acts-of-violence-based-on-religion-or-belief-declaration-by-the-high-representative-on-behalf-of-the-european-union/>

<sup>127</sup> Submission of the European Parliamentary Research Service to the Intergroup. See Annex 3 for specific references to Council documents including the subject of freedom of religion or belief.

<sup>128</sup> Council of the European Union (21 June 2021), 2020 EU Annual Report on Human Rights and Democracy in the World: <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-9838-2021-INIT/en/pdf>, p. 113; United Nations General Assembly (16 December 2020) Resolution 75/188 Freedom of Religion or Belief: <https://undocs.org/en/A/RES/75/188>

to respond to human rights violations more actively and consistently<sup>129</sup>. Sanctions are often applied in a context of broader human rights violations, which makes it hard to disentangle whether they also address violations of the freedom of religion or belief. However, there are some good examples. The EU in March 2021 imposed sanctions on Chinese officials involved in the repression of the Muslim Uyghur minority in China<sup>130</sup>. Also, sanctions on Myanmar for violations including the repression of the Rohingya community were prolonged in 2021<sup>131</sup>.

### 3.2 EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT'S ENGAGEMENT TO PROMOTING AND PROTECTING THE FREEDOM OF RELIGION OR BELIEF

An inquiry from the European Parliament Research Service on request of the European Parliament Intergroup on FoRB & RT into how the Parliament has engaged in issues related to freedom of religion or belief over the last four years since our previous report was published, yields the following results (please see Annex 2 for a full overview of all the different files):

- **Resolutions between 2017-2021: 29 European Parliament resolutions were adopted, out of which nine were own initiative reports.** Most of these resolutions address the human rights situation in a particular country. This is often much broader than freedom of religion or belief alone, but the issue of religious freedom is often explicitly addressed in these resolutions (for example resolution [2021/2647](#) on blasphemy laws in Pakistan and resolution [2019/2980](#) on violations of human rights including religious freedom in Burkina Faso);
- **Recommendations between 2017-2021: three European Parliament recommendations were adopted.** Two recommendations ([2017/2041](#) and [2018/2040](#)) related to the annual United Nations General Assembly. The other one ([2021/2023](#)) addressed relations between the EU and India. Freedom of religion or belief was explicitly advocated in all three recommendations;
- **Written and oral questions between 2017-2021: 24 written and 1 oral questions were asked by Members of the European Parliament.** Many of these questions are concerned with the situation of freedom of religion

or belief in a particular country. Subjects included persecution of Christians and Hindus, nationalisation of church property and blasphemy laws. There were also multiple questions asked addressing the appointment of the EU Special Envoy for the promotion of freedom of religion or belief outside the European Union;

Often the adoption of recommendations and resolutions goes accompanied by a plenary debate.

### 3.3 EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT URGENCY RESOLUTIONS

From the overview above, it becomes clear that resolutions account for the largest part of the Parliament's efforts to address issues related to freedom of religion or belief. The Parliament's resolutions, especially its urgency resolutions, are positively evaluated by stakeholders. Urgency resolutions are considered to be a very useful and effective tool that the Parliament has at its disposal. The main reason why urgency resolutions are deemed effective is that they put pressure on the governments that are addressed, through generating media publicity and becoming a tool for human rights campaigners. This pressure leads to results as authoritarian governments often seek acknowledgement and are therefore sensitive to the incentives created by urgencies.

A recent example of the impact of European Parliament resolutions is the acquittal of the previously mentioned Pakistani Christian couple Shagufta Kausar and Shafqat Emmanuel, who were detained for seven years on false allegations of blasphemy, following a Parliament's urgency resolution addressing this specific situation in April 2021. Although the direct effect of the resolution cannot be proven, sources around the couple, including their lawyer Saif Ul Malook, have confirmed that the adoption of the resolution by the European Parliament gave more urgency to the judicial proceedings in this case. Other examples include the introduction of sanctions restricting the import of timber from Myanmar, thereby targeting the Tatmadaw regime. Furthermore, the sanctions imposed against Chinese officials for their involvement in human rights violations against Uyghurs also followed Parliament resolutions calling for such sanctions.

<sup>129</sup> European Parliamentary Research Service (December 2020): EU Human Rights Sanctions. Towards a European Magnitsky Act: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2020/659402/EPRS\\_BRI\(2020\)659402\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2020/659402/EPRS_BRI(2020)659402_EN.pdf)

<sup>130</sup> Council Implementing Regulation 2021/478 (22 March 2021): <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=OJ:L:2021:0991:FULL&from=EN>

<sup>131</sup> EU Sanctions Map: <https://sanctionsmap.eu/#/main/details/8/?search=%7B%22value%22:%22%22,%22searchType%22:%7B%7D%7D>

However, the success of urgency resolutions is also relative. The same resolution addressing the situation Shaqfta Kausar and Shafqat Emmanuel also called on the European Commission to review whether Pakistan can maintain its GSP+ status as the blasphemy laws that are being enforced in the country violate the conditions for this specific trade agreement. Despite the resolution being adopted almost unanimously by the Parliament's plenary, the Commission unfortunately did not explicitly address this call by the Parliament up until the publication of this report.

