



**CONTEMPORARY  
ISSUES OF FREEDOM  
OF RELIGION OR BELIEF  
IN ARMENIA, GEORGIA,  
AND BEYOND**

**REGIONAL CONFERENCE REPORT**

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OF RELIGION  
OR BELIEF IN ARMENIA,  
GEORGIA, AND BEYOND**

**REGIONAL CONFERENCE REPORT**

Yerevan 2020

UDC 342.731

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ISBN 978-9939-1-1135-3

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On May 24, 2019 the regional conference Contemporary Issues of Freedom of Religion or Belief in Armenia, Georgia and beyond took place in Yerevan. This subsequent Regional Conference Report provides an overview and speeches of the sessions – such as global challenges of FoRB, issues regarding education, the role of interreligious dialogue in conflict transformation, and conflicting rights.



Kingdom of the Netherlands



**EURASIA  
PARTNERSHIP  
FOUNDATION**

Published with the support of the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in Armenia and Georgia, within the scope of the “Towards sustainable reform: promoting freedom of religion or belief in Armenia” project implemented by Eurasia Partnership Foundation (EPF).

The views expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in Armenia and Georgia or EPF.



*This publication is a part of the series of manuals published under the “EPF University” heading. This publication is a part of Education, methodology of history, culture and values (EMHCV) direction. The series include texts which belong to four large thematic directions:*

**Critical Thinking (CT)**

**War and Peace (WP)**

**Civil Society (CS)**

**Education, methodology of history, culture and values (EMHCV)**

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# FOREWORD

**Mr. Jos Douma, Special Envoy on Religion and Belief, Former Ambassador of the Kingdom of the Netherlands to Armenia and Georgia (2015-2019)**



More than a year has passed since the conference “Contemporary Issues of Freedom of Religion or Belief in Armenia, Georgia and beyond” took place in Yerevan and now you have the report.

I hope you will enjoy reading and contemplating!

For me personally, the conference was in a way a farewell to this topic in the regional context and a sneaky preview on the subject from a more global perspective. I knew about my new position as Dutch Special Envoy on Religion and Belief, but could not reveal it, since this prospect was still under embargo. But emotionally I definitely related to it in my opening speech and subsequent discussions. I was inhaling useful thoughts and trying to interpret discussions from a trans-Caucasus context.

From that wider perspective I was even more proud than before about the work done by EPF in general and Kolya and Bella in particular. They had brought together a wide range of religious representatives from Armenia and



Georgia and experts from the region and beyond. And they had also been successful in having the government of Armenia participate substantially.

The Prime Minister did not only make himself available, he did not merely give an opening speech, rather he shared a conceptual view in what could be regarded as a keynote address. The Ombudsman shared with us his agenda and thoughts on religious affairs and beyond. The UN resident coordinator listed the UN commitment to Human Rights in Armenia and FoRB in particular and the UN Special Envoy on Freedom of Religion and Belief inspired us by video message.

During subsequent discussions, many speakers addressed general aspects of the subject and zoomed in on the regional and national situation. Regrettably I could not witness all breakout sessions, nor could I attend all plenary discussions, but I sensed the vibe of so many participants actively engaging, testing comfort zones and accepting challenges.

I sincerely hope reading speeches, statements and reports will make you feel this vibe and experience the breakthrough we achieved: sharing thoughts in a fraternal/sisterly manner.

What a reader who did not participate will regrettably miss, is the atmosphere of the closing dinner. I will never forget chatting with four clerics from Georgia - two Orthodox, a Muslim and a Seventh-Day Adventist – who as true friends shared a meal, different food and different drinks, but indeed being fed together.

After leaving the Caucasus, I regularly went back to PM Pashinyan's opening address, quoting:

“It should be noted that freedom of religion is one of the most important freedoms because I am at least convinced that a person believing in God first of all believes in himself. Consequently, freedom of religion, freedom to believe in God is first of all the freedom of an individual to believe in himself.

Of course, there are such people who believe in themselves, on the contrary, by not believing in God. But in the same way, the human being becomes a key player in the process of self-confidence. This is very important. I mean that freedom of religion is a human being's freedom.”

But I would also like you to contemplate the following quote: “The fact that national minorities feel comfortable in Armenia is vivid evidence of what I just said. I mean that providing guarantees for the preservation of national and religious minorities’ identity in Armenia is a matter of principled approach for the Government. They should feel free to preserve, develop and be proud of their ethnic identity.” These words are both a consolation, assurance and a challenge. For many people ethnic and religious identity are almost the same. But for as many they are not.

Your ethnicity is given by birth, but your religion (or lack thereof) – even if coinciding with your ethnicity - is a matter of conscience, and for many a deliberate choice. As the PM said: freedom of religion is a human being’s freedom....

I wish you all pleasant reading and the joy of religious freedom for all!

# **WELCOMING REMARKS**



**Mr. Nikol Pashinyan,  
Prime Minister of Armenia**

It should be noted that freedom of religion is one of the most important freedoms because I am at least convinced that a person believing in God first of all believes in himself. Consequently, freedom of religion, freedom to believe in God is first of all the freedom of an individual to believe in himself.

Of course, there are such people who believe in themselves, on the contrary, by not believing in God. But in the same way, the human being becomes a key player in the process of self-confidence. This is very important. I mean that freedom of religion is a human being's freedom.

Freedom of religion is one of the most important freedoms, and it relates directly to all those values that are universally recognized by mankind - whether democracy, transparency, human rights, freedoms, justice or the like. In this regard, I am pleased to note that the Republic of Armenia is a country that is pursuing freedom of religion, freedom of belief and conscience. And especially, New Armenia is fully committed to these values. The fact that national minorities feel comfortable in Armenia is vivid evidence of what I just said. I mean that providing guarantees for the preservation of

national and religious minorities' identity in Armenia is a matter of principled approach for the Government. They should feel free to preserve, develop and be proud of their ethnic identity.

Generally speaking, religion and inter-religious relations are perhaps the most important topic because it has long been accepted that the differences between religion and religious perceptions are usually separated from each other. But we consider this situation quite strange also because most of the popular or major religions originate from the same God. And this makes us say that the dividing lines do not emanate from people who deal with religions but from their interpretation, because our faith and conviction is that religion is actually supposed to unite peoples; religion is indeed for peace and harmony; religion is in fact a way to happiness.

And if it is true that the dividing lines were drawn by virtue of religious doctrines, that is, by giving different interpretations, then dividing lines can be removed in the same way by those who gave such interpretations with new approaches, and the most important precondition here is mutual respect for others' beliefs, emotions, ideologies and perceptions.

Bearing this in mind, I attach special importance to this forum which highlights the need for mutual respect. Conferences like this should help us come to a common interpretation of the general idea of religious consciousness of peace, freedom, love and harmony.

I do believe that this is possible. I know how challenging it is, but no one should be wary of hardships, especially in New Armenia. I want the forum to pursue this difficult task with vehemence and courage.

Thank you.



**Mr. Arman Tatoyan,  
Human Rights Defender of Armenia**

Honorable Prime Minister, Dear Mr. Ter-Gabrielyan, Your Excellency Ambassadors, dear representatives of the Armenian Holy Apostolic Church, religious communities and organizations, dear guests from Georgia, ladies and gentlemen. I welcome the conference which relates to a sensitive and topical issue: freedom of religion and the key related issues in Armenia, Georgia and the world.

I congratulate the Eurasia Partnership Foundation on the occasion of conducting such an important event.

This event is dedicated to the values which are irreplaceable for the life and functioning of every person and for normal development of every society. Of course, each person has a right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. This right includes the freedom to change one's religion or convictions, as well as the freedom to express those alone or jointly with others, privately or in public. In addition, this right is guaranteed both under the international obligations undertaken by our country and by our Constitution. The freedom of the activity of religious organizations

is also guaranteed in the Republic of Armenia, and has been enshrined in the foundations of the Constitution as well. I would like to stress the importance of the thesis voiced by the Prime Minister, that freedom of the activity of religious organizations and of the activities of religious minorities are considered to be of principal importance in the country and should be protected. This is an extremely important thesis that, I think, reflects an important bar set for the protection of human rights as well. It is an undisputable fact that freedom of thought, conscience and religion is one of the foundations of a democratic state and a civilized society. This is not only a vital element forming the identity of persons with certain affiliation and their perceptions of life, but also is an important safeguard for all those persons who, for instance, are not followers of any religion or do not have any religious convictions. Pluralism, which is an inseparable part of a democratic society and often is achieved at a high cost in the course of centuries, depends on this freedom. A prohibition derives from here, aiming to exclude any coercion in pursuing a person to disclose his or her religious convictions or religious identity or to change those convictions. This is an absolute prohibition constituting a fundamental safeguard of this freedom, and our country has an undertaking to guarantee it. Freedom of thought, conscience and religion are closely linked with other human rights and freedoms as well. For instance, the high level of protection of this freedom directly influences freedom of speech, freedom of gatherings and assembly and a number of other values as well. Notwithstanding these important safeguards, it should be highlighted that for our country, for our statehood and in the life of our people the Armenian Holy Apostolic Church has played an exceptionally important, a truly historic role. The role and the mission of the Armenian Holy Apostolic Church, of course, have been important in preserving the national values and traditions, as well as in protecting human rights. With all this said, for the issues pertinent to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, the exclusion of discrimination and unfair stigmatizing treatment is of key importance for the social harmony and peaceful coexistence of persons and groups of persons having different religious convictions and views. Any religion-based discrimination should be excluded, and here I also would like to mention that the Armenian nation itself, in the beginning of the previous century, suffered at first hand the cruel consequences of discrimination, including religious discrimination, and the consequences of torture and stigmatization, loss of life and property derived

from that discrimination. We ourselves are to treat religious views, freedom of conscience and thought of every person respectfully, highly appreciating the role of each of those values.

For me, as the Human Rights Defender, protection of freedom of thought, religion and confession is of the utmost importance, and here the efforts are being taken both on the level of personal, of course, cases, and through the conduct of activities advocating for improvement of the legal system. I will bring just one example of successful cooperation, one that we had with Eurasia Partnership Foundation, where based on an issue raised by the Foundation, I applied to the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights to submit the draft of the respective Law of the Republic of Armenia to an expert assessment. Now, along with our partners from both the Government and civil society, and the international partners, we are in the phase of re-developing that draft. I would also like to mention that the Human Rights Defender will be actively involved and undertakes to be highly committed to cooperate with the partners in this field.

I do think that this is one of the issues that must have inclusive participation as one of the underlying principles, since that is the only way by which we can be successful when dealing with this important issue.

Thank you for your attention.





**H.E. Mr. Jos Douma,  
Ambassador of the Kingdom of the Netherlands to  
Armenia and Georgia**

Dear Prime Minister, Ombudsman, members of Armenian government and parliament, representatives of the Armenian Apostolic Church and of the Georgian Orthodox Church and of other religious organizations, colleagues and friends,

What a pleasure to be back and continue our discussion on Contemporary Issues of Freedom of Religion or Belief in Armenia, Georgia and beyond. I have fond memories of our last meeting here in the Marriott, two years ago and later in a smaller setting on tolerance in the nearby Congress hotel. Thank you Isabella, Kolya and Gevorg for all the work done and for bringing such an impressive crowd together – both quantitatively and qualitatively.

Two years ago, I discussed in my opening remarks a specific aspect of many religions that tends to be forgotten often: the missionary zeal, which may lead to issues like perceived intolerance, to irritation and to policies to counter it. Maybe the international audience, evangelicals – and if here – Jehovah witnesses, recognize themselves in this missionary zeal, whereas local dignitaries might recognize the dangers of proselytism – in slang ‘stealing souls.’

Both are implicitly central in the general discussion on Freedom of Religion and Belief and might pop up today again.

But today, I'd like to focus briefly on some different aspects.

I'd like to start with thanking the previous speakers, the Prime Minister and the Ombudsman, for their very relevant and brave addresses. The statement by Prime Minister Pashinyan being more conceptual and wider – having the effect on me of a penetrating Friday morning sermon – and the introduction of the Ombudsman being more on policy aspects, discussing tasks for government and politics.

Freedom of Religion and Belief is one of human rights, but it addresses quite often not only states, but also the population at large and vested institutions like churches.

It then has to do with the question how countries perceive themselves.

At yesterday evening's reception, one of the speakers described both Georgia and Armenia as Christian nations. And – historically speaking – rightly so! The majority of both populations see both countries as Christian, your nationhood was formed by Christianity and it is clear that your mainstream culture is Christian – by all means.

But both nations are also identified by minorities that have been and still are constituting parts of that same nation. I hope that today we will be able to recognize both: the Christian nature of both societies and the religious diversity of both nations.

But we might also dig a bit deeper. It's clear from literature, both fiction and non-fiction, official and popular, that both Armenia and Georgia see themselves as especially privileged by the grace of God as Christian nations, deserving a special relationship between the state and the “main” church. Mr. Prime Minister, you already made some very relevant remarks about this. But you took action already some weeks ago, when receiving the Catholicos in your office. At that occasion you inaugurated a “Working Group on State-Church Relations”. Your address was published on the government's website.

Preparing for today, I read the address again. And, Mr. Prime Minister, you take a starting point exactly on this position, the deep and warm relationship between the Armenian church and the Armenian nation-state. But you also make important references to the different responsibilities state and church have.

One passage that struck me as leading for today's discussion, is where you relate to the national identity. I quote: "However, we likewise need to understand to what extent our views coincide in terms of preserving identity and what issues exist in this context that we should discuss".

