

Commitment to Religious Freedom at the Level of the European Union

A Victim of Polarisation?

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After the various institutions of the EU had set things in motion in a positive manner in several respects in the 2010s regarding advocacy for freedom of religion or belief (FoRB), an increasing polarisation can be observed today in the debates on this human right at the European level. The political right-wing is engaging in client politics, thereby seeking to appropriate the issue for themselves, while liberal and left-wing forces seem to be increasingly reluctant from engaging in activities promoting religious freedom with high publicity.

A positive development regarding advocacy for FoRB in the 2010s

There was a brief phase in the mid-2010s when a number of rather considerable successes were achieved globally regarding promoting FoRB at the EU level:

- June 2013 saw the European Union's Foreign Affairs Council (FAC) adopting the **EU Guidelines on the promotion and protection of freedom of religion or belief**. The members of the Council established in the guidelines that breaches of FoRB may exacerbate intolerance, and often constitute early indicators of potential violence and conflicts.¹ The guidelines provide the EU delegations and member states' embassies and consulates with practical

¹ Council of the European Union: EU Guidelines on the promotion and protection of freedom of religion or belief. Foreign Affairs Council meeting Luxembourg, 24 June 2013, para. 1, https://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/EN/foraff/137585.pdf, accessed on: 4 Sep. 2023.

instructions for their work, and contain important information in this regard on the understanding of FoRB, as well as elucidating the link to other human rights and formulating specific prospects for action for enhancing FoRB.

- The office of a **Special Envoy for the promotion of freedom of religion or belief outside the European Union** was furthermore established in 2016. Jean-Claude Juncker appointed the Slovak politician Ján Figel' from the Christian Democratic Movement (KDH) as the first Special Envoy in the same year.
- The work of the **Intergroup on Freedom of Religion or Belief and Religious Tolerance** in this phase can also be regarded as relatively successful. The Intergroup is intended to ensure that in its international relations the EU promotes and protects the right of the individual to freely express their convictions (whether theistic, non-theistic or atheistic). All political groups of the European Parliament were actively involved in the Intergroup between 2014 and 2019 on a broad basis, albeit to differing extents.

Between withdrawal and polarisation

However, these successful developments have unfortunately not been continued in recent years. In fact, one may observe that religious freedom has increasingly become a polarising topic at the EU level:

- For instance, there have repeatedly been heated debates concerning the office of the **Special Envoy for the promotion of freedom of religion or belief outside the European Union**. Some criticised Ján Figel', with his detractors particularly including liberal, left-wing, green and social democratic delegates who accuse him of having “undermined the credibility of the mandate by showing highly problematic acquaintances with organisations opposing women’s sexual rights and LGBTI people’s rights.”² In response to

2 European Parliamentary Forum for Sexual and Reproductive Rights (EPF): 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 (14 Sep. 2020), <https://www.epfweb.org/sites/default/files/2020-09/EU%20Special%20Envoy%20on%20FoRB-%20Final%20version%20EC%20President.pdf>, accessed on: 16 Oct. 2023.

such a complaint, European Ombudsman Emily O'Reilly found fault in that the mandate of the Special Envoy was not sufficiently clear, and that the documents setting out his mandate and work plan were not available to the public.³ There was also repeated contention concerning whether the office should be continued at all. When the mandate of the Special Envoy expired in October 2019, the European Commission initially stated shortly later that the office was not to be extended. In response to criticism on the part of Members of Parliament (MEPs) and Member States as well as representatives of various religious communities, in July 2020 the Commission decided to appoint a new Envoy, and Christos Stylianides took over the post in May 2021. However, Stylianides only held the office for five months. It was only after the post had been vacant for more than one year that a new incumbent was appointed on 7 December 2022 in the person of the diplomat Frans van Daele, who was already 75 years old at that time.