### 3.4 THE EU GUIDELINES ON THE PROMOTION AND PROTECTION OF FREEDOM OF RELIGION OR BELIEF

The EU Guidelines on the promotion and protection of freedom of religion or belief<sup>132</sup> were adopted in 2013 and provide a framework for addressing freedom of religion or belief in the European Union's external policies. The general conclusion on the Guidelines is that on substance, they are still useful and valid, although eight years after their adoption a formal evaluation in line with paragraph 70 of the Guidelines would be appropriate. The obligation for such an evaluation is provided for in the Guidelines themselves, and must be executed by the Working Party on Human Rights from the Council (COHOM) after a period of three years after the adoption of the Guidelines. Although an evaluation was mentioned in a Council working document from June 2021, to this date no evaluation has been made public<sup>133</sup>.

This is a missed opportunity, as the proof of the pudding is in the eating and it is here that we find some challenges<sup>134</sup>. Findings from our inquiries indicate that there is a lack of effective action when it comes to the implementation of the guidelines by the EEAS and its external delegations. The main reason for the ineffectiveness is supposed to be the limited knowledge and awareness at the EU's exter-

nal delegations of the particular elements and meaning of religion or belief in the country of presence. There is a need for more understanding of how societies are shaped and influenced by religions and other forms of culture and belief. This is necessary, as the understanding of such issues is instrumental to better understanding what the promotion of the freedom of religion or belief entails for EU foreign policy and international cooperation<sup>135</sup>.

Although the training on religious freedom that is provided to EEAS officials is considered of good quality, there are also comments that it is too general. There is too little focus on particular religious aspects of specific countries, leading to insufficient awareness of the importance of religion in the lives of the citizens of these countries. In 2018, the European Parliament called for broader and more systematic training programmes as a means to increase the awareness and use of the Guidelines, including the involvement of academics, religious organisations and other representatives of civil society<sup>136</sup>. A relating point of concern is that EU foreign representations often pay too little attention to religious organisations when arranging meetings with civil society organisations, thereby misjudging the social function that religious organisations have. Also, many representations do not have a clear contact point for issues relating to freedom of religion or belief, which makes implementation of the Guidelines and the accountability for that more complicated.

### 3.5 TRADE RELATIONS INCLUDING THE GENERALISED SCHEME OF PREFERENCES

Most of the trade agreements that the EU concludes with third countries, contain clauses with regard to human rights, including the freedom of religion or belief. For example, third countries that enjoy tariff preferences under the generalised scheme of preferences (GSP), have to commit to a number of international conventions related

<sup>132</sup> [https://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms\\_data/docs/pressdata/EN/foraff/137585.pdf](https://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/EN/foraff/137585.pdf)

<sup>133</sup> European Parliament Report of 10 December 2018 (2018/2155(INI)): [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-8-2018-0449\\_EN.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-8-2018-0449_EN.html); Council Working Document 9337/21 of 1 June 2021: <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-9337-2021-INIT/en/pdf>

<sup>134</sup> Portaru, A. (25 June 2019). *The EU needs to show real commitment to religious freedom.*

<https://www.euractiv.com/section/freedom-of-thought/opinion/the-eu-needs-to-show-real-commitment-to-religious-freedom/>

<sup>135</sup> European Parliament Report of 10 December 2018 (2018/2155(INI))

<sup>136</sup> *Idem*



to human rights, labour rights, environmental protection and good governance. A number of these conventions, including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, include specific commitments as regards the protection of freedom of religion or belief<sup>137</sup>.

Trade agreements and arrangements like GSP hence give the EU quite powerful tools to promote the freedom of religion or belief in third countries. However, there is a lot of good will on paper, but effective action is too often lacking. Trade relations are not considered as being hugely effective when it comes to guaranteeing human rights, as efforts made by the EU in this regard are insufficient. For example, the trade agreement with Vietnam was adopted by the European Commission despite calls from civil society and Vietnamese activists that the agreement does not sufficiently protect human rights.

Another example is the GSP+ status of Pakistan. Despite clear and persistent violations of the commitments the country has under this status, the renewal of the status for this country is not explicitly coupled to clear and observable benchmarks. In this regard, EU institutions also contradict themselves. Whilst the former EU Special Envoy for the promotion and protection of freedom of religion or belief outside the European Union, Ján Figel', stated that renewal of the status would depend on the acquittal of Asia Bibi, who was detained and sentenced on blasphemy charges, the European Commission went ahead and renewed the status regardless. In general, the EU very rarely withdraws trading privileges on the basis of human rights concerns. The only country in which this is currently happening is Cambodia, that lost parts of its duty-free

access to EU markets following human rights abuses such as restrictions on labour rights and land grabbing<sup>138</sup>. In November 2021, also the United States announced that they would assess the eligibility of Cambodia under their GSP programme following ongoing human rights abuses<sup>139</sup>.

Conditionality in trade relations does often not yield effective results because the parameters for evaluation are too loose. Besides, the scope of evaluation is often limited to labour rights only, without properly assessing the broader spectrum of human rights commitments that must be upheld. Nevertheless, trade relations can be a very powerful instrument in the protection of human rights and have a lot of potential. However, more needs to be done to unleash this potential.

### 3.6 THE EU SPECIAL ENVOY ON THE PROMOTION AND PROTECTION OF FREEDOM OF RELIGION OR BELIEF OUTSIDE THE EUROPEAN UNION

The post of Special Envoy for the promotion and protection of freedom of religion or belief outside the European Union (hereafter: Special Envoy) was created in 2016 by the Juncker Commission, following a resolution adopted by the European Parliament<sup>140</sup>. The role of Special Envoy was fulfilled by Ján Figel' between May 2016 and December 2019<sup>141</sup>. After the end of this mandate, the Von der Leyen Commission took almost two years to appoint a new Special Envoy in May 2021. However, the newly appointed Special Envoy Christos Stylianides left his post in September 2021 only after a few months for a position in the Greek government<sup>142</sup>. Before addressing the position of the Special Envoy and the role of the Commission in the appointment of this official, we first look back at the work of the previous Special Envoy who was in office until 2019.