And, another one, relating to education: "the Mother See suggests teaching the history of the Armenian Apostolic Church in our schools. In this context, the first question is whether we should set a distinction between the history of the Armenian Apostolic Church and the history of the Armenian people, and if we do, why and how we put this distinction, and so on."

I repeat the last words: "and if we do, why and how we put this distinction, and so on".

Closing, I'd like to refer to the planned discussion on competing rights, this afternoon. The Ombudsman put FoRB already in perspective as one of the human rights. And he listed some of those rights – albeit not sexual orientation, 'being who you are'. Especially in connection to that right I see potential conflict.

The metaphysical nature of most religions, their history, traditions and reference to old scriptures make it difficult to interact with and respond to new developments and new insights. Then, given the fact that the religion feels inspired by someone transcendent and is founded on old wisdom and insight, make it inflexible and the road to conflict is open. I hope we can make headway on this issue in the afternoon and close this conference in peace and understanding.

Society is waiting ...



**Mr. Shombi Sharp,  
UN Resident Representative to Armenia**

Distinguished Prime Minister Pashinyan, Mr. Tatoyan, Ambassador Douma, Mr. Ter-Gabrielyan, let me just welcome all of you. This is really an incredibly vibrant hall with representatives from civil society, faith organizations, government and parliament across the two countries Georgia, Armenia and beyond. And I have to say that for me this a special format in particular having served three and half years, actually almost four years in wonderful საქართველო (Sakartvelo) and now having spent an amazing, just over one year in Hayastan. So I would like to say, in particular, to everybody, “barev dzez, bari or bolorid”, as well as “მოგესალმებით ძვირფასო კოლეგებო” (mogesalmebit dzvirpaso kolegebo).

I would like to thank, of course, the Eurasia Partnership Foundation for bringing us all together here today (it is quite an important role today that civil society plays here in Armenia, as in Georgia) and of course to thank the government of the Kingdom of the Netherlands for also making this possible and also supporting a number of other important initiatives and projects in this space.

As the secretary-general Antonio Guterres said, reminded at the General Assembly actually just last month, “In today’s world the world must stand together. We must come to those who seek to demonize and divide. And we must defend the freedoms of religion and belief as part of this path.”

Colleagues, the international moral and legal basis and the mechanisms for these rights as a core element of democracy and human identity have long been clear. In fact, the cornerstone, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, was agreed by all the United Nations member states over 70 years ago, which states very firmly that everyone has the rights to freedom of thought, conscience and religion: and this includes the freedom to change religion or belief and freedom in public or private to manifest one’s religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance. Building on the Universal Declaration, freedom of religion and belief has been underlined in international law since 1973 through the international covenant on civil and political rights. Today the UN Human Rights Committee closely monitors the implementation of these rights, with respective freedom of religion, especially in terms of religious minorities within countries, and both Armenia and Georgia have received recommendations from the committee in previous years in this regard and have made steps forward, and the United Nations remain ready and willing to work on these issues, the details of which we will discuss later in the course of the day. For example, here in Armenia in recent years the Constitution of 2015 includes Article 41 on freedom of thought, consciousness and religion, which very closely mirrors the words in the language of the Universal Declaration.

The UN Human Rights Committee also maintains the leading independent expert: a special rapporteur on Freedom of Religion and Belief with mandate to reach out to member states, to help and to assist and identify specific obstacles to these freedoms and to make recommendations. Later today we have the opportunity to hear from Mr. Shaheed a video address and he remains, I know, always open to come to countries, on country visits and work together with you.

Now I think it has been mentioned that Armenia and Georgia are both countries that put respect towards the protection of the human rights at the very top of the national agenda and, as the Prime Minister mentioned, in the last year we, here in Armenia, have enjoyed the new Armenia following

the transformational and peaceful revolution of April and May last year. But even in these countries, as has been mentioned by the previous speakers, these issues are very complex. Many issues are actually on the border of private and public domains. One can sometimes see competing rights, for example the scope of religion in public schools and the ability to freely express views about religion in a public sphere, in social media space in mass media, in political life and in the justice sector, just to name a few of these issues. So these are not easy, but that's exactly why we are all here and why this conversation today is so fundamentally important. The topic of freedom of religion also fits very well with the secretary general's focus on the prevention of conflict. Too often in the past, conflicts, both ancient and recent conflicts between or within states have been fueled by discrimination against specific groups, including on religious grounds, as well as by a lack of trust and, in fact, it is estimated that three-quarters of the world's major conflicts currently have cultural dimensions. So bridging the gap between cultures is both urgent and necessary for peace, stability and development, and interreligious dialogue is a powerful tool to help achieve that. I would say it is also often a misconception in some corners that religious faiths are not engaged in the promotion of human rights in a formal sense as we understand it, but this is clearly not the case. The United Nations and others in the international community are working closely with many different faith-based organizations in many different areas. We will hear a bit later about the Faith for Rights initiative of the office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights for example, which categorizes the involvement of religious communities in the promotion and protection of human rights. Here in Armenia the UN is very proud and honored to work with the Armenian Apostolic Church, with the Armenia Round Table, with other Christian dominations, who are also here present and other faiths to promote human rights and the achievement of the SDG, social and economic development for the country. And this range is quite broad, from helping to prevent domestic violence to improving gender equality, to reducing the harmful effects of prenatal sex selection, to even promoting environmental education awareness and the Sustainable Development Goals more broadly.

Of course, we also partner with the international community in these efforts. I would note, in particular, our partnerships with EU helping through the UN joint program on human rights to implement some of the EU budgetary supports targeting anti-discrimination issues, including the right to

freedom of religion and belief in this country. So I think I would finally join ambassador Douma in recognizing an important initiative launched both by Prime Minister Pashinyan and his Holiness the Catholicos Karekin II to launch the working group on State of Nations in March of this year, I guess this is a very important mechanism and tool to work through these complex issues as we move ahead. So I hope finally that today we'll meet the ambition of the organizers and all of us here, and we are very confident that we will, that during the sessions and in between the sessions we can move forward towards feeling the realization and aspirations both of Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, but also the aspirations of all of the people, the governments of Georgia, Armenia and beyond, to live together in these two wonderful countries in the region and globally to exercise everyone's human rights, and for freedom and peace with development. So let me say "shnorhakalutyun", "დიდი მადლობა"(didi madloba) and perhaps risking a bit of levity giving the day and the subject my favorite phrase in Georgian "მადლობა ღმერთს პარასკევია" (madloba xmerts paraskevia). Thank God it's Friday.



**Mr. Gevorg Ter-Gabrielyan,  
Chief Executive Officer of Eurasia Partnership Foundation**

Thank you.

Dear Mr. Prime Minister,

Dear guests,

Now, after several speeches delivered in English, again I am speaking with you in Armenian. I am very glad to see all of you here today, for various reasons. Number one reason is that at this moment we are sitting with the highest representative of the state and are discussing the issues together. We, as a non-governmental organization without any official status, and the international community – along with us. Previously, the international community would engage with us in discussing this kind of issues, but the state and the government, with rare exceptions, would never actively participate in a discussion of these matters. Secondly, of course, I would like to mention the Armenia-Georgia unified approach towards these matters, which is a standalone value in itself. Our organization, in general, if it has any strength whatsoever, is strong for its ability to bring people together,



who would not meet otherwise. We work on Armenia-Azerbaijan dialogue, we work on Armenia-Turkey dialogue, we work to bring together religious organizations and to deliberate jointly upon those difficult matters that have been pointed out by the previous speakers. And it seems that there has been no impediment so far for the Armenia-Georgia dialogue, and it should take place everlastingly. Nevertheless, despite the activation of this dialogue within the course of recent years and especially during the last year, I have a feeling that every time when such an occasion is created, it must be a special one. At least I do have a feeling that our regional ties, our cross texture, still, have plenty and plenty room to grow. Therefore, I welcome our Georgian guests and also wish that, as a result of this conference, specific ideas will be developed of specifically Armenian-Georgian relevance, and that the discussion of some Armenia-Georgia issues will continue. And I also wish that it is not going to take place on a conference-by-conference basis. The conferences, though, are incredibly important and, in this regard, we cannot forget, of course, that this is taking place thanks to the Government of the Netherlands and Mr. Douma, who invested special efforts so that this program became a reality. Our cooperation has been going on for several years now. And thanks to that cooperation we managed to transcend many boundaries – not only in terms of arranging this conference, or gathering various religious organizations at one table, but also in terms of bridging the attitudes of the people towards the processes taking place in Armenia. I would bring as an example a result that is particularly important to me: our research “Manifestations of tolerance and intolerance in Armenian literature,” that we conducted two years ago. Till now, with the print run being fully distributed long time ago, this research retains high significance and is widely utilized across Armenia. And that is an illustration of one of the principles of our methodology: we do not, so to speak, work as a non-governmental organization, with those strata and groups that agree with us, but rather we want to reach those groups within the Armenian society that do not fully embody contemporary values. They are guardians of traditional values. The whole Armenian people loves literature. When, within the context of studying such a modern and strange-sounding value as tolerance, you analyze literature, this awakens interest towards these values, towards the laws and the very cause that our organization, civil society and the international community have been dealing with. Thus, we try to address this issue not in a so-called conflicting manner, but – the same way as with all other projects – in the form of a dialogue on what our society

is very much divided by: between those who follow traditional values, and those who follow the so-called modern values. In reality, this is an artificial division and, in this regard, a very important thesis has been raised by the Prime Minister, which is of core importance for us as well, for our activity. We consider that a human being is an integrated phenomenon and that various manifestations of his/her identity, the various 'slices' of it are not in a conflict, we do not think that a person is first an employee and secondly a father, or is first a teacher and secondly a mother, having different identities at different times. We try to observe the human being (and this is what constitutes the very essence of human rights) as one integral totality – in all its manifestations. And here, of course, discussion on the topic on what can religion give to this perception, seems to me very important. So many things have been already said about the renewal of the values, which I do not need to refer to anymore and which is considered as very important by our organization as well.

Once again, I extend my gratitude to Mr. Prime Minister, to all the guests who are with us today. I am confident that we are going to have interesting discussions which once again will turn into a guidance – to the effect that our society, our Georgian society, international community and, possibly, our governments take certain steps on a more precise basis, as to where to go in relation to these extremely interesting issues.

Thank you very much!

**SESSION I:  
GLOBAL  
CHALLENGES  
IN THE FIELD OF  
FORB AND THE  
SITUATION  
IN ARMENIA  
AND GEORGIA**



source: Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty

**Mr. Ahmed Shaheed,  
UN Special Rapporteur on FoRB (video message)**

Warm greetings to you all at the annual Regional Conference of the Contemporary Issues of Freedom of Religion or Belief. I am so glad that you have come together to discuss an issue close to my heart and my mandate, that is, the freedom of religion or belief.

In fact, it is not just about freedom of religion or belief. It is also about freedom of thought and conscience as stated in Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. The UN Human Rights Committee also clarified that freedom of religion or belief should be broadly construed so as to protect “theistic, non-theistic and atheistic beliefs, as well as the right not to profess any religion or belief”. So, we are talking about everyone’s right to hold religious or non-religious beliefs. We are also referring to the right to manifest one’s religion or belief; to express one’s thoughts that may be critical of religion or belief; or to simply be loyal to one’s conscience and be whoever they want to be peacefully.

However, we see that in reality, this freedom is not granted everywhere or to everyone. Our societies are becoming more diverse as migration is

growing rapidly. The emerging demographic composition in many countries does not fit the traditional mosaic of many societies. We see that people, whether they are religious or not, conservative or liberal, numerous or few, struggle in different societies to get recognised. Many are often restricted disproportionately in manifesting their identities or beliefs, and in expressing their thoughts freely. As societies have become more diverse, paradoxically, many are becoming more territorial in regard to the public manifestation of religion or belief.

In such a time, it is urgent to unravel misconceptions about the right to freedom of religion or belief, and to promote understanding among different communities. I believe that just as human rights can protect freedom of religion or belief, so too can religions or beliefs advance human rights. But it requires us to promote a climate of religious tolerance as well as a culture of acceptance. We can think and believe differently in matters of faith but when it comes to human rights, such as freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief, we must accept that everyone has equal rights and is equal in human dignity.

It is important that we have regular open dialogue at all levels to enhance each other's understanding and acceptance. We may not subscribe to the same set of beliefs but we can be more civil about our differences and foster coexistence and societal inclusion. States have a role in facilitating such dialogue, and a duty to be an impartial guarantor of everyone's human rights. This requires the recognition not just of the fact of pluralism, but also embracing the value of pluralism and diversity.

Therefore, this conference is timely to bring people together to discuss the many challenges we face in our societies today and build a strong network of solidarity to promote and protect everyone's right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief!

I wish you all a fruitful deliberation! Thank you.



**Mr. Kishan Manocha,  
OSCE/ODIHR Senior Adviser on FoRB**

Despite a robust scheme for its protection and a considerable range of governmental, intergovernmental and civil society efforts to advance it, freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) is proving to be a difficult human right to guarantee and protect. Indeed, there is evidence to suggest that FoRB is the fastest eroding human right in the world.

I would like to offer some reflections in light of the current situation.

Some of the challenges to advancing FoRB for all derives from increasingly sceptical attitudes towards human rights in general. Obstacles to the full and free exercise of FoRB are taking place in a deteriorating environment for human rights generally across the world. There has been a notable retreat from universalism in many places. The universalist worldview is coming under relentless assault from authoritarians, populists and purveyors of an aggressive, chauvinistic nationalism. Some people are frightened by the idea of a shrinking universe. The world is coming to their doorstep as a result of the internet and migration flows and they fear this. They reject the greater interconnectedness and openness of societies and they try to keep

out “otherness”. They gravitate towards their own kind. Diversity and multiculturalism are seen as threats, they dilute “core” identity and traditional ways of living and introduce foreign values. FoRB and other universal human rights are increasingly falling victim to these pernicious forces.