- There was also heated discussion of the **European Guidelines on FoRB**: while the guidelines set out an ambitious framework for promoting FoRB, the implementation of the guidelines fell short in practice.⁴ These shortcomings made it easy for the far-right groups European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) and Identity and Democracy (ID) to level criticism in the debate on the tenth anniversary of the EU Guidelines on FoRB⁵ with inadequate efforts on the part of the EU for religious freedom. Some MEPs from the far-right parties added to their criticism the accusation that the European institutions appeared to be more active regarding gender and LGBTIQ issues than religious freedom. The MEP who speaks on behalf

3 European Ombudsman: 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 (30 Jul. 2020), <https://www.ombudsman.europa.eu/en/decision/en/130887>, accessed on: 4 Sep. 2023.

4 Portaru, Adina: "The EU Guidelines on Freedom of Religion or Belief at Their Fifth Anniversary: Implementation Lagging Behind?," in: Wolfgang Benedek/Philip Czech/Lisa Heschl/Karin Lukas/Manfred Nowak (eds.), *European Yearbook on Human Rights* 2018, Cambridge: Intersentia 2018, pp. 193–210.

5 The minutes of the plenary debate – on which the summary and the quotes that follow are based – can be accessed here: European Parliament: Verbatim report of proceedings (13 Jul. 2023), https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CRE-9-2023-07-13-ITM-010_EN.html, accessed on: 16 Oct. 2023. Similar patterns were already on display in the plenary debate held on 3 October 2022 on the topic of The EU's actions in the field of freedom of religion or belief worldwide, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CRE-9-2022-10-03-ITM-013_EN.html, accessed on: 16 Oct. 2023.

of the ID group accuses “those on the left and the globalists” of “ruining” freedom of religion or belief, and betraying the “heritage of the forefathers” by promoting Islamism via a “multiculturalist ideology.” Criticism – albeit more moderate in tone – was also levelled by the representative of the centre-right European People’s Party (EPP). However, one notices that the group chose to be represented by none other than an MEP from the right-wing Christian Democratic People’s Party KDNP, the partner of Fidesz in the Hungarian Government, an administration that has come under criticism due to shortcomings regarding the rule of law and which takes a clientelistic and patronistic approach to religious freedom.⁶ The representative of the Socialists and Democrats (S&D) in the European Parliament – who comes from Poland – in turn uses the debate to make a case for secularism, and in doing so makes scathing attacks on his country’s right-wing government and accuses them of being implicated with problematic clerical structures, as well as misusing the term “Christian values.” In turn, the representative of the liberal Renew group stresses the importance of the fight against Islamism.

MEPs from the far-right groups ECR and ID dominate the debate in quantitative terms. They provide six out of eleven MEP contributions, although not one single member spoke for The Greens/European Free Alliance (EFA). While two members from The Left in the European Parliament (GUE/NGL) spoke, they did not so on behalf of their group, but rather as individual representatives.

The overall impression formed is that the in some cases very heated contributions have given rise to few concrete proposals concerning how the implementation of the guidelines can be improved. Some of the speeches in fact extend beyond the actual topic, and are used instead to make attacks on political opponents. One exception is the proposal of the ECR group to designate 24th June as European Anti-Religious Persecution Day,⁷ albeit this was mostly symbolic in nature.

6 See chapter “Hungary under Viktor Orbán: ‘Illiberal Christian Democracy’ and the Instrumentalisation of Religious Freedom”.

7 MEP Bert-Jan Ruissen repeated the call only a few days later, albeit this time with the diverging designation “European Day for the Promotion of Religion or Belief”: Ruissen, Bert-Jan: “It’s Time To Implement the EU Guidelines on the Promotion of Freedom of Religion or Belief” (21 Jul. 2023), <https://europeanconservative.com/articles/commentary/its-time-to-implement-the-eu-guidelines-on-the-promotion-of-freedom-of-religion-or-belief/>, accessed on: 16 Oct. 2023.