<sup>137</sup> Regulation (EU) No 978/2012 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 25 October 2012 applying a scheme of generalised tariff preferences and repealing Council Regulation (EC) No 732/2008, Annex VIII: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex%3A32012R0978>

<sup>138</sup> European Parliamentary Research Service (December 2020). EU Human Rights Sanctions. Towards a European Magnitsky Act: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/italy/resource/static/files/import/seminario\\_per\\_giornalisti\\_sakharov/eprs-briefing-659402-eu-human-rights-sanctions-final.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/italy/resource/static/files/import/seminario_per_giornalisti_sakharov/eprs-briefing-659402-eu-human-rights-sanctions-final.pdf), pp. 2, 3

<sup>139</sup> US Department of State (10 November 2021), Business Advisory and GSP Assessment for Cambodia: <https://www.state.gov/business-advisory-and-gsp-assessment-for-cambodia/>

<sup>140</sup> European Parliament resolution of 4 February 2016 (2016/2529(RSP)): [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-8-2016-0051\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-8-2016-0051_EN.pdf)

<sup>141</sup> Report of Special Envoy Ján Figel' (21 November 2019): [https://ec.europa.eu/international-partnerships/system/files/jan-figel-final-report-mandate-2019\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/international-partnerships/system/files/jan-figel-final-report-mandate-2019_en.pdf)

<sup>142</sup> Evangelical Focus (10 September 2021): EU position for the promotion of religious freedom vacant again, <https://evangelicalfocus.com/europe/13213/eu-position-for-the-promotion-of-religious-freedom-vacant-again>

Upon his farewell, Special Envoy Ján Figel' published a report looking back on his mandate<sup>143</sup>. During this mandate, which was renewed on a yearly basis, the Special Envoy was serving as a special adviser to the Commissioner for International Cooperation and Development. DG DEVCO facilitated the appointment of one full time policy advisor, and the Special Envoy was supported by the European Commission and the European External Action Service (EEAS). According to the report, the work of the Special Envoy has contributed to the goal of mainstreaming the promotion and protection of freedom of religion or belief in the work of the EEAS, through public statements, Human Rights Dialogues and discussions in the context of trade agreements<sup>144</sup>.

According to Special Envoy Ján Figel', the key take away from his years in service was that "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>145</sup>. The importance of the role of the EU and especially the Special Envoy in the field of religious freedom has been acknowledged by Pakistani victim of persecution Asia Bibi and Czech FoRB activist Petr Jasek, whose liberation from jail in Sudan was partly thanks to involvement of the Special Envoy. Another positive sign is the fact that since 2016, many Member States have created positions similar to the one of the EU Special Envoy<sup>146</sup>. Also non-European countries like the USA, Canada and the UK have a Special Envoy for religious freedom.

The appointment of a new Special Envoy has been a challenge for the Commission, as the post has been vacant for most of the mandate of the current European Commission. It took the Commission already two years to appoint a (second) Special Envoy in the first place, and the appointment of the third one has also taken too much time. The lack of interest in the issue of freedom of religion or belief that the present Commission displays sends the wrong message to the international community and civil socie-

ty. Especially since individual Member States are making more progress by appointing their own Special Envoys. What is concerning in this regard, is that there seems to be a tendency within the EU institutions of considering the right to freedom of religion or belief as an optional right, that could prejudice other fundamental rights. Instead, it must be recognized that the right to freedom of religion or belief is at crossroads with many other agendas as it is ultimately about good governance and equal citizenship<sup>147</sup>.

Besides the long delay in appointing somebody for the post of the Special Envoy, there are also concerns about the details of the mandate. Stakeholders do not know how they can get in touch and cooperate with the Special Envoy as even during the mandate of Mr. Stylianides, much was unclear about his plans and his office. The mandate and the resources of the Special Envoy are considered to be limited<sup>148</sup>. After all, the position of the Special Envoy has the potential to be a positive instrument for emphasizing the role of freedom of religion or belief in the human rights ecosystem, and for giving visibility to violations of these rights.

### 3.7 CONCLUSION

Evaluating the efforts of the EU to promote and protect the freedom of religion or belief around the world, the main takeaway is that the EU has potentially powerful instruments at its disposal, which yield the most effect if they are used in a concerted fashion. However, the use of these instruments could be and must be more effective, for example when it comes to enforcing the human rights clauses in trade agreements, or the appointment and support of the EU Special Envoy. The underlying philosophy must be one in which the right to freedom of religion and belief is acknowledged as contributing to peaceful and resilient societies, in which all human rights are respected. The next chapter will deal with proposals how the EU can further improve its efforts.

<sup>143</sup> Report of Special Envoy Ján Figel' (21 November 2019): [https://ec.europa.eu/international-partnerships/system/files/jan-figel-final-report-mandate-2019\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/international-partnerships/system/files/jan-figel-final-report-mandate-2019_en.pdf)

<sup>144</sup> Report of Special Envoy Ján Figel' (21 November 2019), p. 3

<sup>145</sup> Report of Special Envoy Ján Figel' (21 November 2019), p. 4

<sup>146</sup> Report of Special Envoy Ján Figel' (21 November 2019), pp. 1, 5

<sup>147</sup> Report of Special Envoy Ján Figel' (21 November 2019), p. 6

<sup>148</sup> Portaru, A. (25 June 2019)

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BE AND MUST BE MORE EFFECTIVE.**

# 4. RECOMMENDATIONS TO STRENGTHEN THE EUROPEAN UNION'S EFFORTS IN PROMOTING AND PROTECTING THE FREEDOM OF RELIGION OR BELIEF

The previous chapter analysed and evaluated the variety of efforts that the EU is undertaking to promote and protect the freedom of religion or belief around the world. It concluded that the different programs and institutions that the EU has at its disposal to pursue this objective have a lot of potential, but efforts could be enhanced to further and fully unlock this potential.