Another problem stems from within the world of FoRB advocacy itself, which has been infected by some of the attitudes just described. At the same time as rhetoric on behalf of FoRB has grown louder, in recent years some of its advocates have grown less sympathetic to FoRB for certain religious communities and non-believers. Indeed, in some quarters, FoRB is being promoted in a tribal and exclusionary manner. In some cases, it would appear that “FoRB” is less about defending the right of religious believers to hold and practice their faith and more about defending the right of the majority to denigrate and abuse a vulnerable minority.

Finally, there are many misunderstandings and misconceptualisations about the nature, status and scope of FoRB as set out in universal standards. These stem, in large part, from a hardened secularist attitude towards religion in general and poor literacy about specific religious belief systems. FoRB has important individual, collective, institutional, educative and communicative dimensions, but unfortunately, we see an ever-increasing presence of a reductionist approach to, or understanding of, FoRB that seeks to limit it to mere belief or private worship while neglecting the equal protection given under international law to conviction-based practices, collective expression and manifestation, and religion’s public involvement. This is a very worrying phenomenon as it has real-world effects. Misperceptions and inadequate conceptualisations lend intellectual support to excessive restrictions on FoRB, leading to worrying protection gaps for vulnerable/at-risk groups such as migrants, refugees and religious minorities.

## **THE NEED FOR ENABLING ENVIRONMENTS**

FoRB requires enabling or empowering environments that allow people to hold and practice their religion or belief freely. If there is not an enabling environment, then everyone’s rights are violated and not just those who may be experiencing discrimination or persecution. I would like to offer a few reflections on some of the features of such enabling environments.

**One**, there is a need for ongoing dialogue around a holistic understanding of FoRB as a human right underpinned by such key principles as universality, dignity, freedom, equality and non-discrimination. Conceptual clarity around the very substance of FoRB would seem necessary if States, civil society organizations and religious or belief communities are to build a common and coherent approach to advancing FoRB and related human rights for all.

In this regard, it should be remembered that.

- FoRB is linked with the idea of humanity in all its diversity and needs to be promoted unequivocally as a right for all people, because when it is restricted to one group it does indeed become a force for harm, not good. FoRB should not be used as a weapon of exclusion, and instead we should defend the freedoms of those with whom we deeply disagree, but which do not harm us
- FoRB has different aspects – individual, collective, institutional, educative and communicative. It is about freedom to as well as freedom from, freedom to choose and freedom to change. It also requires that the state serve as the trustworthy guarantor of FoRB for everyone; this means that States should provide an open, inclusive framework in which religious or belief pluralism can unfold freely and without discrimination. This requires overcoming any exclusivist settings; what must be overcome is an understanding in which the State identifies itself with one particular religion or belief at the expense of an equal and non-discriminatory treatment of followers of other persuasions.
- There is no hierarchy of human rights, all of which are ultimately “universal, indivisible and interrelated and interdependent”, to cite a formula coined at the 1993 World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna. In this regard, we need to avoid two extremes: FoRB as a “lesser” or “secondary” right; FoRB as “the first and foremost right”. Neither approach reflects adequately the complex realities on the ground. FoRB is closely related to and therefore cannot be isolated from, for example, freedom of opinion and expression, freedom of association and assembly, and rights related to gender equality and non-discrimination. FoRB is an inalienable and fundamental human



right which is integral to a host of important social goods, but this does not mean that it is more important than other rights. FoRB should not be used to restrict enjoyment of other human rights and vice versa; these human rights tend to rise and fall together.

**Two**, efforts to advance FoRB for all are best achieved in environments that embody universal values. There needs to be a commitment on the part of all actors to the universality of FoRB and other human rights. A key question here is: how can we help people make international standards on FoRB, and the values that underpin them, their own? An important lesson is that while FoRB interventions should not lose sight of universal norms, they must also have strong local anchorage/roots. Context matters and with particular force in this field. So interventions to promote FoRB must be locally relevant and resonant. This requires strong local actors and ownership. It is important to listen carefully to local voices, especially religious or belief communities and their leaders who hold important local knowledge and are likely to be key actors in promoting or undermining FoRB for all in their societies. In most countries, however, local FoRB leadership is weak, divided and isolated, pointing to the need for active engagement with, and support to, local actors through well-crafted capacity building, training, and networking. Such support needs to be coupled with broader efforts to strengthen the local legitimacy of FoRB, e.g. through processes of “vernacularisation”, helping people understand how and why FoRB is relevant to their reality, their lived experience.

**Three**, it has been encouraging to see efforts to engage a range of important stakeholders in the creation of such enabling environments. These commonly include State authorities, religious and belief communities, civil society organizations, national human rights institutions and equality bodies, academic institutions and schools, the media. Nevertheless, there is an urgent need to diversify the range of actors involved. Broader alliances and coalitions are needed to advance FoRB for all. Very often, groups and networks that discuss FoRB are self-selecting ones involving people who have been long involved in the topic, e.g. minorities and their activists, etc. How do we engage with those who might exclude themselves or be left out of important conversations about FoRB? One way to do this is to mainstream issues of FoRB into other conversations rather than making it a standalone topic. How can FoRB be linked to issues that people care about,

for example peace, climate change, sustainable development, and made relevant to these important discussions? This could be a way of ensuring that more people and more institutions realise the value of FoRB.

**Four**, the role of education, formal and informal, is a critical part of building and sustaining open, inclusive and religiously diverse environments underpinned by respect for FoRB and other human rights. Young people, especially, need access to education that teaches them, from the earliest years, about the idea of humanity in all its diversity, including in the domain on religion and belief. Education about religions and beliefs usually focuses on children and young people, but neglects the vital role of continuing education for adults. Education and exchange at all levels are vital to support inclusive approaches to religion and belief in society. Further, there is also an educational responsibility that falls to religious or belief communities, teachers, community leaders, families, civil society to change attitudes, values and behaviours of individuals.



**Mr. John Kinahan,  
Forum 18**

I'll speak for just over 13 minutes using examples from Forum 18's work monitoring and analysing FoRB violations in Central Asia<sup>1</sup>, the South Caucasus<sup>2</sup> (on Georgia with the Tolerance and Diversity Institute), Russia<sup>3</sup>, Belarus<sup>4</sup>, Russian-occupied Crimea<sup>5</sup> and Donbas<sup>6</sup>. We also publish occasional analyses on Turkey<sup>7</sup> with the Norwegian Helsinki Committee Turkey Freedom of Belief Initiative<sup>8</sup>. My examples are mainly drawn from those places, and I'll be using them to discuss some global challenges in relation to FoRB and security.

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1 Forum 18 News Service, <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=27>

2 *Ibid*, <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=20>

3 *Ibid*, <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=10>

4 *Ibid*, <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=16>

5 *Ibid*, <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=86>

6 *Ibid*, <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=87>

7 *Ibid*, <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=68>

8 Freedom of Belief Initiative, <http://www.inancozgurlugugirisimi.org/>

Let's first think about the idea that more security requires less human rights. The *Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR)* and the *International*

*Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)* both begin: "recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world"<sup>9</sup>. During the Troubles, as we called them in Ireland, over 3,600 people were killed<sup>10</sup>. In 1983 Interpol found that Northern Ireland was the most dangerous place in the world to be a police officer. Yet today it's no more dangerous than anywhere else in Western Europe, and almost all the community strongly supports policing. Why? As the then-Chief Constable of Northern Ireland stated in 2009, human rights must be at the core of policing<sup>11</sup>. Ending the Troubles required the post-1998 introduction of strong institutional protection of everyone's human rights<sup>12</sup>. This strengthened democracy and the rule of law, and laid a strong foundation for reconciliation through listening and understanding the experiences of people on opposing sides<sup>13</sup>. This produced the popular support for law enforcement essential for any society's security. No government can afford to neglect human rights, including FoRB, if it genuinely wants security - especially against terrorists claiming a religious motivation.

So we might want to question the idea that more security requires less respect for human rights.

Do the ways we think about FoRB help us understand reality, or leave us blind to reality and threats to everyone's freedom? In Russia only five percent at most of Russians attend Orthodox services. So if we think of Russia as basically Orthodox under the Moscow Patriarchate, with a few

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9 UN General Assembly, International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, 16 December 1966, United Nations, Treaty Series, vol. 999, p. 171, <http://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/ccpr.aspx>

10 CAIN Web Service, Violence - Information on Deaths During the Conflict <http://www.cain.ulst.ac.uk/issues/violence/deaths.htm>

11 House of Commons, Home Affairs Committee, Policing of the G20 Protests, Eighth Report of Session 2008–09, <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200809/cmselect/cmhaff/418/418.pdf>

12 See e.g. a lecture given in 2000 by Professor Brice Dickson, then Chief Commissioner of the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission <http://bihr.org.uk/sites/default/files/Brice-Dickson-transcript.pdf>

13 See Reconciliation and Human Rights in Northern Ireland: A False Dichotomy?, Maggie Beirne and Colin Knox, *Journal of Human Rights Practice*, Vol. 6 Number 1, March 2014, pp. 26–50, <https://academic.oup.com/jhrp/article-pdf/6/1/26/6461674/hut032.pdf> and Rebecca Dudley, *Human Rights and Reconciliation*, Rebecca Dudley, Corymeela Community 2013, <https://www.corymeela.org/cmsfiles/resources/think-peaces/think-peaces-10.pdf>

smaller groups, we can overlook the centuries-old communities of non-Moscow Patriarchate Orthodox, Buddhists, non-Orthodox Christians, Jews, indigenous pagans and Muslims, as well as atheists and followers of many other beliefs such as Hare Krishna devotees. There are claims made that only some within Orthodoxy, Islam, Judaism, Buddhism and [non-Orthodox] Christianity are “traditional religions”. This phrase began to be used in 1995 to advocate for discrimination - for example, for privileges for the Moscow Patriarchate Orthodox but not for the historically far more “traditional” Old Believer Orthodox<sup>14</sup>.

Today in 2019 there is a nationwide Jehovah’s Witnesses ban. The UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Opinion and Expression David Kaye, then-SR on the Freedoms of Peaceful Assembly and Association Maina Kiai, and SR on FoRB Ahmed Shaheed stated that “the use of counter-extremism legislation in this way to confine freedom of opinion, including religious belief, expression and association to that which is state-approved is unlawful and dangerous, and signals a dark future for all religious freedom in Russia”<sup>15</sup>. There are increasing numbers of prisoners of conscience jailed for exercising FoRB, including six Muslims jailed for periods of between two and eight years for meeting without state permission with other Muslims to study theologian Said Nursi’s writings, pray, eat, and drink tea together<sup>16</sup>. One of those jailed Muslims, Yevgeny Kim, was last month made stateless by being stripped of his Russian citizenship and awaits deportation to his country of birth Uzbekistan<sup>17</sup> – itself a serious FoRB violator<sup>18</sup>. Russian Jehovah’s Witnesses are increasingly being jailed and detained for periods of a year or more, and yesterday, a court confirmed a six-year jail sentence against Dennis Christensen<sup>19</sup>. Well over 180 are known to be being investigated on “extremism” criminal charges, many in detention, under house arrest, or under travel restrictions<sup>20</sup>. And throughout 2018 at least 56 organisations and 103 individuals – Protestants, Jews, Hare Krishna

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14 Forum 18 News Service, [http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2246](http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2246)

15 *Ibid*, [http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2297](http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2297)

16 *Ibid*, [http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2450](http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2450)

17 *Ibid*, [http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2478](http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2478)

18 *Ibid*, <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?country=33>

19 *Ibid*, [http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2479](http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2479)

20 *Ibid*, [http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2480](http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2480)

devotees, Muslims, Catholics, Orthodox, etc. – were prosecuted under “anti-missionary” legal changes with a 90 percent conviction rate. As Hare Krishna lawyer Mikhail Frolov said, “believers don’t understand what they can and can’t do, and because of heavy fines they don’t want to take the risk and therefore significantly reduce their activity, especially in public”<sup>21</sup>.

Unless it is stopped, discrimination – for example in the mass media and in education – can over time also take other countries into what the UN Special Rapporteurs described as “a dark future”.

So we might want to question whether the ways we think about FoRB help us understand reality, or leave us blind to reality and threats to everyone’s freedom.

Is FoRB a threat to security, or are FoRB violations the real threat? As UN Special Rapporteur on FoRB Ahmed Shaheed reminded us today, “we are talking about everyone’s right to hold religious or non-religious beliefs. We are also referring to the right to manifest one’s religion or belief; to express one’s thoughts that may be critical of religion or belief; or to simply be loyal to one’s conscience and be whoever they want to be peacefully”<sup>22</sup>. FoRB violations attack deep-rooted personal identities and values, and both make political and social tensions more difficult to resolve and add new conflicts. FoRB violations normally happen in a context where people cannot express different identities and opinions openly, in societies where the rule of law is weak, which deny women equality, where LGBTI people face attack.

For example, in Kyrgyzstan followers of many different beliefs are concerned at continuing attacks on people because of their beliefs, and the impunity the authorities give such attackers. Violent attacks continue against local Christians and Muslims friendly with Christians after an attack on a Protestant, Eldos Sattar uuly, which left him needing immediate surgery. During a formal police questioning of witnesses, Sattar uuly and his lawyer were verbally and physically attacked. Kyrgyzstan has a long record of not bringing perpetrators of violent attacks to justice, including state officials who incited attacks on people trying to bury their dead<sup>23</sup>.