- It is not only the distribution of speeches in central debates on FoRB that clearly indicates a trend towards the far-right groups presenting themselves as the defenders of religious freedom, particularly regarding the topic of persecuted Christians, while the more left-wing and/or secular-oriented members are shrinking from an open commitment to religious freedom. This trend also becomes clear regarding the membership of the intergroups of the European Parliament focussing on topics related to FoRB:
 - For instance, the far-right group ECR clearly dominated the **Intergroup on Freedom of Religion or Belief and Religious Tolerance** in mid-September 2023, with eight out of fifteen representatives. Moreover, with one representative from the ID group and one independent who had previously represented far-right parties, two further members were present who can be attributed to the far-right camp. The remaining groups together only made up one-third of the members (3x Renew, 1x EPP, 1x S&D). The Greens/EFA and GUE/NGL groups were no longer represented at all.⁸ In contrast to this, GUE/NGL had still provided two members of the Intergroup in the previous parliament in 2014 to 2019, including a Co-Chair, and The Greens/EFA also provided one of the Intergroup's Vice-Chairs. By contrast, ECR only provided three out of the fourteen members.⁹
 - An even more unambiguous dominance on the part of the far-right groups can be observed in mid-September 2023 in the **Intergroup on Christians in the Middle East**: 21 members are provided by the extreme right-wing group ID, and three further members by ECR. Seven others are independent but are all active or former members of extreme right-

8 European Parliament: Intergroup on Freedom of Religion or Belief and Religious Tolerance [IG9-14], <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/meps/en/intergroup/6301/Intergroupe%20%2%20ABLibert%C3%A9%20de%20religion%20et%20de%20conviction%20et%20tol%C3%A9rance%20religieuse%2%BB>, accessed on: 16 Oct. 2023.

9 European Parliament: Intergroup 'Freedom of Religion and Belief and Religious Tolerance.' List of the Members, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/about-parliament/files/organisation-and-rules/organisation/intergroups/legislative-list-of-member-freedom-of-religion-20151130.pdf>, accessed on: 17 Oct. 2023.

wing parties. Only two members belong to the EPP group. The other parliamentary groups are not represented at all.¹⁰

However, problems are caused by the withdrawal of left-wing and/or secular-oriented forces and their lack of replacement, not only because it provides scope to the far-right but also because it shows that it goes hand in hand with a loss of quality:

- While the Intergroup on Freedom of Religion or Belief and Religious Tolerance previously published reports on the situation of religious freedom at intervals of two years, only one single report to date has been released in the current parliamentary term (2019–2024). It should also be noted that the 2017 report still emphasised cooperation with a consortium of independent scholars and with the European External Action Service (EEAS), while the 2021 report contains no such reference. The selection of civil society sources in the 2021 report is also somewhat limited, as almost all of the organisations named have a Christian or conservative background. Moreover, one notices careless mistakes and methodical shortcomings, as well as deteriorations, although it would exceed the scope of the present article to discuss this extensively.¹¹
- Moreover, the public relations work of the Intergroup has also deteriorated. Only highly sporadic updates are published on the Intergroup's social media channels, and the Intergroup's Facebook page was completely abandoned between 2018 and 2022.¹² However, a particular problem is that the Intergroup's Twitter channel is now also being used for sharing party-political posts unrelated to the work of the Intergroup. For instance, a congratulatory post from the ECR group for an election victory on the part of the far-right extremist Sweden Democrats was posted there in September

10 European Parliament: Intergroup on Christians in the Middle East [IG9-07], <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/meps/en/intergroup/details/6294/Intergroup%20on%20Christians%20in%20the%20Middle%20East>, accessed on: 12 Sep. 2023.

11 European Parliament Intergroup on Freedom of Religion or Belief and Religious Tolerance (FoRB & RT): Reports, <https://www.religiousfreedom.eu/work/>, accessed on: 20 Sep. 2023.

12 European Parliament Intergroup on Freedom of Religion or Belief: <https://www.facebook.com/epwgonforb>, accessed on: 4 Sep. 2023.