This chapter lists a number of recommendations to this end, also based on our consultations with civil society organisations. The recommendations are directed to the European Council, the European Commission (including the EEAS and the Special Envoy) and the European Parliament. Although the European Court of Justice also is involved in protecting the freedom of religion or belief, this predominantly concerns internal cases in the EU, whilst the mandate of the European Parliament Intergroup on FoRB & RT, and thus the scope of this report, considers the situation outside the EU.

A general notion that underlies all these recommendations is that advocacy of the freedom of religion or belief is strengthened by recognizing its relationship with other human rights and policies. Therefore, we must keep in mind that promoting religious freedom is an aspect of all foreign policy initiatives, including issues related to economic development, judicial independence, and electoral legitimacy and so on. As the previous Special Envoy noted in his final report, *the freedom of religion or belief is not more or less important than other human rights, but serves as a litmus test for all of them*<sup>149</sup>.

## 4.1 THE EUROPEAN COUNCIL AND THE COUNCIL OF THE EU

We encourage the Council to keep addressing violations of the freedom of religion or belief through its own initiatives, as well as in multilateral fora. If violations of this specific right are happening in a third country, the Council must explicitly address this, especially if it happens in a context of broader human rights violations. Selective and

unjustified restrictions of the right to freedom of religion or belief in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic call for more urgency. We also encourage the Council to use the new Global Human Rights Sanction Regime to swiftly and effectively target persons and entities that are known for committing violations of the freedom of religion or belief. Sanctions under this regime can best be coordinated with other countries using similar sanctions, in order to obtain a more effective use. Much of the work of the Council in this regard happens in cooperation with the European Commission and the EEAS, that will be addressed individually below.

## 4.2 THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION

Within the European Commission, the promotion and protection of the freedom of religion or belief outside the European Union lies mainly with the EU Special Envoy and the EEAS. Based on the evaluation presented before, we have the following recommendations.

### 4.2.1 THE EU SPECIAL ENVOY FOR THE PROMOTION OF FREEDOM OF RELIGION OR BELIEF OUTSIDE THE EUROPEAN UNION

One of the most pressing issues is the position of the Special Envoy, as this post has effectively been vacant during the entire mandate of the Von der Leyen Commission so far. Although a Special Envoy (the second one in this position) was appointed in May 2021, his very short time in office has not yielded any notable results. The Intergroup does not understand why appointments for this position have to take up so much time. It is vital to have a quick reappointment, in order to not do any damage to the work that

<sup>149</sup> Special Envoy Ján Figel' (21 November 2019), p. 4

previous Special Envoys have done in terms of diplomatic relationships. A quick re-appointment will not only solve the problem of vacancies, but will also reaffirm the commitment of the European Commission and the EU in general to the important issue of freedom of religion or belief.

With regard to the mandate and the activities of the Special Envoy, we propose the following recommendations:

- The Special Envoy must have an active and transparent multi-year mandate, which is supported by adequate resources including full-time staff and increased funding;
- The Special Envoy should act as a coordinator for the different channels that the EU is using to promote and protect the freedom of religion or belief, as concerted action has the potential to be more effective;
- The Special Envoy must undertake efforts to work together with the national Special Envoys from the Member States, in order to exchange information and coordinate actions, establishing a platform for coordination on freedom of religion or belief would be recommended; cooperation can help to counter inaction through lack of expertise or fear to engage<sup>150</sup>;
- Civil society organisations are keen to work together with the Special Envoy, this must be facilitated by open channels of communication between the Special Envoy and CSOs;
- The Special Envoy should have regular consultations with the relevant committees of the European Parliament (including the AFET and DROI committees) and with the European Parliament Intergroup on FoRB & RT and other Intergroups that have an interest in the issue; this consultation must serve to exchange information and mutually strengthen efforts undertaken by all parties involved.

#### **4.2.2 THE EUROPEAN EXTERNAL ACTION SERVICE (EEAS) AND EU REPRESENTATIONS IN THIRD COUNTRIES**

In the work of the EEAS and its external delegations, the acknowledgement that the freedom of religion or belief is strongly interconnected with human rights and citizenship in general must be a key checkpoint<sup>151</sup>. Awareness of the role and importance of religious issues in European external action must lead to an assertive approach in pro-

moting and protecting religious freedom. This could be enhanced in the following ways:

- The training that EEAS officials and EU diplomats receive on issues related to religion or belief is very much appreciated and must continue; however, the training should be more tailored to the country-specific situation in which the diplomats find themselves; this includes taking into account structural elements such as governance structures, the justice and legal system, and the nexus between state and religion; investing in literacy on the issue of religious freedom is necessary as the concept is too often misunderstood, misused or underused (this applies to many sectors and countries)<sup>152</sup>; when organizing the training, the EEAS should also consider inviting representatives from faith-based CSOs as well as the European Parliament Intergroup on FoRB & RT to share their knowledge and expertise on the issue and the political views on it;
- The EEAS and EU delegations should also include religious organisations in their dialogue with civil society; currently, these organisations often do not get as much attention as other civil society organisations, although they can play an important role in the different societies EU delegations are operating in; to this end, each EU external representation should appoint an official who serves as contact point for issues related to freedom of religion or belief;
- The EEAS can organize region-specific consultations with CSOs, for example ahead of bilateral summits with third countries; in this way, CSOs can come prepared and provide valuable information; more general, the dialogue between EU institutions and civil society on issues related to freedom of religion or belief would be served by a more regular character;
- The knowledge and awareness of the EU Guidelines on the promotion and protection of freedom of religion or belief must be enhanced in order to ensure a transparent transposition of the Guidelines;
- The time has come for a public review of the Guidelines, in order to assess if they still provide an adequate framework for current situations;
- Embassies of Member States are already working together outside the EU; further cooperation in countries