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21 *Ibid*, [http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2474](http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2474)

22 Video message to the “Contemporary Issues of Freedom of Religion or Belief in Armenia, Georgia and beyond” conference in Yerevan on 24 May 2019.

23 [http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2460](http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2460)

It is impossible to understand FoRB violations against anyone unless one looks at FoRB from an all human rights for all people perspective. As former UN Special Rapporteur on FoRB Asma Jahangir – a Pakistani lawyer who defended those accused of blasphemy and women against rape and discrimination – commented: “When I am asked which community is persecuted most, I always reply ‘human beings’”<sup>24</sup>.

So we might want to focus on the freedom in “freedom of religion and belief”, as an empowering freedom for everyone essential for everyone’s freedom and security.

Many states use “security” as an excuse for violating FoRB, even though their international legal obligations forbid this<sup>25</sup>. Former UN Special Rapporteur on FoRB Heiner Bielefeldt wrote in 2016 that: “Freedom of religion or belief rightly has been termed a “gateway” to other freedoms, including freedom of expression and freedom of peaceful assembly and association. There can be no free religious community life without respect for those other freedoms, which are closely intertwined with the right to freedom of religion or belief itself. This is exactly what worries authoritarian Governments and often causes them to curb freedom of religion or belief”<sup>26</sup>.

As the *OSCE ODIHR/Venice Commission Joint Guidelines on the Legal Personality of Religion or Belief Communities*<sup>27</sup> note: “States have developed a number of practices involving, for example, police control, surveillance, restrictive measures including the closing of places of worship, confiscation of property, financial sanctions, imprisonment, blocking access to chaplaincy services, restricting the dissemination or ownership of religious literature, or restricting the freedom to convince others of one’s religion or belief”.

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24 at the Prague commemoration of the 25th anniversary of the Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief.

25 “Freedom to manifest one’s religion or beliefs may be subject only to such limitations as are prescribed by law and are necessary to protect public safety, order, health, or morals or the fundamental rights and freedoms of others.” See also the *interpretative UN Human Rights Committee General Comment 22* [http://www.tbinternet.ohchr.org/\\_layouts/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CCPR%2fC%2f21%2fRev.1%2fAdd.4&Lang=en](http://www.tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CCPR%2fC%2f21%2fRev.1%2fAdd.4&Lang=en)

26 UN General Assembly, Elimination of all forms of religious intolerance, 2 August 2016, A/71/269, [http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Religion/A-71-269\\_en.pdf](http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Religion/A-71-269_en.pdf)

27 OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, *Guidelines on the Legal Personality of Religion or Belief Communities*, <http://www.osce.org/odihr/139046>

Kazakhstan, for example, in 2018 proposed new restrictions which among many other things included bans on sharing the beliefs of religious communities denied state permission to exist, and confiscating all religious literature that has not passed state censorship. The regime claimed that this implemented its human rights obligations, and that people who exercise FoRB without state permission are a “risk group” who may get involved in what the regime calls “terrorism”<sup>28</sup>.

As Fionnuala Ní Aoláin, the UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism, pointed out last Monday on her Kazakhstan country visit, in relation to the targeting of religious and civil society groups: “The use of extremism laws against political groups and critical voices is a worrisome practice and detracts from the genuine and much-needed work globally of addressing ... terrorism challenges”<sup>29</sup>.

So we might want to ask whether “security” measures are what they claim to be, or are really about protecting unjust rulers.

Dictatorships make great efforts to deceive people. For example, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Russia all make extravagant claims of “religious tolerance” or state-sponsored “religious dialogue”. Such meetings and their foreign guests never seriously publicly address the reality of the host’s systemic and increasing FoRB violations<sup>30</sup>. Kazakhstan’s commitment to “dialogue” may be judged by, among other things, the arrest this month of Aslan Sagutdinov for holding a blank piece of paper in a square in Oral<sup>31</sup>. Such regimes’ alleged “religious dialogue” falsifies reality and signals that human rights, the rule of law, and freedom are of no importance. And can any “dialogue” worthy of the name, with the trust that is essential for this, be facilitated by a regime which steadily worsens its flagrant breaches of the human rights it has solemnly promised to implement?

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28 Forum 18 News Service, [http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2384](http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2384)

29 OHCHR, Kazakhstan: UN expert urges reform of law and practice on terrorism and extremism, <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=24620&LangID=E>

30 Forum 18 News Service, [http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=1939](http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1939)

31 Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty, Meta Protest: Kazakh Man Detained Holding Blank Poster, <http://www.rferl.org/a/meta-protest-kazakh-man-detained-holding-blank-poster/29926716.html>



As the *European Union Guidelines on the promotion and protection of freedom of religion or belief*<sup>32</sup> state: “Religious tolerance as well as intercultural and interreligious dialogue must be promoted in a human rights perspective, ensuring respect of freedom of religion or belief, freedom of expression and other human rights and fundamental freedoms”. If this happens, a context for fruitful, wide-ranging interreligious dialogue is facilitated. This can open the door to co-operative constructive action on many issues, such as environmental protection and tackling poverty.

For as then-UN Special Rapporteur on the Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and of Association Maina Kiai said on a 2015 country visit to Kazakhstan: “the robust exercise of human rights and the maintenance of peace and harmony are mutually reinforcing goals. Indeed, the best guarantor of stability is ensuring that all people living in Kazakhstan fully enjoy their rights as endorsed by the Government through its voluntary ratification of international human rights law”<sup>33</sup>.

So we might want to ask whether our own actions and words empower people exercising their FoRB and other human rights, or empower their governmental oppressors.

Serious FoRB violations signal that the regimes responsible are not genuinely interested in security, but only in retaining their unjust grip on power. The rule of law and the fundamental freedoms of religion and belief, expression, association, and assembly reinforce each other. Indeed, current UN Special Rapporteur on FoRB Ahmed Shaheed has stated that the lack of FoRB and linked fundamental freedoms in his home country of the Maldives is directly connected to the lack of an independent parliament or judiciary<sup>34</sup>. The challenge we face is this: how can we foster genuine security, by giving people what the *OSCE ODIHR/Venice Commission Joint Guidelines on the Legal Personality of Religion or Belief Communities*<sup>35</sup> calls “the dignity they deserve as members of the human family”.

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32 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. [http://consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms\\_data/docs/pressdata/EN/foraff/137585.pdf](http://consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/EN/foraff/137585.pdf)

33 OHCHR, Statement by the Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association at the conclusion of his visit to the Republic of Kazakhstan, <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=15517&LangID=E>

34 speaking in the Bundestag in Berlin on 14 September 2016.

35 OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, Guidelines on the Legal Personality of Religion or Belief Communities, <https://www.osce.org/odihr/139046>



**Ms. Nina Pirumyan,  
Office of the Human Rights Defender, Chief of the  
Research and Educational Center, Armenia**

Thanks for the invitation and opportunity to participate in a discussion dedicated to protection of human rights and particularly, to a right of the utmost importance – freedom of thought, conscience and religion; a discussion which is a unique forum for engagement of the stakeholders and for the exchange of thoughts.

The activities and the scope of authorities of the Armenian Human Rights Defender as a national institution for protection of human rights extend to all the spheres of protection of human rights. Certain principles have been developed within the course of operation of the Defender's institution, which enable us to relate to concerns of both each person individually and of certain groups of the society, as well as to raise those concerns. Moreover, human rights-related issues are being voiced not only on individual level by bringing the attention of the state to specific complaints or potential violations of human rights, but also on an institutional or systemic level in general.

Besides that, it should be noted that during the discussion on sensitive issues pertaining to human rights, the educational component is very

important, conducting discussions is important. In this regard also, the Human Rights Defender's Office of Armenia has a unique role to play in terms of getting all the interested persons engaged in discussion.

A topical issue is certainty of domestic legislative regulations pertaining to freedom of thought, conscience and religion and the process of bringing them into line with international standards, taking into account that the government has this commitment and is currently in the process of legislative reforms. Moreover, the Human Right's Defender's Office of Armenia has presented its expert opinion on these legislative changes in the light of the standards of protection of human rights.

Analysis of international jurisprudence on this right speaks to the fact of its continuous development, which is most vividly illustrated by the dissenting opinions of the judges of the European Court of Human Rights, as well as the changes, in some cases, in the legal positions of the Court itself. For instance, in *Lautsi and others v Italy*, the Court earlier had found a violation of Article 9 in relation to the claim of the Applicants that presence of depictions of crucifixion scenes in the classrooms of the Italian public schools was in violation of Article 2 of Protocol 1, namely – of the right of upbringing a child in accordance to own (atheistic) convictions. Eventually, though, the Grand Chamber of the Court found in its judgment of 18 March 2011 that presence of depictions of crucifixion scenes in the classrooms of the Italian public schools did not amount to preaching of certain religious beliefs or intimidation of students.

Changes of legal criteria and their interpretation is a normal practice, since we are dealing with such a specific area as freedom of thought, conscience and religion and the right to exercise it, which is shaped not only by the factors that are subject to legal regulation, but also by factors that are outside the scope of legal regulation, such as the person's world-view, moral values, etc. And it is a mission of the state to legislatively regulate, to the extent possible, what is subject to legal regulation, pursuing just one goal – to guarantee everybody's freedom of thought, conscience and religion. And if the domestic legislation lacks precise rules or formulas as to how the Government should be legally responding to a particular situation connected to freedom of religion or to the limits of realization of this freedom, the fundamental idea or principle will need to be applied, that

everybody's right should be fully guaranteed and any limitation of it should be necessitated by the rights of others, by the general idea of adhering to democratic standards.

Within the framework of my speech I will address one example of guaranteeing the freedom of thought, conscience and religion, which is not only a matter of theoretical interest or international jurisprudence, but also has certain practical significance, taking into consideration that the Human Rights Defender has raised this issue<sup>36</sup>. More specifically, it pertains to the freedom of thought, conscience and religion with regards to children, the peculiarities of realization of this right, the roles of the Government and the parents, as well as relationship with the child's right to education.

The boundaries of the obligation of the state to ensure a child's right to education on the one hand, and those of the role that the parents should be playing in development of the child's religious perceptions on the other hand, are set out in a number of international documents. The right of a parent to bring up a child in accordance with his/her own philosophical and religious perceptions is a right that is enshrined and protected by international legal norms. Many international legal documents and instruments, including the Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the European Convention on Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, address this right, which has been further interpreted and developed by the European Court of Human Rights.

Thus, Article 18(4) of the ICCPR provides that *[T]he States Parties to the present Covenant undertake to have respect for the liberty of parents and, when applicable, legal guardians to ensure the religious and moral education of their children in conformity with their own convictions.*

Article 2 of Protocol 1 to the ECHR, when guaranteeing every person's right to education, also provides for *the right of parents to ensure education and teaching in conformity with their own religious and philosophical convictions.*

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36 In the Annual Report on 2018 activities the RA Human Rights Defender addressed the situation with regard to guaranteeing children's freedom of conscience in public schools by raising the issue that during the *History of Armenian Church* class the teachers, in some cases, impose religious rites, for instance, prayer or making the sign of the cross, which may contradict the religious convictions of some persons; see at: <http://pashtpan.am/resources/ombudsman/uploads/files/publications/0e3f463c0e6c42f12cb497d483739dec.pdf>

In international documents this is interpreted as a right of parents to direct a child in conformity with their own convictions and abreast of his development. At the same time, the wish of the parents to upbringing their child in conformity with their own convictions – a wish which the state is restricted by and which it has to take into account – does not inherently imply the state's obligation to ensure so-called immunization against other denominations and branches of religion. In other words, in this way the state is not under obligation to keep a child away from communication with other denominations or religious doctrines or to exclude such a possibility.

Analysis of the case-law of the European Court reveals that certain legal rules have been developed in relation to children's freedom of conscience and right to education, teaching of religious ideologies in public entities, and the substance thereof.

Firstly, in reference to Article 2 of Protocol 1 to the Convention, the European Court has found that the holder of this conventional right is the parent and not the child. At the same time, Article 8 and Article 10 guarantee conventional rights – such as freedom of conscience and right to privacy of personal and family life – ensuring those rights for children as well. Consequently, the issues of religious education of children are considered by the Court within the context of the afore-mentioned conventional rights as well, in the light of the general goals of the conventional tool of spreading democratic values. In all those cases where the failure to respect this right of a parent leads to restriction of the child's right to freedom of conscience (*forum internum*), the claim of the child is considered separately: as an interference with the right under Article 10.

The next criteria to be considered by the European Court is the margin of appreciation by the member state. In the Court's case law it has been determined that when developing educational curricula, the state is entitled to directly or indirectly disseminate information of religious or philosophical nature. The content and manner of presenting such information is another issue: the substance of the educational curriculum should be objective, written in a critical way and promoting comprehensiveness. In different situations the European Court deliberated, for instance, on the involvement of children in an event which may, in one way or another, relate to the religious convictions of the child – discussing whether the goals of the given

event may somehow affect the person's religious convictions (e.g. the Court found participation of a pacifist in a parade dedicated to a military event to be incomparable with obliging to participate in an event), and whether there is necessarily a connection between a person's belief and the means of its manifestation, etc.

At the same time, notwithstanding the state's margin of appreciation in development of educational curricula and organization of its educational system, the European Court has introduced the standard of prohibition of pressure or instruction, i.e. the exclusion of any alternative to the exercise of the right. In the terminology of the European Court this prohibition is called 'indoctrination', which is absolutely prohibited as such: religious indoctrination is when the person, including a child, is not given an alternative of choosing or changing his own convictions, it is a barrier, the bordering line, which cannot be trespassed by anybody, including the state. It is incompatible with respect towards the religious and philosophical perceptions of the parents. In conclusion, there can be no margin of appreciation or justification by the state when failing to take into account the wishes of the parents.