2022.¹³ The blog on the website of the Intergroup on Freedom of Religion or Belief and Religious Tolerance has also been used in recent years for the dissemination of partisan political messages, often using patterns such as those described in the section “Appropriation and reinterpretation of religious freedom by the far-right” later in this chapter.¹⁴

The precise reasons for the increased withdrawal by left-wing and/or secular-oriented forces from an open commitment to religious freedom that has been observed should be analysed in future studies. However, it is conceivable that attempts to appropriate the issue on the part of far-right regarding religious freedom as well as the commonly-held perception of the topic as “conservative” are acting as a deterrent towards left-wing and/or secular-oriented MEPs. Moreover, a role might be played by the fact that MEPs from such circles feel an uncertain or indeed distanced attitude towards religion as secularisation advances in Europe. Organisational problems furthermore appear to have a role to play.¹⁵

Appropriation and reinterpretation of religious freedom by the far-right

Another important reason for the increasing commitment to the issue of “religious freedom” and especially the sub-aspect of “supporting persecuted Christians” by the far-right groups is probably that these issues offer them a welcome opportunity to present themselves as “ordinary conservatives.” While leftists

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- 13 ECR Group (@ecrgroup): ‘Congratulations to @jimmiakesson & our friends from @sdriks for the excellent result in the Swedish national elections, coming out as the 2nd strongest party. The conservative message has a growing appeal across Europe.’ – ECR Co-Chairs Ryszard Legutko & @RaffaeleFitto (12 Sep. 2022), <https://twitter.com/ecrgroup/status/1569231883317248000>, accessed on: 4 Sep. 2023.
 - 14 European Parliament Intergroup on Freedom of Religion or Belief and Religious Tolerance (FoRB & RT): Blog, <https://www.religiousfreedom.eu/blog/>, accessed on: 2 Jan. 2024.
 - 15 Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (ed.): Einsatz für Religionsfreiheit – gestern, heute, morgen. Interviews mit Expertinnen und Experten aus Politik und Zivilgesellschaft, Berlin 2021, p. 43, <https://www.kas.de/documents/252038/11055681/Einsatz+f%C3%BCr+Religionsfreiheit+%E2%80%93+gestern%2C+heute%2C+morgen.pdf/093435af-dc12-4917-4843-4884c8f10fd?version=1.2&t=161799333142>, accessed on: 17 Oct. 2023.

and liberals need to recognise that conservative policy-making is perfectly legitimate in the democratic space (even in those cases where it is primarily motivated by electoral considerations), the way in which the far-right groups refer to religious freedom is no longer “conservative,” but in stark contrast to core ideas of the human rights approach. Looking at speeches, motions, social media and website posts and publications of the far-right groups and far-right European parties and their representatives, it is striking that religious freedom is repeatedly reinterpreted in a way that undermines its character as a universal right to freedom, and instead the groups attempt to establish their own ideological narratives and enemy stereotypes:

Islam in particular is often made the enemy and bogeyman, and fears of migration are exploited for constructing a scenario of intimidation, often echoing conspiracy theories. The far-right group ID describes the protection of what it defines as national identities against an alleged islamisation as one of its key priorities:

“The ID Group aims to safeguard the identity of the citizens and nations in Europe. The right to control, regulate and limit immigration is a fundamental principle shared by the Members of the Group. So is their willingness to fight for a safer Europe with well-protected external borders and a stronger cooperation to tackle terrorism and islamisation. The Members unequivocally oppose the possible accession of Turkey.”¹⁶

In even more drastic terms, this alleged threat was described in 2019 by Giorgia Meloni, who has been the president of the ECR party since 2020 and has represented Italy in the European Council as head of government since 2022:¹⁷

“If the Muslims think they are bringing holy war into our home, the time has come to take even drastic measures: all that remains is to block any kind of Islamic immigration until they have clarified their ideas. We intend to

16 Statutes of the Identity and Democracy (ID) Group in den European Parliament, https://assets.nationbuilder.com/idgroup/pages/54/attachments/original/1673443377/NEW_ID_Statutes__EN_11.2022.pdf?1673443377, accessed on: 18 Oct. 2023.