<sup>150</sup> Report of Special Envoy Jan Figel (21 November 2019), pp. 11, 12

<sup>151</sup> Report of Special Envoy Jan Figel (21 November 2019), p. 8

<sup>152</sup> Report of Special Envoy Jan Figel (21 November 2019), p. 9

of distress is encouraged as it offers a lot of potential; EU Delegations can play a coordinating role in this regard;

- Representatives of the EEAS, especially from relevant country-desks (for example concerning the countries listed in this report) should consult the European Parliament Intergroup on FoRB & RT on a regular basis to provide updates and exchange views.

#### **4.2.3 PROMOTING AND PROTECTING RELIGIOUS FREEDOM IN TRADE RELATIONS**

The evaluation in the previous chapter indicated that, when it comes to trade relations between the EU and third countries, the EU should do more in order to ensure human rights commitments are being upheld. In that regard, the following recommendations should be taken into account:

- Make more and coherent use of clauses in trade agreements that protect human rights, including the right to freedom of religion or belief; this means closer monitoring whether commitments are upheld, and adequate enforcement if this is not the case;
- In order for effective enforcement to be possible, the EU must more specifically communicate to a third country the outputs it desires, and above all how it will assess these outputs through the use of benchmarks and concrete conditionality tools; the revision of the GSP-regulation is a great opportunity to provide more clarity and transparency in this regard;
- There must be more coherence between resolutions of the Parliament concerning the human rights situation in third countries, and efforts undertaken by the Commission (especially DG TRADE) and the EEAS; regular communication between all actors involved on this agenda should contribute to more coherence of EU action;

### **4.3 THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT**

Also the European Parliament and its Members could, individually or in a concerted action, undertake efforts that promote the freedom of religion or belief worldwide. Some concrete proposals include:

- Urgency resolutions: urgency resolutions are an effective tool for bringing about change in third countries, as governments from time to time can be sensitive to a strong message by the European Parliament; MEPs and political groups in the Parliament are encouraged to continue addressing violations of the freedom of religion or belief in urgency resolutions;
- Visiting projects of faith based organisations: an important tool for creating more awareness of and commitment to the importance of religious freedoms, MEPs should invest more in seeing the output of religious organisations in third countries that they visit; on missions (e.g. country visits on behalf of committees, delegations or political groups), there must always be the opportunity to visit projects that are ran by religious or faith-based organisations; such visits can serve to demonstrate what role religion and its representatives play in that particular society;
- The European Parliament must advocate the establishment of a special day for the commemoration of victims of religiously motivated violence, on which the EU institutions and EU delegations worldwide pay tribute to those who fell victim to violations of the right to freedom of religion or belief.

**“ THE FREEDOM OF RELIGION  
OR BELIEF IS NOT MORE  
OR LESS IMPORTANT THAN OTHER  
HUMAN RIGHTS, BUT SERVES AS A  
LITMUS TEST FOR ALL OF THEM.**

**- JÁN FIGEL'**

# ANNEX 1 - QUESTIONNAIRE AND LIST OF RESPONDENTS

## QUESTIONNAIRE

The following list of questions was sent to a number of CSOs:

### Questionnaire for the annual report by the European Parliament Intergroup on Freedom of Religion or Belief and Religious Tolerance

1. *Can you identify 10 countries in which the situation with regard to the freedom of religion or belief has deteriorated over the last years? Please elaborate and explain;*
2. *Can you identify 10 countries in which the situation with regard to the freedom of religion or belief has improved over the last years? Please elaborate and explain;*
3. *With regard to the freedom of religion or belief worldwide: what do you consider the most pressing threats and biggest opportunities? How should the European institutions mitigate the threats and pursue the opportunities?*
4. *How do the European institutions perform when it comes to promoting and protecting freedom of religion or belief outside the EU?*
5. *How would you evaluate the implementation of the EU Guidelines on the promotion and protection of freedom of religion or belief (adopted in 2013)?*
6. *What is, in your evaluation, the effect of EU action by the following means?*
  - a. *The EU Special Envoy for the promotion and protection of freedom of religion or belief*
  - b. *European Parliament (urgency) resolutions*
  - c. *Trade relations with third countries (including the generalized scheme of preferences, GSP)*
  - d. *Diplomatic relations through the European Union External Action Service (EEAS) and the Member States' embassies*
7. *Which means or channels are most effective and why?*
8. *How could the efforts of the European institutions to promote and protect the freedom of religion or belief outside the EU be further improved?*
9. *How would you evaluate the role of the European Parliament (including the European Parliament Intergroup on Freedom of Religion or Belief and Religious Tolerance) in promoting and protecting the freedom of religion or belief outside the EU?*
10. *How should the European institutions best engage with NGOs and civil society in order to contribute to the promotion and protection of freedom of religion or belief outside the EU?*

*Open question: which message would you especially like to convey to the European Parliament Intergroup on Freedom of Religion or Belief and Religious Tolerance?*



## CONTRIBUTIONS BY CSOS

Of the CSOs that were approached, we have received a response to the questionnaire from the following organisations:

1. Open Doors
2. Aid to the Church in Need (ACN)
3. ADF International
4. Baha'i International
5. The Secretariat of the Commission of the Bishops' Conferences of the European Union (COMECE)
6. Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW)
7. Human Rights Without Frontiers (HRWF)
8. Jubilee Campaign

Although we have used the input by these organisations for this report, we have not directly attributed it in the report for reasons of confidentiality, unless the information was publicly available. Apart from the direct input from these organisations, we have also used numerous other reports published by CSOs and governmental organisations.