Therefore, I think, we, as a state, are tasked with ensuring that the above-mentioned international legal viewpoints and principles become guidelines for the reform of the regulatory legislative framework and in the practice of implementing legislation. At the same time, the substantive specifics of this right hint to us that observation of principles of tolerance and diversity as democratic values is an obligation for all of us – both as preservers of freedom of thought, conscience and religion, as a society, and as status-driven role players in the field of protection of human rights. Consequently, taking into account the current phase of legislative changes in the area discussed, and the expert opinion of the OSCE/ODIHR, the Human Rights Defender's Office is ready to invest its efforts in discussing the legal problems and highlighted issues in this sector, as well as in solving them.



**Mr. Beka Mindiashvili,  
Council of Religions under the Public Defender of Georgia**

Thank you very much. I would like to begin with my salutation to dear Ambassadors, people from non-governmental organizations and I would like to use this chance to offer my gratitude to the Embassy of the Netherlands and Eurasia Partnership Foundation for this good and well-organized conference. This is a good tradition, this is the fourth time already that we are participating in this conference. Unfortunately, I was unable to attend the previous conference in Armenia, but still I would like to offer you my gratitude because I am given an opportunity to talk to you about those challenges, those issues that we find in Georgia from the point of protection of freedom of expression and promotion of the culture of tolerance.

The Council of Religions is represented only by religious unions. I'm underlining this, because Council of Religions, that works from 2005 under the Office of Public Defender of Georgia, is fully independent in its decision making. They could share the vision of the ombudsman, but they make decisions independently, and we, the representatives of the ombudsman office have only the supporting function in the Council. There are 32 different religious communities in this Council. Let me begin my speech by saying

that in Georgia people quite often people are prone to saying that we are historically tolerant people. Maybe historically we are, but quite often people underlining this point do not behave in a tolerant manner. Currently, we are much less tolerant than we used to be. Nowadays, in that sense the situation is similar to what we had from 1990s up to the 2004s, when every day you could see different religious minorities chased and prosecuted, whereas there were cases on non-Orthodox religious unions, when they had the buildings/churches burnt, their prayers interrupted, mass cases of physical attacks. Georgia has lost several cases at the European Court of Human Rights in these regards. I can say that unfortunately during these years it became our business card to say that in Georgia religions are not tolerated.

In the post-Soviet space, in the period when religious unions and religious minorities did not have possibility to get registered and exercise many of their rights, Georgia was the only country which provided them space to survive. But this situation has changed since 2004-2005 when various religious extremist groups were arrested and then the legal regime changed. The Ombudsman, the Tolerance Center under the auspices of the Ombudsman and the Religious Council have taken and still undertake very active participation in these process, such as simplification of registration for the religious unions. We can say that today we have such legal system, which allows all religious unions to register, they can become public law legal entities, but practice the status of the private law. This is very useful because it does not allow the state to influence or control them, and in particular the state cannot control their financial independence and education.

Since 2005, the laws on general education has been changed. This law has now restricted the interventions and insider role of Orthodox Church in the general education system at schools. Now we have a law according to which the school system and religion are separated from each other. Academic process is separated from the religious studies. Moreover, the indoctrination and proselytism is prohibited, using religious symbols in nonacademic purpose sciences are prohibited, and the religious discrimination is prohibited. But in all of these cases what the law says is one thing and the reality in our schools is another thing. As a rule, the problem is that our legislation might be very progressive, even better than the legislations of some European countries, but our reality is very different and that is one of the challenges as regards religious discrimination at



schools which actually we can see even now. This is a systemic problem, but we can say also that very important changes are being enacted.

Since 2004, members of religious unions who are conscientious objectors can refuse to serve in military service. Since 2010 on the basis of a court case which the Ombudsman's office filed in the court they can refuse to go to the reserve military service. Representatives of religious minorities / unions are nowadays entitled to enter prisons to visit their congregation without the permission of the Orthodox Church patriarchate, which was previously necessary to be able to enter the prison. Also, it is very important that during this period the state somehow has managed to respond to religious violence, however this remains a key problem. In the annual reports presented by the Ombudsman in Parliament, the first issue is religious violence and the problems of the state response to such cases of religious violence. For many years the state did not even qualify this as religious violence and although the Criminal Code has articles penalising the prevention of exercising certain religious rights, in practice even now the law enforcement authorities do not enforce these provisions. The situation actually has somewhat improved but we do not have any visible progress. For instance, in cases of violence against another religious group or a representative of another religion the perpetrators often remain unpunished and the law enforcement authorities either delay or close investigations without initiating prosecutions. Another issue is that after the collapse of the Soviet Union, restitution has only been granted to the Orthodox Church. The majority of expropriated property has been returned and they are funded from the budget (they are receive 25 million Lari from the budget) but restitution has not been granted to the religious minorities, and today we have a problem in the capital. There are seven Armenian churches which are actually deteriorating. And we call it vandalism, which may be unintentional, but on the other hand it happens because the state does not exercise its duty of care. Also, many Catholic churches were turned into Orthodox Church, and they modified the exterior, the churches were "Orthodoxized". The Lutheran churches, the synagogues and the mosques are not taken care of. There are many buildings that have been expropriated during Soviet times and currently do not have any owner and they are deteriorating, and that is a serious problem.

Another problem is the issue of restitution of properties in which religious services are held. The religious unions conduct services in properties where

they have the right to use, but they are not the owners. That is also a very problematic issue. As for safety issues with regard to religion, our vision and position with the Religious Council is that safety problems are created by the violation of human rights and the limitation of human rights through efforts to limit religious rights. The state, however, seems to not consider safety a priority and in cases of aforementioned violations, it considers them in context of freedom of religion. For instance, in 2014 despite the fact that the Religious Council had critical position on the creation of this structure, the National Agency of the Religious Matters in its concept stated as follows: "we shall consider in the context of safety the minority groups living at the border regions". This is absolutely an unacceptable vision for us and we are struggling with it at every level, including at the attempt to pass the law on religious unions, which we think will restrict the rights of the religious minorities. We are against the state policy but still I want to say that we are cooperating with the state. Of course, as an example, I can bring the draft Constitution, where the drafters have included the six limitation conditions with regard to religious freedom. One of them was concerning the state security issues, which is unacceptable with regards to religion. State should not be considering the religion in this security context. It's unacceptable even philosophically. As a result of criticism, these problematic articles were removed, including the state security issues, and there we have a Constitution which is similar to the European Convention of Human Rights.



**Ms. Mariam Gvatzdze,  
Tolerance and Diversity Institute, Georgia**

Good afternoon ladies and gentlemen, thank you for coming today. I want to thank the Dutch Embassy for supporting human rights in our countries; and to EPF Armenia for organizing this conference. It's a pleasure to be on this panel with the distinguished experts with whom I have worked on freedom of religion issues on many occasions. I'd like to take this opportunity to talk about freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) in Georgia, the main challenges and our experience in this regard.

Today several speakers mentioned freedom of religion or belief and the security issue, and that is certainly something that we must think about. We all understand the meaning and importance of the term "national security" or security in general, however we should appraise the threats associated with securitizing FoRB, threats of those laws and policies that place religious freedom under strain and create tools for states to arbitrarily intervene in FoRB. Very often such measures are disguised by the state authorities as a 'fight against extremism', or the terms like 'peaceful coexistence', 'religious feelings' and 'traditions' are used as an excuse to intervene and limit FoRB.

And recently we faced such a threat in Georgia, when the state attempted to amend the Constitution and to limit FoRB on ambiguous grounds, including national security. I am very proud that civil society and the majority of religious organizations were united against these amendments: they addressed the Venice Commission and other international organizations, they addressed the president of Georgia to veto these amendments, and called on the Parliament of Georgia not to adopt the legislation that puts fundamental freedoms at risk. Finally, as a result of joint efforts, the Parliament was obliged to amend the newly adopted constitution again, and removed the disputed clause.

Nevertheless, despite this victory, we are still concerned that the government demonstrated a desire to limit religious freedom on the grounds of national security. Has this desire disappeared or is it still there? Sometimes the state policy and practice speak for itself. For example, there are systemic cases of discrimination against Muslim citizens in our country. Muslims were not allowed to build a mosque in Batumi. The city hall refused to grant them a building permit, using totally discriminatory and unjustified arguments.

John Kinahan gave good examples of how non-dominant religious organizations are persecuted in our neighboring countries, many of them being banned and labeled as 'extremists'. As my colleagues mentioned here today, some populists and authoritarians around the world are using various reasons to intervene in freedom of religion or belief; and maybe we are facing a similar situation in Georgia too, when the state invents various motives, policies and laws to oppress and persecute religious minorities. We are having an ongoing discussion in Georgia on the adoption of special legislation on religion and religious organizations. A special working group was set up recently at the parliament to discuss FoRB issues, but in reality, allegedly this is an attempt to introduce a law on religion. We think that if the state introduces various regulations and a definition of religious organizations, this will leave some religious communities unregistered, will limit the activities and rights of non-dominant religious groups and will be a tool for discrimination in the hands of the government. Our opponents and supporters of the law (the state and some of the state-funded communities) say that many European countries have special laws on religion. We say that now we have good laws, FoRB is guaranteed in our legislation and despite this, state practice towards religious minorities is discriminatory, creating

numerous artificial barriers and obstacles against them. Furthermore, the understanding that FoRB is for ALL is weak in the society, the environment is not tolerant enough and we lack respect for cultural diversity and pluralism. On the contrary, diversity is often perceived as a threat. Therefore, we are confident that with such legislation the government will create an instrument to legitimize unlawful intervention in the FoRB.

Issues related to ownership of property of non-dominant religious organizations are among the most pressing ones. Obtaining construction permits for new places of worship as well as the re-appropriation of historical property have been problematic over the course of many years. In addition, discriminatory norms in Georgian legislation have hampered the efforts of non-dominant religious groups to purchase property from the state.

Batumi's Muslim community has been trying to construct a mosque in the city for many years. Batumi has big population of Georgian Muslims and the only mosque in the city cannot accommodate the believers, thus people are praying on the streets. In 2017 local Muslims purchased land and applied to Batumi City Hall for a construction permit. However, the local authorities refused to issue such a permit without reasonable legal ground. In June 2017 Muslim community members decided to go to court, hoping that the latter would declare the decision invalid and establish a case of discrimination. Only 22 months after lodging the claim did the court start to review of the case, and it is still pending.

Restitution of property expropriated by Soviet authorities stands out as one of the most pressing issues related to property of religious organizations. I will name another example and another pending case – the case of the Armenian Church in Georgia. In July 2017 the Georgian authorities donated Tandoyants Surb Astvatsitsini (Tandoyants Church of Holy Mother) and its surrounding area to the Patriarchy of the Georgian Orthodox Church. Numerous historical sources confirm that before the Soviet occupation the church belonged to the Armenian Apostolic Church. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the church and its premises became public property. The state had not carry out any study into the church's origin and its cultural and confessional characteristics prior to making a decision on the donation. In 2018 the Georgian Diocese of the Armenian Apostolic Church filed a claim against the National Agency of Public Registry and the Ministry of Economy. The case is pending.

The case of Batumi mosque and Tandoyants church are not simply two cases relevant only to two religious organizations, neither are they just cases of discrimination and FoRB of these two religious communities. We find these cases are a test, where do we stand as a state and where we want to go? So far, the state has failed to demonstrate that human rights and freedom of religion or belief for all is a priority. As Dr. Kishan mentioned today, FoRB is not for some, it's for all and if the state says that your freedom of religion is to stay home and pray there, of course that's not FoRB. And I agree, that's what the state is saying for example to the Muslims of Batumi: that you can sit in your homes, but you do not have the right to build a new place of worship in the city.

In his introduction today, Vladimir mentioned the decisions of the Constitutional Court of Georgia. Indeed, we had very positive developments last year. Religious groups have been calling for the elimination of discriminatory provisions in Georgian legislation and the discriminatory environment over the course of many years. These problems have repeatedly been highlighted in reports and recommendations developed by the Public Defender of Georgia as well as by international and local organizations. In July 2018 the Constitutional Court made unprecedented decisions and upheld two claims filed by religious organizations, who were represented by my organization – TDI, and Tbilisi Free University. The Court ruled that the reviewed cases represented a breach of Article 14 of the Constitution (prohibition of discrimination/ensuring equal treatment) and deemed certain provisions of the Tax Code and Law on State Property unconstitutional because of their discriminatory treatment of religious organizations – those provisions granted certain rights and privileges only to the Georgian Orthodox Church, while others could not enjoy same rights.

In addition to upholding claims of religious organizations, the Court made an important statement regarding the role of the Georgian Orthodox Church: *'The recognition of the Church's special role stems from its immense historic virtue and is not intended to create preferential legal treatment for Christian Orthodoxy at the present time. The historic role cannot be seen as a legitimate source for preferential treatment. Nor can it be deemed a constitutional goal. [...] Granting certain rights to the Church should not prevent other religious organizations from the enjoyment of the same rights.'*

And finally, I want to summarize all I said through the example of the State Agency for Religious Issues (SARI). I did not mention this institution while overviewing various FoRB related problems in Georgia, however it is related to all of them. In 2014 the government of Georgia created the State Agency for Religious Issues under the Prime Minister's office. We think that in its work this Agency is very much like the Soviet religious affairs institution. SARI fails to be a guarantor of FoRB – on the contrary – it has proven on numerous occasions that the goal of the Agency is to control religious organizations, rather than human rights. The language used by the Agency in relation to many non-dominant religious communities, NGOs and people who criticize the state's religious policy and the work of the Agency is often unethical and disturbing. During the constitutional amendments, when there was a risk that religious freedom would be limited on the grounds of national security, what did SARI do? It did not speak up at all and on the contrary, it started negotiations with some religious organizations not to speak up against these amendments. Consequently, taking into account that it is the main state institution responsible for FoRB in Georgia, the question of what is the vision and policy of the state on freedom of religion or belief remains alarming.

