



European Platform against Religious
Intolerance and Discrimination

Brussels

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Open Letter from the European Platform against Religious Intolerance and Discrimination (EPRID) to the Members of the European Parliament, including the Intergroup on Freedom of religion and belief & Religious Tolerance.

Brussels, November 2018

Re: DRAFT REPORT 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)), by Mr. Andrzej Grzyb MEP

Dear Member of the European Parliament,

The European Platform against Religious Intolerance and Discrimination (EPRID) is a diverse network of civil society organisations including religious and non-religious (non-confessional) associations operating at the European level. The objective of EPRID is to collectively promote freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) around the world.

About a year ago, the members of EPRID unanimously resolved to express support for the continuation of the mandate of the EU Special Envoy for the promotion of freedom of religion or belief outside the European Union. EPRID expressed that support by way of an open letter addressed to the Presidents of the European Council, the European Parliament, the European Commission, and Commissioner Neven Mimica.

Before we address the content of the report, EPRID wants to echo the UN General Comment 22 on Freedom of Thought, Conscience or Religion, emphasising that

"the freedom of thought, conscience, and religion is far-reaching and profound; it encompasses freedom of thought on all matters, personal conviction and the commitment to religion or belief, whether manifested individually or in community with others. Article 18 of the Universal Declaration

of Human Rights protects theistic, non-theistic and atheistic beliefs, as well as the right not to profess any religion or belief. The terms "belief" and "religion" are to be broadly construed. Article 18 is not limited in its application to traditional religions or to religions and beliefs with institutional characteristics or practices analogous to those of traditional religions."

In this light, EPRID welcomes the DRAFT REPORT 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)), by Mr. Andrzej Grzyb MEP.

EPRID members advise the European Parliament to send a strong political message to the Council to establish an EU Special Representative on Freedom of Religion or Belief. Alternatively, we advise the European Parliament to urge the Commission to renew and strengthen the mandate of the EU Special Envoy on the promotion of Freedom of Religion or Belief outside the EU.

It is our hope that the discussion about the draft report and the tabled amendments will further strengthen EU's efforts in promoting and defending freedom of religion or belief. Therefore, our recommendations and observations are the following:

- that the person appointed is both in possession of and seen to be vested with real institutional credibility and power. For an effective implementation of the mandate, a strong and structural coordination and cooperation with the EU Special Representative on Human Rights, the EEAS, and DG Trade is crucial.

It will be through appropriate normative and structural connection with the other priority areas of the EU that the mandate will succeed in supporting work done in humanitarian aid, refugees and dealing with conflict in the Middle East.

- Secondly, it is important that the mandate be for ongoing periods of three to five years, so that each appointee has sufficient time to implement projects in accordance with EU priorities.
- Thirdly, if the mandate is to be successfully performed, an adequate allocation of budget and staffing is needed. The allocations should take account of the needs for liaison with internal EU institutions and policy areas, the training and support of EU Delegations tasked with the promotion of FoRB, the implementation of the EU Guidelines on the promotion of Freedom of Religion or Belief and continued dialogue with civil society. Without adequate allocation of resources, the mandate has the potential to fail over time or, possibly worse, for it to lapse into window dressing and tokenism at a time when real action is required of the European Union.

Since the beginning of his mandate, members of EPRID have met and worked with the current Special Envoy. We are impressed by Dr Ján Figel's considerable achievements in his efforts to promote the principles of FoRB in several regions of the world all in a relatively short time.

In the current international climate of persecution and diminution of the basic freedoms of conscience, thought or religion, and of expression, the continuation of an informed and articulate voice on behalf of the European Union is necessary.

EPRID thanks you for your attention to the matters raised in this letter. If there is any matter that requires elaboration or explanation, EPRID and its constitutive members are ready to discuss those matters either in writing or in meetings.

Yours sincerely,

EPRID Board of Coordinators

On behalf of EPRID Members:

- Association Internationale pour la Défense de la Liberté Religieuse
- Bahá'í International Community
- Christian Solidarity Worldwide
- Conference of European Churches
- European Evangelical Alliance
- European Union Office of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints
- Human Rights Without Frontiers
- Open Doors International
- Quê Me: Vietnam Committee on Human Rights