17 Quotes that have not been published in English have been translated into English by the authors of the chapter.

defend our classical and Christian roots from the process of the Islamisation of Europe, let the do-gooders and sultans of half the world get used to it.”¹⁸

While the ID group portrays Islam as a threat, they describe the “Greek-Roman and Christian heritage as the pillars of European civilization”¹⁹:

“The Europe of today needs a return to the values of its identity and Judeo-Christian roots, which are constantly threatened by widening Islamisation. The lack of clarity of relations with nations such as Turkey, as well as uncontrolled illegal immigration, contributes to destroying EU cooperation and the stability of our Member States.”²⁰

Some far-right representatives not only postulate the danger of growing Christianophobia but already speak of “persecution of Christians in the European Union,” such as the Polish ECR MEP Bogdan Rzońca in a question to the European Commission from 2020.²¹

Moreover, it is argued that the alleged islamisation is a threat to religious freedom and other human rights. A typical example is provided by the wording of an ID group motion proposing an alternative resolution text for the 2020 EU Strategy for Gender Equality, in which ID condemns “mass migration and the ensuing attempts at the Islamisation of Europe as a threat to our security and an attack on religious freedom and women’s rights.”²²

18 Giorgia Meloni: Se i musulmani pensano di portare la guerra santa in casa nostra, è arrivato il momento di prendere provvedimenti anche drastici (23 Apr. 2019), <https://www.facebook.com/giorgiameloni.paginaufficiale/posts/pfbidoH5Yemf3ubpZBW5uZ6ZzbAjhzyYXenKvrwssQUQU2BnZezS8cn6DmVCpv5p5h83UDI>, accessed on: 17 Oct. 2023; for a summary of other similar statements by Meloni, see Bridge Initiative Team: Factsheet: Giorgia Meloni (2 Feb. 2023), <https://bridge.georgetown.edu/research/factsheet-giorgia-meloni/>, accessed on: 17 Oct. 2023.

19 Statutes of the Identity and Democracy (ID) Group in den European Parliament.

20 The Parliament: “La rentrée: Marco Zanni says it’s time for change” (18 Sep. 2020), <https://www.theparliamentmagazine.eu/news/article/time-for-change>, accessed on: 17 Oct. 2023.

21 European Parliament. Parliamentary question: Persecution of Christians in the European Union (6 Apr. 2020), https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/P-9-2020-002116_EN.html, accessed on: 17 Oct. 2023.

22 European Parliament: European Parliament resolution on the EU Strategy for Gender Equality (13 Jan. 2021), https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-9-2020-0234-AM-001-001_EN.pdf, accessed on: 17 Oct. 2023.

The far-right presents itself as the only force that takes these alleged threats seriously and stands up for religious freedom and the protection of persecuted Christians and fights against Christianophobia, in Europe as well as worldwide. This claim is underlined by symbolic gestures, whereby the nomination of the Archbishop of Mosul Najeeb Michael for the Sakharov Prize 2020 by the ID group should also be interpreted in this sense. At the ID group's press conference on the nomination, it is noticeable that the ID representatives hardly respond in their speeches to the Archbishop's solution-oriented analysis, which emphasises the importance of interfaith cooperation, dialogue, peaceful coexistence, mutual respect and the language of the heart, and instead try to foreground the issue of defending Christian identity against radical Islamism, a theme that fits much better with their propagated worldview.²³

On the other hand, political opponents are accused of inaction or even complicity. ECR MEP Carlo Fidanza – chair of the Intergroup on Freedom of Religion or Belief and Religious Tolerance – accused the EU of being a “soulless bureaucratic giant plagued by the worst cultural relativism” suggesting that its lack of commitment to religious freedom was a “submission to Islamic fanaticism.”²⁴ In the process, the far-right likes to present itself as the voice of the silent majority: “We, however, will continue to fight to protect the silent majority.”²⁵ Especially “leftists,” “liberals” and “globalists” are sharply attacked, with “multiculturalism,” “woke ideology,” “cancel culture” and similar inciting buzzwords being used to construct a further enemy image and a further