And when we speak about the violation of fundamental rights of non-dominant religious organizations in Georgia, we must also realize that if today only minority religious communities are facing discrimination, this is not a guarantee for the dominant religious institution – the Georgian Orthodox Church - that tomorrow the state won't want to intervene in the Church's internal affairs. That is why I think that all religious communities must be united when it comes to equality, freedom of religion or belief and fundamental human rights.

Thank you for your attention.



**Ms. Isabella Sargsyan,  
Eurasia Partnership Foundation, Armenia**

In this speech I would like to address two main issues. One is the issue of perceptions. You know, it turned out that within the course of the last twenty years the people have forgotten what democracy is. It turned out after the Revolution, that public perceptions are very important, and public opinion is important, because in a democratic society they have a big impact on the authorities. That is a very essential topic on the background of the developments taking place in Armenia after the Revolution, when we have huge media resources and fake news controlled by the previous authorities, as well as the incomprehensible fake people funded by different forces that have a large influence on public opinion. This is an issue that I would like us to discuss eventually as well. In addition, of course, these people are trying to play on the topics that are the most difficult and complicated ones and create fears for the society, and this is used in the public domain as well. Religious convictions are among the targets of these manipulations. That is, when these people want to inflame public opinion against the Government, against the authorities, against non-governmental organizations, then the religious themes and convictions are not in the last place, and this is very, very, very much manipulated in our country. That is about the recent developments.



The second thing that I want to convey, is that one of the common issues in Armenia is that if in Georgia the religious and ethnic minorities are, so to say, numerically larger, in Armenia this 'monoethnic' and 'monoreligious' thesis is used non-stop, as if it were a good thing. I want to say that from the perspective of human rights, the numbers are not important. From the perspective of human rights, it is the people who are important and it is of no relevance whether the Baha'i community consists of five people, or twenty people or five hundred people, since if there is an individual who is unable to exercise fully his or her rights and freedoms, there is already a problem here. I want to note this, because it is a very common and, I would say, erroneous view which we hear not only from uneducated persons, but also from educated people as well. They say, "What is your problem in Armenia? Your minorities are just two percent!" The numbers are of no relevance. I want to stress this.

The second issue that exists in Armenia on this level are the extremes. There are people, including some of our civil society colleagues, who assert that religion should be cast out from absolutely everywhere, that freedom of religion is freedom *from* religion, that religion, the church should not be in any place, that, like you said, people "should sit within the four walls and do whatever they want," which, in my opinion, is an extreme.

Secularism does not mean atheism, we have passed through this phase already, we do know what kind of consequences derive from it. Or – another extreme – 'who is not an apostolic, is not an Armenian'. This is the other facet of the issue, when religious affiliation and ethnic identity are being merged. I think that one of the purposes of this conference, and not only that one, is that we try to find a dialogue between these two extremes and to understand, after all, what secularism is - without creating extremes, for instance, without downgrading the role of the Armenian Apostolic Church or any other church, without excluding it, but also without discriminating against any group or any citizen either. It seems to me that these are the dilemmas existing within our society at a certain level.

More specifically, I would like to address three points. The first point is the law. Let me tell you that Armenia does have a law, and it is titled "The Law on the Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations," that was adopted back in 1991, in the times of the Supreme Council of Armenia,

when the National Assembly was called 'The Supreme Council'. Afterwards, all our efforts to improve this Law were for the worse, meaning that all the amendments subsequently proposed have been progressively worse. And, what we may welcome this Revolution for, apart from everything else, is the fact that we managed, by investing tremendous efforts, and working jointly with the Venice Commission, the OSCE/ODIHR and our religious organizations, to simply ruin the last version of the Law which had been presented by the previous Government just before the Revolution, because that Law would have introduced such regulations, which as one of our colleagues phrased during the discussion with Venice Commission:

"I was a Pentecostal in Soviet times; if this law is adopted, it will become worse than then."

I do not recall who said that, but this is, you said, I remember, this is a very, very bad tendency. With the new Government, of course, we do hope that this Law will be improved, but even if it is not, the Law, which is currently in effect, will be implemented as it is written. Although, there are many questions here that I would like to address.

The second point relates to the national security. In 2015, Constitutional "reforms" took place in Armenia, which as proven by further developments, were initiated just to ensure the eternal rule of Serzh Sargsyan. One of the key motives of our Revolution was precisely these Constitutional amendments. Besides the establishment of this fundamentally disputable system founded by these Constitutional amendments, several provisions on human rights were also changed by the referendum. Thus, in the regulations on religion or conscience, the 'public safety' term defined as it is defined under the European Convention on Human Rights, was replaced by the 'state security'. One of the grounds for limitation of freedom of religion and conscience in Armenia, under the Constitution currently in force, is the 'state security'. That means that any improvement of the Law will be referring to the Constitution and the 'public safety' will turn into the 'state security'. This is only because the previous authorities managed to have these amendments pass in the constitutional package.

The third problem that currently exists, of course, is discriminatory treatment, and I would like to read out from several laws that are currently

in force. I want to say this also to our state officials. We have discussed this also with lawyers, and if cases reach the European Court, Armenia, with high probability, will lose. Thus, Clause 3 of Article 1(3) of the Law “On Recruitment into Military Service”, Clause 7 of Article 39(1) of the Law “On Service in the Police”, Clause 8 of Article 43(1) of the Law “On Service in the National Security Bodies”, Article 39(1) of the Law “On the Rescue Service”, Clause 7 of Article 32(1) of the Law “On Penitentiary Service”, Clause 7 of Article 30(1) of the Law “On the Service Ensuring Compulsory Enforcement of the Judicial Acts” – all of them prohibit membership of the servicemen of the mentioned sectors in a religious assembly or organization. Of course, the law does not spell out whether all religious organisations are implied; in other words if, for instance, any serviceman who most probably, at least nominally, is a follower of the Armenian Apostolic Church, then he/she should not work in the field of enforcement of the judicial acts or any other sphere. You would agree that this is a very discriminatory provision. Surely it relates to other religious communities as well, and I have been told by the evangelical community that there have been several cases where people were denied recruitment into a service on exactly this ground. There are numerous similar limitations in practice as well. I am looking at Mr. Shkolnikov and see that, alas, I have no more time and will not be able to address also the education sector-related issues, but we are going to have a separate discussion on that. Thank you.

**PARALLEL  
SESSION:  
INTER-RELIGIOUS  
DIALOGUE  
AS A TOOL  
FOR CONFLICT  
TRANSFORMATION**



**Ms. Salpy Eskidjian Weiderud,  
Executive Director, Office of the Religious Track of the  
Cyprus Peace Process**

I am grateful to be invited by the Eurasia Foundation to share a hopeful initiative from the little island of Cyprus, in the far Eastern Mediterranean corner and to highlight with concrete examples the positive role religious leaders can play in peacebuilding, conflict transformation and reconciliation.

I hope my introduction will give you insights on:

- *How discrimination can be prevented by promoting and facilitating open and transparent dialogue between different faith communities*
- *How rebuilding partnerships of divided faith communities can lead to tolerance, respect and mutual understanding.*
- *How encouraging cross-community dialogue and cooperation has led to efforts to combat hatred, racism and intolerance on the grounds of religion or belief.*

I feel humbled to stand here before you to share with you the unprecedented changes that took place in the last nine years through dialogue and cooperation of the religious leaders of Cyprus, contributing to changing negative stereotypes and stigmatization and promoting mutual respect and understanding in a country where religion, like everything else, has been divided for decades.

From the outset I want to make it very clear, I am not here to comment on the political situation in Cyprus or the status of the UN-led process for a comprehensive solution, however as a facilitator of a track that was created to make a positive contribution to that process I cannot help but make references to the terrain we are working in as we don't function in a vacuum nor in the philosophical corridors of academia.

The Christian and Muslim religious leaders of Cyprus have written a new page of history in Cyprus where cooperation, dialogue, mutual understanding and trust have started to emerge, putting a new stamp on the image of role of religion in Cyprus from negative or apathy to positive.

Where perceptions and stereotypes dictated division, thanks to the RTCYPP there has been unity, instead of confrontation there has been collaboration, instead of violations there has been joint advocacy against violations, against discrimination.

You see in Cyprus there are many narratives, different experiences, painful unshared memories, different perceptions of the same reality, divided geographies, forgotten histories, suppressed pains.

Different identities, flags, symbols, traditions, religions, languages ... as long as identity is respected and safeguarded they can be respected, appreciated and even shared, there is no reason for any discrimination, violence or even wars.

Discourses in Cyprus have been formed and told by men over decades, where his story takes main stage and her story is only heard in private. Where his vision is dominant and her vision has been deformed by the dominant one. Where mistrust is used and fed daily by the reality of political rhetoric, and division perpetuates and sustains it.

The Cyprus conflict has never been a religious conflict. But religion and freedom of religion have become victims of the unresolved conflict, as many other human rights principles, and being important for community identity, religion has sometimes also been misused.

*What are the images when you think of Cyprus?*

*What is your image of religion in Cyprus?*

*What did we do?*

The Religious leaders of Cyprus have progressed far since the Religious Track of the Cyprus Peace Process under the Auspices of the Embassy of Sweden brought them together in 2009.

10 years ago, Christian and Muslim leaders did not speak to each other, they did not even know each other, the right to access religious monuments for worship across the ceasefire line was at best extremely limited and many faithful Cypriots had lost hope of their rights. By working together, and advocating everybody's rights, we have seen significant progress.

The religious leaders of Cyprus have learned that it is very difficult to reach results in a situation of conflict, if they only address their own needs and in a national context. However, when they talk together, and address principal concerns and in line with human rights law, they can count on international support for their claims.

And when they stand up for the needs of each other, they are able to use the political trust within their own communities to enhance the human rights agenda and contribute to conflict transformation and peacebuilding.

This is the main learning from the Religious Track of the Cyprus Peace Process, which could be shared with others and also be applied in other conflicts and contexts.

The relevant question is of course, how could we reach where we are now? What made it possible for the religious leaders of Cyprus to move from a narrow self-interest to an enlightened self-interest?

If I should pick one word that is more important than others, it should be **trust**. Without trust, it is very difficult to make progress in a conflict situation, as every hurdle on the way will be almost impossible to overcome. When there is trust, individual setbacks which are unavoidable can rather be used as investments and learning for the future than being allowed to spoil the entire work.

Still, there is not one simple answer to how trust can be achieved, but allow me to mention some aspects which have been critical for achieving results in the work of the Religious Track of the Cyprus Peace Process. I will not elaborate on them now but am happy to do so in the discussion if there is interest and time permits.

1. A pragmatic, sustainable and open-minded approach from the religious leaders themselves.
2. International support, giving a serious framework and guidance on principles.
3. A dedicated, stubborn and active facilitation.
4. Backing from the political stakeholders in the conflict.

I have to also acknowledge that successful result of the Religious Track is closely linked to the continuous financial support of the Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs, the administrative support of the Church of Sweden, the auspices of the Swedish Embassy in Cyprus and the close involvement of the Ambassador of Sweden and the Special Envoy for Religion in Conflict and Peacebuilding of the Swedish Foreign Ministry who is one of the architects of the RTCYPP and key facilitator.

The RTCYPP and Embassy of Sweden have the respect of the government of the RoC and the TC administration, most of the political authorities on both sides of the divide as well as the international community and civil society actors who understand peacebuilding and human rights.

### Some Examples

Today, we can recognize the significant progress made because of the RTCYPP, in fulfillment of Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.



With them we have experienced many first-timers ...

Wherewith the RTCYPP GO Archbishop of the Church of Cyprus and the Mufti agreed to meet, acknowledged each other and even started working together for the first time since 1964.

For the first time in Cyprus history we established working relations and dialogue between the 5 religious leaders of Cyprus.

Mufti, who was previously not able to cross to the south nor visit or pray in the mosques there, was able to do so.

One of the Bishops of the GO Church of Cyprus who was stoplisted and denied to conduct liturgy at one of the most important places of worship for the Church Of Cyprus, was welcomed.

For the first time religious leaders celebrated each other's' feasts together. Now they don't miss each other's feasts.

Churches and mosques that were closed or abandoned were opened for worship, for repairs led by religious leaders together for the first time.

The number of permissions for Christians to pray in their historic churches north of the green line are now significantly higher and the Cathedral of the founding Apostle of Cyprus, Barnabas, which serves as icon museum, is accessible for worship on a regular basis.

No Turkish national could think of crossing to the south to pray at Hala Sultan Tekke. Now 3000 pilgrims of Turkish origin can visit Hala Sultan Tekke annually for three major holidays at the request of the Archbishop of the Church of Cyprus and support of all Christian religious leaders.

Clerics are showing the way in Cyprus by learning each other's language, culture and traditions, and sharing this knowledge with one another. The Religious Track has initiated language trainings for imams to learn Greek and for priests to learn Turkish with the blessing of the religious leaders and opened up the circle of dialogue from leaders to priests, imams and laypersons including women.

Many religious monuments have been restored thanks to joint efforts and funding, mainly from the EU and USA.

No joint statement was ever made. There was never joint advocacy. For the very first time in Cyprus, the religious leaders have had a joint voice on critical matters. They have made several joint declarations, on the peace talks, violence against women, missing persons, terrorism and violence and in response to urgent matters on the island and elsewhere.

