



European Parliamentary Forum
for Sexual and Reproductive Rights
Rue Montoyer 23
1000 Brussels
Belgium

Brussels, 14 September 2020

Margaritis Schinas
Commission Vice-President for Protecting our European Way of Life
Lead of Commission's dialogue with churches and religious associations or communities, and with philosophical and non-confessional organisations

Mandate of the EU Special Envoy on Freedom of Religion or Belief: Call to improve transparency and to appoint a candidate with a strong human rights record

Dear Mr. Vice President,

As Members of the European Parliament, we wish to express our concerns about the renewal of the mandate of the EU Special Envoy for the promotion of freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) that was announced by your office in a tweet last July.

Whilst we fully agree with the importance of FoRB as a fundamental right to be protected within and outside the EU, we believe that this protection and promotion should take place within the overarching framework for human rights as defined by the EU Charter of fundamental rights.

The EU Special representative for Human Rights oversees the effectiveness and visibility of EU human rights policy and in so doing treat all rights as indivisible and interdependent and interrelated. Creating a separate mandate solely for the protection of FoRB runs the risk of an unnecessary siloing of this right from others and discouraging it to be treated in an inclusive and intersectional manner.

For this reason, we deeply regret the absence of a transparent and comprehensive assessment by the European Commission of the effectiveness and added value of the position of the Special Envoy in the process of the renewal of the mandate. Notably such an assessment was also requested by the European Parliament in its resolution of 15 January 2019.

We are also strongly aware of the risks that emphasizing FoRB over other fundamental rights can entail. Indeed, all over the world, **freedom of religion has too often been used by some to undermine and hamper others' fundamental rights, particularly the right to equality and non-discrimination of women and LGBTI people**, as it was highlighted in detail in the last report of UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief¹ and explicitly stated in the EU's 2013 guidelines on the promotion and protection of freedom of religion or belief which constitute the policy framework for the Special Envoy's work.

¹ A/HRC/43/48

We are all the more concerned by your decision to renew this mandate that, in the past, previously appointed Special Envoy Jan Figel has undermined the credibility of the mandate by showing highly problematic acquaintances with organisations opposing women's sexual rights and LGBTI people's rights (CitizenGo and ADF International). These concerns were shared by several MEPs in [an letter to former EC President](#) in February 2019 and were reiterated in the complaint to the Ombudsman against the Commission that was lodged this year by MEP Sophie In't Veld's². In her final decision, the Ombudsman also made clear that "EU staff members with a prominent role, such as the Special Envoy [must] fully adhere to EU values, which include all human rights".³

Since the right to FoRB is intrinsically interrelated to other key fundamental rights that are also under threat, **we urge you to appoint as Special Envoy on FoRB a candidate who can show a strong record in promoting all fundamental rights and European values.** As MEPs committed in the defence of all human rights, we cannot accept that a Special Envoy speaking on behalf the EU shows public support to organisations that actively campaign against gender equality and the right to non-discrimination on the ground of sex orientation. We would like to recall the EU's international obligation to equally protect all fundamental rights.

We also urge you to provide clarity and transparency in the mandate of the EU Special Envoy on FoRB; in the definition of his/her tasks, in the process of appointing the Special Envoy and in terms of the reporting obligations of the Envoy, as recommended by the European Ombudsman⁴. For example, we want to see regular public reports on his/her future missions. These reports should include an exhaustive list of his/her links with interlocutors as well as the country context and any recommendations made or follow-up actions taken. Regrettably, the [very succinct report of the previous mandate](#) (2016-2019)⁵ fails to give any information about visits made apart from the name of groups met by the Special Envoy.

Yours sincerely,

Signatories:

1. Hon. Alviina Alametsä, MEP, Finland
2. Hon. François Alfonsi, MEP, France
3. Hon. Marc Angel, MEP, Luxembourg
4. Hon. Maria Arena, MEP, Belgium
5. Hon. Fernando Barrera, MEP, Spain
6. Hon. Brando Benifei, MEP, Italy
7. Hon. Gabriele Bischoff, MEP, Germany
8. Hon. Benoît Biteau, MEP, France
9. Hon. Malin Björk, MEP, Sweden
10. Hon. Damien Carême, MEP, France
11. Hon. Olivier Chastel, MEP, Belgium
12. Hon. David Cormand, MEP, France
13. Hon. Jakop Dalunde, MEP, Sweden
14. Hon. Rosa D'Amato, MEP, Italy
15. Hon. Petra De Sutter, MEP, Belgium
16. Hon. Gwendoline Delbos-Corfield, MEP, France
17. Hon. Karima Delli, MEP, France
18. Hon. Bas Eickhout, MEP, Netherlands
19. Hon. Tanja Fajon, MEP, Slovenia
20. Hon. Sandro Gozi, MEP, France
21. Hon. Claude Gruffat, MEP, France
22. Hon. Francisco Guerreiro, MEP, Portugal
23. Hon. Heidi Hautala, MEP, Finland
24. Hon. Pierrette Herzberger-Fofana, MEP, Germany
25. Hon. Pär Holmgren, MEP, Sweden
26. Hon. Sophia in 't Veld, MEP, Netherlands
27. Hon. Yannick Jadot, MEP, France

² Complaint about maladministration, ref 1553/2019

³ Decision in case 1553/2019/NH, paragraph 16

⁴ Decision in case 1553/2019/NH on the role of the EU's Special Envoy for the promotion of freedom of religion or belief outside of the EU

⁵ https://ec.europa.eu/international-partnerships/system/files/jan-figel-mission-reports_en_1.pdf

28. Hon. Łukasz Kohu, MEP, Poland
29. Hon. Dietmar Köster, MEP, Germany
30. Hon. Alice Kuhnke, MEP, Sweden
31. Hon. Karen Melchior, MEP, Denmark
32. Hon. Maria Noichl, MEP, Germany
33. Hon. Jutta Paulus, MEP, Germany
34. Hon. Evelyn Regner, MEP, Austria
35. Hon. Terry Reintke, MEP, Germany
36. Hon. Diana Riba, MEP, Spain
37. Hon. Michèle Rivasi, MEP, France
38. Hon. Caroline Roose, MEP, France
39. Hon. Mounir Satouri, MEP, France
40. Hon. Tineke Strik, MEP, Netherlands
41. Hon. Vera Tax, MEP, Netherlands
42. Hon. Marie Toussaint, MEP, France
43. Hon. Ernest Urtasun, MEP, Spain
44. Hon. Monika Vana, MEP, Austria
45. Hon. Kim van Sparrentak, MEP, Netherlands
46. Hon. Hilde Vautmans, MEP, Belgium
47. Hon. Pernille Weiss, MEP, Denmark
48. Hon. Salima Yenbou, MEP, France