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- 23 European Parliament, Multimedia Centre: Press conference by Marco Zanni, I&D President, Nicolas Bay, Thierry Mariani, Jérôme Riviére, Joachim Kuhs, and Najeeb Michael, on ‘Archbishop of Mosul Najeeb Michael Moussa, nominated for the Sakharov prize 2020’ (6 Oct. 2020), https://multimedia.europarl.europa.eu/de/websstreaming/press-conference-by-marco-zanni-i-d-president-nicolas-bay-thierry-mariani-jerome-riviere-joachim-kuh_20201006-1400-SPECIAL-PRESSER, accessed on: 17 Oct. 2023.
- 24 European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) – Fratelli d'Italia: Europa senz'anima, Von der Leyen non difende liberta' religiosa (24 Jun. 2023), <https://ecr-fratelliditalia.eu/europa-senzanima-von-der-leyen-non-difende-liberta-religiosa/>, accessed on: 17 Oct. 2023.
- 25 Identity and Democracy Group: Plenary Booklet, Identity and Democracy, 2–5 May 2022, Plenary Session, p. 5, https://www.idgroup.eu/2_5_may, accessed on: 4 Sep. 2023.

alleged threat.²⁶ The Finnish ID MEP Laura Huhtasaari even includes the term “climate change” in this list and sketches some kind of alleged liberal re-education that endangers Christian traditions:

“The hegemony prevailing in the EU sees increasing multiculturalism as an intrinsic value. At the same time, it wants to reduce the importance of Christianity. Christian traditions, such as Christmas celebrations, are being driven out of schools. Liberal politicians have become allergic to the message of Christianity. Liberals want to change the message of the church to match their political ideology, that is climate change and the rainbow idea. This is all done in the name of tolerance. Christ is not tolerated, but the spread of Islam is seen as a progressive and miraculous thing.”²⁷

In particular, the ECR group perceives “family values” as being threatened by a corresponding “ideological monopoly of the left,” which is why the group has set up a working group to counter it.²⁸ Already in 2019, the future ECR party president Meloni warned at the World Congress of Families that the family was allegedly being made the enemy and that national, religious, gender and family identities were under attack.²⁹

The patterns observed are the same patterns of populist appropriation and reinterpretation that have already been discussed in other contributions to this book: religious freedom is interpreted in a clientelistic way. The religious is often reduced to a role as a source of tradition and identity. Objectives that

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- 26 See e.g. Angeli, Matteo: “The National Rally’s anti-woke gamble” (1 May 2023), <https://ytali.com/2023/05/01/the-national-rallys-anti-woke-gamble/>, accessed on: 17 Oct. 2023; Independent: “How a far-right politician could become Italy’s first female leader” (17 Sep. 2022), https://www.independent.co.uk/news/long_reads/italy-prime-minister-far-right-giorgia-meloni-salvini-b2166887.html, accessed on: 17 Oct. 2023.
- 27 Identity and Democracy Group: Plenary Booklet, Identity and Democracy, 12–15 Dec. 2022, p. 8, https://www.idgroup.eu/12_15_december, accessed on: 4 Sep. 2023.
- 28 European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR): New ECR Policy Working Group on Family and Life launched (30 Mar. 2022), https://ecrgroup.eu/article/new_ecr_policy_working_group_on_family_and_life_launched, accessed on: 17 Oct. 2023.
- 29 Bump, Philip: “That Giorgia Meloni speech captivating the U.S. right doesn’t make sense” (27 Sep. 2022), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2022/09/27/meloni-italy-united-states-far-right/>, accessed on: 17 Oct. 2023; Cassius: Giorgia Meloni’s electrifying speech at the World Congress of Families, English subtitles (17 Apr. 2019), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y_Z1LClnhsk, accessed on: 17 Oct. 2023.

are legitimate or even worthy of support when considered in isolation (combating Islamist violence, supporting families, cultivating customs and traditions, protecting religious freedom and women's rights, and helping Christians in need) are mixed with problematic ideological or conspiracy-theoretical narratives and demands for discriminatory measures that disproportionately restrict human rights. By generalising, exaggerating, insinuating, coining ideological inciting buzzwords, fuelling culture war debates, omitting important contextual information or even citing unsubstantiated or even false allegations, a scenario of intimidation is constructed and fear, hatred and prejudice are stoked. Against this alleged threat, the far-right in turn stages itself as the one and only saviour representing the true voice of the people, while political opponents are denied legitimacy and dissenting views are portrayed as complicit with the threat.