UN and civil society efforts prior to the RTCYPP had no relation to religion or faith-based institutions. A huge section of the local communities were almost ignored or invisible to the peacebuilding efforts, prior to RTCYPP.

The joint efforts of the religious leaders have been acknowledged and praised by the UN SR FoRB, the UN SG, the UNOCHR, UNFICYP and UN Good Offices.

The Religious Track and the leaders have been able to present the joint efforts for Freedom of Religion at the Human Rights Council in Geneva and at the UN Security Council in New York and have been acknowledged in repeated reports of the UN SG, reports of the UNHCHR on Cyprus, Special Rapporteur on FORB and most recently by the UN Security Council.

The Religious Track and leaders have endorsed the Beirut declaration Faith for Rights of the UN OHCHR and translated them into Greek and Turkish to contribute to wider ownership among all Cypriots, with a particular focus on youth.

- The list goes on...

This does not mean it's all rosy and perfect in Cyprus ....

Naturally there is still a lot of pain, frustration and disappointments, especially when the joint efforts of the religious leaders on basic matters pertaining to religious freedom are ignored and religious freedom is disrespected and even violated.

For example only a year ago a historic Byzantine religious monument in the green line of the Buffer Zone, which we have been working together to save

since 2014, collapsed after heavy rainfall due to human failure despite the united witness and advocacy of the religious leaders.

Freedom of religion and belief, as part of human rights, includes **freedom to** as well as **freedom from** and **freedom to choose** religion. Every religion and every human being with faith or no faith should be treated with the same respect. As religion has been part of the division, the Cyprus conflict has hampered the development of a full and modern understanding of freedom of religion in both communities.

One of the key challenges remains the lack of religious literacy on behalf of many in civil society and international organizations, including key figures in power and state and municipal authorities. We still need to work more on the structural ignorance of the other and lack of real understanding of the fundamental principle of religious freedom or belief, but it's improving.

All communities of Cyprus: Greeks, Turks, Armenians, Maronites and Latins have suffered from being separated for almost a generation, and the understanding of what is important for the Muslims in the Greek Cypriot community and for Christians in the Turkish Cypriot community has eroded. To compensate for that, the religious leaders have assumed a role of interpreting the need of the other in their respective community.

Cyprus is the only country in the European Union where Muslims and Christians historically and in modern times have lived together in harmony and full mutual respect, although in separation for the last fifty years. And if we put Cyprus in its cultural-geographic belonging in the Middle East, it is the only country with a Christian majority.

This unique history is one reason why Cyprus can be an example for both Europe and the Middle East. Unlike many European countries, we do not find widespread negative attitudes to Islam in the Greek Cypriot community. Because of the recent conflict, there might be negative attitudes towards Turks, but Muslim cultural presence is part of our mosaic.

And compared to some countries in the Middle East, we do not find widespread negative attitudes towards Christians within the Turkish Cypriot Community. Because of experience in the past, there might be a negative perception of the Greek Orthodox Church or its clergy, but Christian cultural presence is part of their mosaic.

I would like to end with the joint words of Cyprus Christian and Muslim religious leaders against discrimination, terror attacks and violence –

*We categorically condemn all forms of violence against innocent civilians. No war, no act of terrorism, atrocities or violent attacks against innocent people can be justified in the name of God Almighty or any religion or humanity. War begets war. Violence begets violence. All people of good will must stand together to respect, support and care for one another. Violence in the name of God is violence against religion itself.*

*As religious leaders we have a responsibility not only to speak out and work united against all forms of violence but also understand and address diligently the root causes that lead to such conflicts, violence and wars and to always promote and protect peace.*

*Our sacred texts call us not only to combat injustice but also to uplift the poorest in our midst. Where inequality is entrenched, instability and conflict are far more likely to erupt. Inspired by our shared values we embrace the moral imperative to reach out to the most vulnerable among us, uphold human dignity and advocate for human rights.*

*The dialogue we have experienced together has strengthened our conviction that there is no future without tolerance, mutual understanding, respect and peaceful co-existence.*

*With our different identities we have to be together as one human family, as people of every faith or none. We have a responsibility to preach, act and show that our shared respect for human life and dignity is stronger than evil acts of terror, and perversion of religion.*



**Ms. Anna-Carin Öst,  
Head of UNHCR Office to Armenia**

Thank you very much. Let me say first, thank you also to the organizers for providing us with opportunity to come here and also speak from the refugees' perspective. I am going to speak about refugees and a little bit about UNHCR's journey on how to deal with religion or faith. As you know UNHCR is a non-political and humanitarian UN agency that is mandated to provide international protection and humanitarian assistance and to seek permanent solutions for refugees, displaced persons and for stateless persons.

As we speak today, there are 68 and a half million persons displaced in the world today. About 25.4 million are refugees and 40 million are internally displaced. If you calculated that's one person displaced every two seconds. So, since we started this session, we are talking about in between 2,000 to 2,500 persons who have become displaced somewhere in the world. Here in Armenia, UNHCR works with about 18,000 people who have been displaced. They mainly originate from Syria, Azerbaijan, Iraq and Iran, but I am going to speak more today about what we talked about beyond perspective. I'm not really going to concentrate on Armenia or Georgia.

The grounds to becoming a refugee is known to most people, they also include persecution because of religion. This is something that was spoken about in the first session that we had: how people are denied religious rights. Many people cannot return today to their country of origin because of religious violence. We heard from Shombi Sharp [UN Resident Coordinator] speaking about conflicts today being propelled by cultural dimensions including religion. If we talk about where the most refugees come from, they come from five countries. It's Syria, Afghanistan, South Sudan, Myanmar, and Somalia, and most of those are cultural conflicts including religion.

UNHCR is a non-political and humanitarian United Nations agency. We adhere strictly to humanitarian principles: humanity, neutrality, and partiality. We are a secular organization, but to be a secular organization and dealing with refugees does not mean that we can ignore religion. As I said, some of the persons who we deal with have fled their homes because of religious persecution and violence. We have been working with faith-based organizations of different sorts ever since the 1950s in response to displacement emergencies, but also to find solutions for refugees, and this has sometimes led to complications and misunderstandings from both sides perhaps because we didn't understand and listen to each other fully.

Humanitarian actors including UNHCR were sometimes focusing on the challenges in cooperation. We were holding human rights and humanitarian principles and taking a strictly rights-based approach. We were shying away and looking at other sides, other perspectives of faith. Both from the partners that we were working with and also the persons that we were working with. We were looking at the red lines that we saw as unacceptable being against our principles. We were seeing that some religious entities were showing antagonism or exclusion towards persons of different faiths. We were looking at individuals from different faith communities that were expressing hate or preaching religion or pressuring conversion, as a pre-condition for support, access, and assistance, or engaging in practices that we didn't agree with like early marriage and other harmful traditions or gender stereotypes, specifically violations of the rights of women and boys and girls or who are attributing stigma and discrimination against sexual minorities which was also mentioned in the opening statement by the Dutch Ambassador. However, time after time, it was also noted that faith-based entities play an important role and there is a need for humanitarian actors

including UNHCR to deepen our understanding of religious traditions across faiths, and become more faith literate. This means not only understanding what central role faith plays in the communities that we work with, but also more concretely looking into faith structures and networks and on the different approaches needed to effectively engage with faith-based actors.

So UNHCR started a journey of mutual discovery with faith-based organizations, and we were also looking at the role of faith in humanitarian responses in final solutions to displacement. In 2012, High Commissioner Antonio Guterres called together a dialogue on protection challenges under the theme faith and protection. In this dialogue, we had more than 400 representatives from different faiths, faith-based organizations and also other leaders to discuss this issue in Geneva. It was the first time ever when we as an organization engaged in this kind of dialogue, and we also explored the common values supporting the notion of refugee protection in all the world's major religions. It gave us quite a lot of interesting insights in both how can we work better with partners who are faith-based and also how can we better support and serve the people that we work with on behalf of refugees and displaced persons. The dialogue actually initiated the process of a document. It's called the "Affirmation of Welcome" document, welcoming a stranger. It was affirmations of faith leaders and this was signed and endorsed by more than 1700 religious leaders and members of faith community organizations in a signing process in 2013 at the Religions for Peace Ninth World Assembly in Vienna. I like the beginning of the document. It's a long document and it's available on our website so you can have a look. The document starts by saying "a core value of my faith is to welcome a stranger, the refugee, the internally displaced, the other. I shall treat him or her as I would like to be treated. I will challenge others, even leaders of my own faith community to do the same." It underpins the value of principles of hospitality, respect, and equality.

We also went a little bit further and developed guidance for our own staff on how to deal with faith-based entities in our work. I'm not a religious person myself but since I started working with UNHCR, some 20 years ago, I have worked with refugees and displaced persons in 8 different countries and met with them in many more. Slowly I have come to realize also how important faith is for a person in a displacement situation. Listening to their stories, witnessing their daily struggle in exile. There are few things as powerful

as a person's faith. It helps them cope with fear, loss, separation, and destitution. It's also central to faith and faith is also central to resilience. It's very often the key in enabling a refugee to overcome their trauma, to make sense of the loss, and to rebuild their lives from nothing. It also provides a person a collective support among victims and it gives them a possibility to be members of a community.

We are in Armenia now and I think the Armenian experience is a clear sign of that. I still remember I started out working with UNHCR in Tanzania and I was dealing with refugees displaced from Rwanda. Then my next duty station was in Turkey in Ankara and suddenly there I come across Alice. Alice was a Rwandan Tutsi who for some reason had ended up in Turkey. She was a very religious woman from the Seventh-day Adventist community and there was no 7th day Adventist in Turkey. I felt a connection to her because I had been working with Rwandan refugees in Tanzania before. We started looking what churches are available in Ankara. No 7th day. Then suddenly she came to me and said "look, you gave me a list of churches and I went to each one of them and I found one where I feel at home and they don't care that I am a 7th day Adventist. They still welcome me, they say come in and we will host you, you can pray in your way". And this was an enormous relief for her and she felt part of the community. I think we need to step away from being strictly rights-based, we need to look at the bigger picture.

We also need to recognize that asylum or protection is not provided by the state based on legal provisions. The receiving community plays an essential role in transforming the rights to enjoy asylum into reality. To realize integration in a new community also means that you need to be accepted and not discriminated against based on religious values. How did we work in reality then to receive the benefits of this engagement with faith-based entities? What we have realized is that faith-based entities provide physical protection and facilitate humanitarian access. It is very often in the faith-based buildings where we find refugees if there has been a mass influx of persons very suddenly, where the international community, the state has not had the ability to prepare or respond in advance. When I have been going out in such communities during my career also, it is the temples, it is the mosques and the churches where you will find them.



Faith-based communities have also been able to carry out work as a deterrence for violence. We have seen examples where one faith community has gone out, sat down, and protected another faith community, to prevent displacement, to prevent violence. Very often also faith-based entities play a role in mediating tensions between refugees and displaced persons if they happen to be all different faiths. This is very important and it's also applicable for mediating conflicts between the local community and refugees. At the same time, it's also a huge opportunity for further dialogue across faiths, but we have to be prepared and to go and be curious and ask questions to try to understand the other side. As was described by Salpy here also, faith-based communities are extremely important in engaging in conciliation and peacebuilding activities. Combating xenophobia and violence, this is also an important thing where we believe that faith-based organizations should get involved.

Our Current High Commissioner was speaking in April to the [UN] Security Council and he was saying that the current stigmatization of refugees and migrants was unprecedented. Now quoting here, "I have been an international civil servant and I have worked with refugees for well over three decades. In my career, in this field of work, I have seen much solidarity and even heroism in some responses that are provided on the ground with the support of the Security Council. Make no mistake, I see this solidarity still very strong and I go around the world and talk about this issue every day in my country. However, over the course of this three and a half decades I have never seen such toxicity, such poison in the language of politics, in the media, social media, and even everyday discussion and conversations around this issue. The toxicity often focuses sadly, tragically on refugees, migrants and foreigners. That should be of concern for us all." Unfortunately, this language of politics has become ruthless. Giving license to discrimination, racism, and xenophobia, refugees and migrants, often the others because they belong to a different faith, have become a target or casualties of power-driven agendas. Political leadership should strive to unite, but now these days it prides itself on dividing. We have to go back to the keeping principles of humanitarian work. We must respond to need not greed. Thank you very much.

**PARALLEL  
SESSION:  
FORB  
AND ISSUES  
OF EDUCATION**



**Mr. Filip Buff Pederson,**  
**Learning Platform [www.forb-learning.org](http://www.forb-learning.org)**

Thank you very much - Good afternoon. I am happy to be a presenter here at this session. Many facilitators call this session just after lunch the “graveyard session” - everybody is a bit tired after the first half of the day, their stomachs are full, and their bodies and minds are working to digest everything. What is left is just the nametag/tomb stone and nothing happening behind it. I can already see now that this won’t be the case today.

First, my name is Filip I am not a scholar, nor a high ranking official in these matters, I am just an activist working to promote freedom of religion or belief in Danish foreign policy, in Danish development cooperation and through our partners and network. I work for an umbrella organization called DMCCDD, Danish Mission Council Development Department. We are an umbrella organization for churches and church-based organizations in international development cooperation. These different partners, churches and people of different beliefs, religions, human rights organizations started to report back: “We need to do something about the violations of Freedom of Religion and Belief”. So, we took up the challenge from our partners and started to promote FoRB across the different projects in South Asia,

South-East Asia and Africa, and tried to strengthen the priority of FoRB in Danish Foreign policy and development cooperation. Since the beginning, Denmark has taken some steps to strengthen FoRB as a priority during the last five years or so. We now have an ambassador for Freedom of Religion or Belief, who heads a unit in the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs to work with these things. Denmark increased funding for projects promoting FoRB in Danish development cooperation.