# ANNEX 2 - OVERVIEW OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT'S INITIATIVES RELATING TO THE FREEDOM OF RELIGION OR BELIEF 2017-2021

The European Parliament Research Service (EPRS) provided the European Parliament Intergroup on FoRB & RT with an overview of all the formal actions that the Parliament took between 2017 and 2021 that were somehow related to the freedom of religion or belief. These actions were discussed in Chapter 2 of this report. Below is the full list of different actions.

## EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT RESOLUTIONS

- European Parliament resolution of 7 October 2021 on **the human rights situation in Myanmar**, including the situation of religious and ethnic groups (2021/2905(RSP))
- European Parliament resolution of 19 May 2021 on the 2019-2020 Commission Reports on **Montenegro** (2019/2173(INI))
- European Parliament resolution of 29 April 2021 on **the blasphemy laws in Pakistan**, in particular the case of Shagufta Kausar and Shafqat Emmanuel (2021/2647(RSP))
- European Parliament resolution of 20 January 2021 on **human rights and democracy in the world and the European Union's policy on the matter** – annual report 2019 (2020/2208(INI))
- European Parliament resolution of 11 February 2021 on **the human rights situation in Kazakhstan** (2021/2544(RSP))
- European Parliament resolution of 11 February 2021 on **the humanitarian and political situation in Yemen** (2021/2539(RSP))
- European Parliament resolution of 17 December 2020 on **forced labour and the situation of the Uyghurs in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region** (2020/2913(RSP))
- European Parliament resolution of 15 January 2020 on **human rights and democracy in the world and the European Union's policy on the matter** – annual report 2018 (2019/2125(INI))
- European Parliament resolution of 16 January 2020 on **Nigeria, notably the recent terrorist attacks** (2020/2503(RSP))
- European Parliament resolution of 19 December 2019 on **the situation of the Uyghurs in China (China Cables)** (2019/2945(RSP))
- European Parliament resolution of 19 December 2019 on **violations of human rights including religious freedoms in Burkina Faso** (2019/2980(RSP))
- European Parliament resolution of 18 April 2019 on **China, notably the situation of religious and ethnic minorities** (2019/2690(RSP))
- European Parliament resolution of 27 March 2019 on **the post-Arab Spring: way forward for the MENA region** (2018/2160(INI))
- European Parliament recommendation of 26 March 2019 to the Council, the Commission and the Vice-President of the Commission / High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy on **the new comprehensive agreement between the EU and Uzbekistan** (2018/2236(INI))
- European Parliament resolution of 14 February 2019 on **women's rights defenders in Saudi Arabia** (2019/2564(RSP))
- European Parliament resolution of 15 January 2019 on **EU Guidelines and the mandate of the EU Special Envoy on the promotion of freedom of religion or belief outside the EU** (2018/2155(INI))
- European Parliament resolution of 15 November 2018 on **Vietnam, notably the situation of political prisoners** (2018/2925(RSP))

- [European Parliament resolution of 12 September 2018 on the state of EU-China relations \(2017/2274\(INI\)\)](#)
- [European Parliament resolution of 31 May 2018 on the situation of women's rights defenders in Saudi Arabia \(2018/2712\(RSP\)\)](#)
- [European Parliament resolution of 14 December 2017 on the situation of the Rohingya people \(2017/2973\(RSP\)\)](#)
- [European Parliament resolution of 13 December 2017 on the Annual Report on Human Rights and Democracy in the World 2016 and the European Union's policy on the matter \(2017/2122\(INI\)\)](#)
- [European Parliament resolution of 5 October 2017 on the situation in the Maldives \(2017/2870\(RSP\)\)](#)
- [European Parliament resolution of 3 October 2017 on addressing shrinking civil society space in developing countries \(2016/2324\(INI\)\)](#)
- [European Parliament resolution of 14 September 2017 on Myanmar, in particular the situation of Rohingyas \(2017/2838\(RSP\)\)](#)
- [European Parliament resolution of 15 June 2017 on the human rights situation in Indonesia \(2017/2724\(RSP\)\)](#)
- [European Parliament resolution of 15 June 2017 on Pakistan, notably the situation of human rights defenders and the death penalty \(2017/2723\(RSP\)\)](#)
- [European Parliament resolution of 16 March 2017 on EU priorities for the UN Human Rights Council sessions in 2017 \(2017/2598\(RSP\)\)](#)
- [European Parliament resolution of 16 March 2017 on Zimbabwe, the case of Pastor Evan Mawarire and other cases of restriction of freedom of expression \(2017/2608\(RSP\)\)](#)
- [European Parliament resolution of 19 January 2017 on Indonesia, notably the case of Hosea Yeimo and Ismael Alua and the Governor of Jakarta \(2017/2506\(RSP\)\)](#)

#### EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT RECOMMENDATIONS

- [European Parliament recommendation of 29 April 2021 to the Council, the Commission and the Vice-President of the Commission / High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy concerning EU-India relations \(2021/2023\(INI\)\)](#)
- [European Parliament recommendation of 5 July 2018 to the Council on the 73rd session of the United Nations General Assembly \(2018/2040\(INI\)\)](#)
- [European Parliament recommendation of 5 July 2017 to the Council concerning the 72nd session of the United Nations General Assembly \(2017/2041\(INI\)\)](#)

#### WRITTEN AND ORAL QUESTIONS INCLUDING THE ISSUE OF FREEDOM OF RELIGION AND BELIEF

- Written question on [Universal respect for freedom of religion](#), 31 May 2021
- Written question on [Detention of Orthodox priests in Montenegro and freedom of conscience and religion](#), 14 May 2020
- Written question on [The new GSP+-status of Uzbekistan and the safeguarding of human rights, including freedom of religion or belief](#), 19 April 2021
- Oral question on [Appointment of an EU Special Envoy for the promotion of freedom of religion or belief outside the EU](#), 2 March 2021
- Written question on [Appointment of an EU Special Envoy for the promotion of freedom of religion or belief outside the EU](#), 19 February 2021
- Written question on [Special Envoy for the promotion of freedom of religion or belief outside the EU](#), 7 December 2020
- Written question on [Reaction to Islamic persecution worldwide](#), 10 November 2020
- Written question on [Persecution of Christians in the Islamic Republic of Iran](#), 2 July 2020
- Written question on [Pakistan's persecution of Christians and Hindus](#), 30 June 2020
- Written question on [Freedom of religion or belief in China, especially regarding churches being closed down](#), 29 June 2020

- Written question on **Freedom of religion or belief**, 6 May 2020
- Written question on **Chinese legislation impacting the issue of succession of the Dalai Lama and Tibetan Buddhist leaders**, 6 May 2020
- Written question on **Religious freedom in India**, 10 April 2020
- Written question on **Nationalisation of church property in Montenegro**, 10 January 2020
- Written question on **Blasphemy laws**, 8 October 2018
- Written question on **Blasphemy laws in Pakistan**, 25 May 2018
- Written question on **Revised regulations on religious affairs in China**, 13 March 2018
- Written question on **Religious intolerance in Egypt: terrorist attacks on Coptic Christians**, 18 January 2018
- Written question on **Persecuted Christians: World Watch List 2018 report**, 10 January 2018
- Written question on **UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief**, 12 October 2017
- Written question on **Ban on the activities of Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia**, 24 July 2017
- Written question on **CJEU ruling on the headscarf**, 27 June 2017
- Written question on **Freedom of religion or belief: agenda for implementation**, 19 May 2017
- Written question on **VP/HR — Threats to the religious freedom of Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia**, 31 March 2017
- Written question on **Special Envoy for the promotion of freedom of religion or belief outside the European Union**, 9 February 2017

#### **DEBATES INCLUDING THE ISSUE OF FREEDOM OF RELIGION AND BELIEF**

- Debate on **Blasphemy laws in Pakistan**, in particular the case Shagufta Kausar and Shafqat Emmanuel, 29 April 2021
- Debate on **Implementation of the Common Foreign and Security Policy - annual report 2020 - Implementation of the Common Security and Defence Policy - annual report 2020 - Human Rights and Democracy in the World and the EU policy on the matter - annual report 2019**, 19 January 2021
- Debate on **Situation of the Uyghur in China (China-cables)**, 19 December 2019

# ANNEX 3 - OVERVIEW OF COUNCIL INITIATIVES RELATING TO THE FREEDOM OF RELIGION OR BELIEF 2017-2021

The European Parliament Research Service (EPRS) provided the European Parliament Intergroup with an overview of Council documents published between 2017 and 2021 that were somehow related to the freedom of religion or belief. A number of these documents were also discussed in Chapter 3 of this report. Below is the extensive list of different actions.

## COUNCIL DECISIONS AND PROPOSALS FOR COUNCIL DECISIONS

- Proposal for a COUNCIL DECISION on **the determination of a clear risk of a serious breach by Hungary of the rule of law**, 20 September 2018

On breaches of freedom of religion or belief, see points 37-39.

## PRESS RELEASES

- Council, **EU imposes further sanctions over serious violations of human rights around the world**, 22 March 2021

The press release contains a link to the specific Council decision to impose sanctions on persons and entities in China under the EU Global Human Rights Sanction regime, in particular against Chinese officials involved in systematic violations of their freedom of religion or belief in Xinjiang.

## POLITICAL DECLARATIONS

- Council, **International Day Commemorating the Victims of Acts of Violence based on Religion or Belief: Declaration by the High Representative on behalf of the EU**, 21 August 2021

See also this webpage: [https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/news/international-day-commemorating-victims-acts-violence-based-religion-or-belief-declaration-high-2020-08-21\\_es](https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/news/international-day-commemorating-victims-acts-violence-based-religion-or-belief-declaration-high-2020-08-21_es)

- Council Declaration on **the fight against antisemitism and the development of a common security approach to better protect Jewish communities and institutions in Europe** -Council conclusion (6 December 2018)

## REPORTS

- Council, **Report of the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy “CFSP Report -Our priorities in 2021**, 28 June 2021

General reference to freedom of religion and the EU's engagement with human rights dialogues with partner countries and in UN resolutions at the Human Rights Council (HRC) is made on page 15. The document also covers EU sanctions under the EU Global Human Rights sanctions regime, without entering in any specific details on sanctions concerning violation of the freedom of Religion or Belief.