The examples presented above are only a small selection. Corresponding narratives can also be found among other representatives and member parties of ID and ECR. It becomes evident that they are an internationally unifying element of the far-right forces in Europe, which runs like a thread through their argumentation, sometimes in a moderate form, with a subtle choice of words, sometimes in a more radical form. It may seem like a paradox that nationalists in particular are very well networked transnationally. However, the EU offers them a welcome projection surface to bundle hatred and thus to advance national political goals and the international network an opportunity to learn about successful populist strategies of others and to further refine ideological narratives.

Cherry-picking approaches towards FoRB across all political groups

Studying speeches³⁰ and amendments³¹ from the parliamentary work and the websites of the political groups represented in the European Parliament, it becomes apparent that the other groups also have certain focal points when referring to FoRB, even if – unlike the far-right – they do not focus on inhuman ideologies or conspiracy-theoretical views:

- For instance, the EPP group is particularly committed to Christians in need.
- Alongside a commitment to religious pluralism and inter-religious dialogue, the S&D group has a particular focus on the connection between labour issues and FoRB.
- In line with its anti-imperialist orientation, the GUE/NGL group resorts to anti-colonialist criticism.
- In several contributions, Renew focuses on the fight against Islamist extremism, matching the line of French President Macron's party, the member party of Renew, which has the largest delegation of MEPs in the group.

30 For the current parliamentary term from 2019 to 2024, the database of the European Parliament lists a total of 38 verbatim reports of proceedings in the category “Debates and Videos” for the search terms “freedom of religion,” “religious freedom,” “Islamophobia” and “persecuted Christians” until the summer recess 2023 (setting: word(s): in text): <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/plenary/en/debates-video.html>.

These included the following debates focussing in a general way, without a specific country focus, on issues related to FoRB: 10th anniversary of the EU Guidelines on Freedom of Religion or Belief (debate); The 30th anniversary of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities; The EU's actions in the field of freedom of religion or belief worldwide (debate); Persecution of minorities on the grounds of belief or religion (short presentation); The European Commission Guidelines on inclusive language (topical debate). By contrast, about two-thirds of the debates dealt with the human rights situation in specific countries, with FoRB being a focal topic in about half of the discussions and appearing sporadically in individual contributions in the other half.

31 For instance, there was a particularly intensive discussion in the Committee on Foreign Affairs and numerous amendments to the report on the persecution of minorities on the grounds of belief or religion (2021/2055(INI)), for which Karol Karski from the ECR group was the rapporteur: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-9-2022-0071_EN.html, accessed on: 4 Sep. 2023.

- The Greens/EFA stays largely out of debates that deal with general issues around FoRB. However, the group and its representatives get involved when it comes to concrete cases of human rights violations. In such cases, they also courageously stand up for religious human rights defenders.

Ideological lines – especially at the political fringes – can also be discerned when comparing which governments are criticised by which groups. For instance, it is noteworthy that the ID group holds back on criticising the Indian government under the leadership of the Hindu nationalist BJP party even when the discussion focuses on human rights violations against Christian minorities.³² On the other hand, GUE/NGL and its representatives are often very reluctant to criticise self-declared communist or socialist governments such as Nicaragua³³ or China,³⁴ or even relativise their human rights violations in a form of “whataboutism” with reference to the West’s own failings.

In general, there is often a tendency to divide into a “right-wing” and a “left-wing” camp:

- The (centre)left and liberals are often more secularly oriented, while the centre-right and far-right often emphasise the importance of Europe’s Christian heritage.
- The centre-right and far-right particularly often call for a stronger commitment to supporting Christians in need. On the other hand, the problem of Islamophobia is more likely to be taken up by left-wing representatives (even if much less frequently than the aforementioned).
- For left-wing and green representatives, it is an important concern that FoRB should not be used to undermine LGBTIQ rights and access to abortion. By contrast, quite a few far-right representatives portray a supposed woke culture as a threat to their identity and religious freedom.

32 European Parliament: Verbatim report of proceedings (12 Jul. 2023), https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CRE-9-2023-07-12-ITM-021-02_EN.html, accessed on: 17 Oct. 2023.