- Council, **2020 EU Annual Report on Human Rights and Democracy in the World**, 21 June 2021, 150 pages

On key EU thematic priorities in the area of human rights, see page 8.

On the actions of the EU Special Representative (EUSR) for Human Rights, Eamon Gilmore under the High Representative/Vice-President (HR/VP) Josep Borrell, concerning, among others, the freedom of religion, see page 8.

For a section on EU action on freedom of religion or belief, see pages 21-24.

On the EU's position on the protection and promotion of the right to freedom of religion or belief and the UN resolution on this issue tabled by the EU, urging countries to step up their efforts to ensure that this right is upheld when addressing instances of intolerance, discrimination and violence based on religion or belief, see page 113 of the report.

On the EU's work on freedom of religion and dialogue with the Organisation for Islamic Cooperation (OIC), see page 121.

All annual reports issued by the Council (the EEAS) since 2009 are available [here](#) (including the 2020 annual report relating to 2019).

- Council, **Proposal for a Council Directive on implementing the principle of equal treatment between persons irrespective of religion or belief, disability, age or sexual orientation-Progress Report**, 4 June 2021

In this context, see also [here](#) (Outcome of the Council meeting - Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs - 14 and 15 June 2021).

- Council, **EEAS Report on the Implementation of Freedom of Religion or Belief Guidelines April 2020-March 2021, 26 March 2021**

This report is mentioned in a Council [list](#) of working papers (WK) distributed in the Working Party on Human Rights in the first quarter of 2021, but is not available publicly.

- Council, **2019 EU Annual Report on Human Rights and Democracy in the World**, 15 June 2020

On freedom of religion and belief and EU involvement, see pages 41-46.

- Council, **2018 EU Annual Report on Human Rights and Democracy in the World**, 13 May 2019

On freedom of religion and belief and EU involvement, see pages 32-36.

- Council, **EU Annual Report on Human Rights and Democracy in the World 2017**, 28 May 2018

On freedom of religion and belief and EU involvement, see pages 29-33.

- Council, **EU Annual Report on Human Rights and Democracy in the World in 2016**, 16 October 2017

On freedom of religion and belief and EU involvement, see pages 25-27.

## EUROPEAN COUNCIL CONCLUSIONS

- **European Council meeting (10 and 11 December 2020) - Conclusions**, 11 December 2020

On the European Council's position on freedom of religion and belief, see point 24.

## COUNCIL CONCLUSIONS

- **Council Conclusions on EU Priorities in UN Human Rights Fora in 2021**, 22 February 2021

On the European Council's position on freedom of religion, see points 10, 12 and page 13.

- **Council Conclusions on EU priorities for cooperation with the Council of Europe 2020-2022**, 13 July 2020

On the European Council's position on freedom of religion, see point 10 and point 19.

- **Council Conclusions on EU Priorities in UN Human Rights Fora in 2020**, 17 February 2020

Freedom of religion is specifically addressed in points 16 and 17 (in particular with reference to Xinjiang and Tibet).

- **Council Conclusions on EU Priorities in UN Human Rights Fora in 2019**, 18 February 2019

On freedom of religion, see points 10, 14, 15. The issue of breaches of freedom of religion is specifically addressed in point 15 (with reference to the Uyghurs, Tibet and the Crimea).

- **Council Conclusions on Yemen**, 25 June 2018

See in particular point 12.

- **Council Conclusions on EU Priorities in UN Human Rights Fora in 2018**, 26 February 2018

On freedom of religion and EU involvement, see point 23.

## OUTCOME OF PROCEEDINGS

- Council, **EU priorities at the United Nations during the 76th United Nations General Assembly, September 2021 - September 2022-Council conclusions**, 12 July 2021

Freedom of religion and belief is specifically mentioned in point 12.

- Council, **Council conclusions on strengthening the application of the Charter of Fundamental Rights in the European Union**, 8 March 2021

- Council, **EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy 2020-2024: Council Conclusions and EU Action Plan**, 18 November 2020

- Council, **CFSP Report -Our priorities in 2019**, 15 October 2019

On freedom of religion and belief and EU involvement, see page 84.

- Council, **Outcome of the Council meeting - 3652nd Council meeting - Foreign Affairs (including Defence)**, Brussels, 19 and 20 November 2018

Concerning freedom of religion, see the EU's position among others on freedom of religion or belief, abuses of the blasphemy law and the freedom of expression and media in Pakistan (page 12).

- Council, **CFSP Report -Our priorities in 2018**, 16 July 2018

On EU action in promoting human rights and supporting democracy worldwide, see page 55.

- Council, **EU priorities for cooperation with the Council of Europe in 2018-2019**, 22 January 2018

On EU priorities for cooperation with the Council of Europe in 2018-2019, see page 5 and page 7.

- Council, **Outcome of the Council meeting - 3521st Council meeting - Transport, Telecommunications and Energy**, 27 February 2017

On breaches of freedom of religion, see points 9 and 22.

#### **COVER NOTES**

Council, **Presidency conclusions from the informal exchange on integration and social cohesion “United in diversity –promoting the European way of life together”**, 26 November 2020

Council, **Citizens’ Consultations -Executive Summaries**, 10 December 2018

#### **ASSOCIATION REPORTS**

Council, **Association Implementation Report on Ukraine**, 1 December 2020



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Council Working Document 9337/21 of 1 June 2021:  
<https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-9337-2021-INIT/en/pdf> .

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<sup>153</sup> Unless specified otherwise, all hyperlinks were last checked on 29 November 2021

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