33 European Parliament: Verbatim report of proceedings (14 Sep. 2022), https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CRE-9-2022-09-14-ITM-015-03_EN.html, accessed on: 17 Oct. 2023.

34 European Parliament: Verbatim report of proceedings (18 Dec. 2019), https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CRE-9-2019-12-18-ITM-019_EN.html, accessed on: 17 Oct. 2023.

- Leftist and green representatives seem to prefer a stronger general commitment to human rights instead of a specific commitment to religious freedom. On the other hand, (centre)right representatives often place a special focus on religious freedom (and especially that of Christians) even when discussing cases where multiple human rights are violated.
- Left-wing MEPs point to problems resulting from the colonial heritage, while far-right MEPs often focus on European self-interest and the role of the EU as a financial donor. One ID MEP even praises the French colonial rule in Algeria as a time of religious tolerance.³⁵

Conclusions and recommendations

Such polarisation tendencies run the risk of weakening and marginalising the political centre. Indeed, regarding the promotion of FoRB, stronger bridges between the centre-left and the centre-right would be desirable. Thereby, the following aspects hold particular importance:

- For the EPP group, the tendency to split into a left-wing and right-wing camp poses the challenge of an appropriate demarcation from the far-right. In fact, this demarcation is fragile, especially regarding the ECR group. At times, the two groups even have cooperative events on topics related to religious freedom.³⁶ This openness may be rooted in the fact that the ECR group at least partly presents itself more moderately and less aggressively in parliament than the ID group and actually started out as a genuinely conservative group. However, especially against the background of Brexit, the group has increasingly opened up to the right and admitted parties that are considered post-fascist, right-wing populist or even far-right extremist.³⁷ Particularly due to the parallels with ID in

35 European Parliament: Verbatim report of proceedings (28 Nov. 2019), https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CRE-9-2019-11-28-ITM-003-01_EN.html, accessed on: 17 Oct. 2023.

36 See e.g. European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR): Conference & Exhibition: Suffering Christians in Sub-Saharan Africa and elsewhere (18 Sep. 2023), https://ecrgroup.eu/event/conference_exhibition_suffering_christians_in_sub_saharan_africa_and_elsewh, accessed on: 17 Oct. 2023.

37 Noteworthy in this context is also the change of the Dutch party ChristenUnie from the ECR to the EPP group for this reason: ChristenUnie: Segers (ChristenUnie): 'Coalitie

terms of content and framing outlined above, the ECR group remains a problematic partner, especially when it comes to questions of religious freedom.

- On the other hand, for greens, leftists and social democrats (especially secular-oriented ones), the challenge is not to be seduced into distancing themselves from dealing with religion-related issues and underestimating their relevance in the shadow of the polarisation fuelled by the far-right. On the contrary, it is crucial to discover FoRB in its fundamental character as a *human* right and universal right to freedom, thus leaving no room for populist distortions of the right. In order to avoid making themselves vulnerable to criticism, they would also be well advised to take note of which rights are actually codified in the central human rights documents; for example regarding an alleged human right to abortion.³⁸

If the democratic forces within society and politics dare to engage in a sincere exchange, there is the potential that the diverse approaches to FoRB do not have to lead to isolated particular interests, but that with the help of the different expertises, even synergies can be discovered. For instance, regarding the question of how religious women – who are often affected by multiple human rights violations – can be supported, an exchange between religious conservatives and progressive feminists could be fruitful.

met Forum niet geloofwaardig' (6 Mar. 2020), <https://www.christenunie.nl/blog/2020/03/06/Segers-ChristenUnie-Coalitie-met-Forum-niet-geloofwaardig>, accessed on: 17 Oct. 2023

38 See also Deutsche Kommission Justitia et Pax: Menschenrechte und kulturelle Traditionen – Grundsatzreflexion und „Testfall“ Recht auf Gesundheit. Erkenntnisse der Arbeitsgruppe „Menschenrechte“ der Deutschen Kommission Justitia et Pax (= Gerechtigkeit und Frieden 139), p. 35, p. 42, http://justitia-et-pax.de/jp/publikationen/pdf/guf_139.pdf, accessed on: 17 Oct. 2023.