One of the main obstacles we saw in our work to advance Freedom of Religion and Belief wasn't the policies, wasn't the willingness to do something, but it was actually education as to what Freedom of Religion or Belief is all about. To this end we joined forces with Nordic colleagues and created an online learning platform for freedom of religion or belief.

Before moving into this topic, I would like to say a few words on formal education and Freedom of Religion and Belief. Of course we are talking about a human right, it is a right for all people to have, hold or change religion or belief. When talking about it, when it comes to the educational system it is key that we start to educate our children in the schools in human rights and in what Freedom of Religion and Belief is.

So the question then becomes: "Do we in our schools in Denmark, in Armenia and in Georgia, have human rights education as a part of the curriculum? Do we teach them about human rights, do we teach the kids what their rights as a human being are and what Freedom of Religion is all about? Such education is, of course, needed, if we want to see open democratic societies, where everybody can contribute to society, based on their values, their beliefs and their religion. But putting in a curriculum as a policy maker, isn't enough. We need to make sure that the teachers in schools can teach human rights and that they have the accurate tools to do so.

So, an important part is having human rights training in the curriculum, and as a part of this: training in freedom of belief and religion both in schools, and as a part of the curriculum for the teachers' seminars, as well as trainings for current teachers. Because without that you will have teachers who were educated years back and they won't have a clue on how to educate people on these issues. So, we need to start working with teachers and teacher's education as well. As a last thing in relation to formal education, it is very

important that we practice what we teach. In schools we can't have teaching about Freedom of Religion and Belief and at the same time force kids to participate in worship. I will give you a couple of examples from Denmark, where the vast majority are Christians, you might have other examples here that you can think of. For instance, in my children's public kindergarten all the kids had to take part in a Buddhist/Hinduist ceremony with a morning sun greeting, just because one of the teachers in kindergarten thinks that this Buddhist/Hinduist thing is cool, all the kids had to sit and meditate on the grass and praise the sun as it rose from the sea. This was a practice repeated several times. Of course, the kids get some education about Buddhism this way, they learn about the practice by doing it, but it is actual worship that they are participating in (this is a violation of the right to freedom of religion or belief).

Another example relates to the lunch the kindergarten provides for the kids and of course, in a public kindergarten they are open to the diverse set of people we have in Denmark, so they will serve 'halal food'. It is not a problem for me, it's good food, it tastes good and sometimes they even take good recipes from the Middle East and prepare a good lunch for them. The kids are introduced to different cultures and the food-related to it, which I was thrilled about. But then again why should all the kids be forced to eat meat and food processed with blessings of Allah when quite a few of them do not believe in Allah? (Is this a violation of FoRB? – it depends on the kids, they are not forced to take part in the ritual and have the choice not to eat the meat – then again this is also the case for the other way around).

The last example was that one of the parents who worked as a pastor in the majority church asked if the kindergarten would visit the church across the street for an introduction to Christmas And for the first time the parents rebelled and called for respect for the minorities and then all the parents were opposing, they didn't want their kids to be forced to take part in religious education. Thus the visit to the church for the Christmas program didn't materialize.

When educating children on Freedom of Religion or Belief you need some kind of education and religious literacy, you do need knowledge about other religions, in order for you to be able to respect and protect their freedom to religion and belief. Without this you might end up in a situation where you

discriminate against some in favor of others. In Denmark Christianity is the majority religion, but most are 'culture Christians' and therefore the parents argued against going to the church for Christmas celebration. They are secular, they think about their religion as something personal for them, but when it comes to other religions they don't complain. These many examples and different cases and examples where dealing with religion in schools and kindergartens is difficult, but we need to learn about religion and we need to acknowledge and respect the right to Freedom of Religion and Belief of the kids, so they won't be forced to be a part of worship of other gods, other religions, other beliefs against their will. A key distinction to be made here is whether it's education about religion or the practice of religion.

That was a bit on formal education. A couple of good questions to ask around the table here would be, when was the last time an assessment of the human rights training in schools was done in your country? What were the issues mentioned, do the kids actually know about their human rights, do they know about their freedom of religion and belief and what were the decisions of the policy makers and the decisions makers to act upon such findings? What were the plans to do something about it, and who make them actually do something about that? My recommendation will be that all of us around this table here would have to follow up all these issues and we look at our educational systems and we ensure that freedom of religion and belief is taught and respected and promoted within our schools.

And in terms of getting it right I will recommend you to consult the Toledo guiding principles on teaching about religions and beliefs in schools. Through these principles you get a good set of guidelines. They are from 2007, but still very relevant and I will encourage you to look at them for further knowledge.

When it comes to informal education, we in NORFORB found that we have many NGOs around the world, we have many human rights activists willing to promote freedom of religion and belief, but they didn't have the accurate tools to do so. To address this gap we developed an online learning platform ([forb-learning.org](http://forb-learning.org)) where we gathered all the resources on FoRB and human rights. The resource materials are for civil society, faith leaders, for journalists, for decision-makers, politicians and bureaucrats. While they can find information on what is the right to FoRB, how do you protect it and

how do you promote it, it will give you different skills and tools to facilitate trainings on human rights activism or as a development professional.

Of course, we do have a language barrier, when it comes to promoting FoRB as well, so we have invested heavily in translating these resource materials and at the moment they are available in English, Arabic, Russian, French, Spanish and Turkish. And soon over the summer they will be also available in Vietnamese, Hindi and Burmese, and by the end of the year in Bangla and Farsi. And maybe, who knows, in 2020 maybe also in Armenian and Georgian? Yes, somebody is willing and able to translate, so we hope that they will find funding to do so in the future.

Our goal is to contribute to building a political and legal social and culture where FoRB for all is respected, protected and promoted, from the bottom up and from the top down. We will be working both with grass root level and policy makers and politicians. And the resources are made in a way where different people, with different target audiences can find resources that that help them target their audience. In addition to all the resources that we gathered from everybody, many people around the table have contributed to build the resources with good links to resources and with knowledge to develop several films. For example, the film which you were shown when you came into the room. We have 8 short films that can be found on YouTube, introducing FoRB, a number of resources for facilitators asking key questions, that you can use when you sit in a group or at seminars in order to raise the level of knowledge on FoRB. The learning platform provides practical guidance for people who want to do something practical about it, not only just sitting and listening to a lot of fine words at a conference, but making change happen and having an impact in countries.

One of the main obstacles is to identify trainers who have knowledge about FoRB as well as the skills to facilitate trainings. To overcome that, we thought that, well we are only a couple of people who could travel around the world full time, each one of us doing our small presentation on what is FoRB, on how do you protect it, how do you promote it. But this way we won't reach the same impact as we would by using modern technologies. This led to the decision to set up an online training course, Training of the Trainer course, so that they in their own countries can go out and do trainings, with accurate knowledge and training skills. It can be religious leaders, wanting

to promote FoRB in that community, they can gather other religious leaders, community leaders and they can have trainings and they can use some of the films, some of the resources, have discussions, what is FoRB, what those things (international obligations) mean in our context.

In 2020 we will also develop a local leader's course, so the local leaders can get offline materials which they can use in small groups, whether they are in Northern Nigeria, or South India, local leaders will be able to use these materials to promote and protect FoRB. In 2021 we plan to set up an online course for development professionals as well. For professionals who want to mainstream FoRB within regular development projects or have it as a targeted objective in a development project. Of course you will have many development professionals saying, well this is not relevant for us.

Last week I was in a Nepal talking to the leaders of an NGO. They were kind of reluctant to go into FoRB and one of the arguments was that they were providing clean water and thus FoRB wasn't relevant to them in their program for their constituency. By chance I have a few years' experience of working in their area. I knew that the Buddhists live up in the high mountains, in the middle mountains you have the Hindus, and due to climate change the Buddhists from the upper parts of the mountains have started to move a bit down and suddenly you start to get conflicts between Hindus and Buddhists. On top of that a growing number of Christians and Muslims as well, who couldn't get access to water because of their religion, because of their belief, as the 'traditional' inhabitants' religion won't allow them to use the same wells as they do. So therefore, even when you work with development cooperation FoRB is important, it's important to get it right. So, my last comment to you is, please become a part of the movement. We have more than sixty partners. Eurasia Partnership Foundation is a partner of a Leading Platform, Forum 18 is a partner of a Leading Platform, we will link to our webpage and we hope that you will use our resources, we need your input on how we can improve them, and hopefully you will find them helpful in your work to promote FoRB. That was it from me. Thank you very much.





**Mr. Hovhannes Hovhannisyan,  
Deputy Head of the Standing Commission on Education  
Science, Culture and Sport, National Assembly**

Let me tell you that before the revolution that took place in Armenia last year I was mainly engaged in teaching religion at different universities, and it so happened that after the revolution I was appointed a Deputy Minister at the Ministry of Education and Science, and currently I am the Deputy Chair of the Commission on Education, Science, Culture and Sport, at the National Assembly. Now, based on my journey, methodologically, I would like to divide my speech into two parts. In the first part, I will be speaking on the issue from the political perspective, and in the second part I will address the academic side of the problem, since I consider that these two processes are interconnected.

When we look at the pre-revolutionary discourse in Armenia, into what the country's situation in the field of freedom of religion and belief used to be, we can say that we had many problems, because we identified the vast majority of those problems within the course of our research studies. Research that we conducted with Sargsyan Isabella, Karamyan Lusine and others highlighted a number of problems existing in the field of religious

freedoms. I can bring an example to illustrate a situation prevalent then at the schools, when the teacher would make the children of a religious community, namely the Jehovah's Witnesses, to leave the classroom for the time of the prayer in the classroom, and she would let them back in only after the prayer was finished. Of course, it would be a bit incorrect to generalize such examples, since there were no such practices in many other places, but there have been such sporadic practices, and maybe, as far as I am aware since I am not that actively involved in the process now, they exist today as well, I don't know. But, what is important, is how it used to be presented, and why we were in such a situation.

Probably, it would seem a bit unnecessary to cite Serzh Sargsyan, who was saying that "*Regardless of what an Armenian belongs to, what is important is his identity and not being an Armenian,*" but in reality we witnessed a drastically different approach. That is, in one place, for instance in Los Angeles, he would declare what was pleasing [the audience], but in the real-life we had a national deliberation conservative discourse represented by the dominant Republican majority which would frequently introduce false agendas shaped in the form of military-patriotic and similar concepts. In reality, though, this would not promote an increase in military patriotism, neither it would make our country more protected and invincible. In my opinion, just the opposite, it was the phenomenon when elements of critical thinking were extracted out of the person, and it attempted to incorporate a single line, a single discourse, and single approach; and from this perspective it should be noted that if during the initial period Republicans were using Nzhdeh Tseghakron (*race-based-religion – transl. note*) ideology, then – from a certain moment in time – they came closer to the Armenian Apostolic Church. Of course, it happened spontaneously; it's not that it was being done upon the wish or consent of the Armenian Apostolic Church. Officially, they would position themselves as guardians of the Church, confronting other religious movements and organizations. Thus, before the Armenian public they would introduce themselves as bearers and guardians of the national conservative, traditional values and of the system of such values, which – let me reiterate this – was pretty disputable and problematic, since they would use it solely for their political gains, without being concerned, in my opinion, for either the Armenian Apostolic Church, or the role and authority of the Armenian Apostolic Church in society, pushing, rather, their own political agenda.

Now, what happened after the revolution? After the revolution, there came an authority that is saying: “I am free of the ‘ism’-s”, “I am not being guided by those”, and, surely, there are problems here, but the remnants of the previous system want to stick labels on the new authorities.

As of today, there are two different discourses: on the one hand, there is a discourse on being a citizen, openmindedness, on thinking and acting freely, and on the other hand – again, some different groups come into sight and drive a wedge: Artsakh-Armenia, the Sorosists and gays have come to substitute Masons, etc. This discourse is being activated again, because it has been proven that society is pretty much sensitive to these topics, and when we follow discussions going on in the social media, we realize that these are the most discussed, news-fed, shared, and clicked topics. From this perspective, this all can be said to be primitive, but a large part of society even fails to notice this, how it is enrooted and slowly cultivated. And let me share an experience. When conducting one of our studies, we carried out a survey among schoolchildren and asked them to write on paper the names of religious organizations, as well as to express their own attitude to those organizations. Mainly, they put down the names of the well-known religious organizations, but for me the most surprising revelation was that very few children mentioned the Armenian Apostolic Church, because in their mind it is not a religious organization but rather a national institution. It is something different, but not a religion, because in their minds religion used to be continually paralleled with Pentecostals or Jehovah’s Witnesses, always in the negative light. For this very reason, the terms ‘religion’, ‘belief’, ‘believer’ were always combined together in a negative context, and that, I think, was also a result of a purposefully designated campaign, and this was revealed by our research, which – let me reiterate – is unfortunate, since we are witnessing such practices. And now, within this very context, the matter which is considered to be of utmost importance – and which we have always been deliberating and focusing on at our research center – is that critical thinking should be developed. Schoolchildren and even children starting from the age of kindergarten should be taught to think and to differentiate. As of today, for instance, our society largely has problems, today we are drowning under the fake news and frequently fake news is being disseminated by the very members of our society, by those who do not differentiate which one is fake news, they even don’t try to check the source of the news but still disseminating it

without having checked the source of the news, and it turns out that they unintentionally become an atom in the propaganda machine. The reason is that they have not been taught media literacy in school, their critical thinking had not been developed, etc. And, thanks to God, currently all schools are undergoing a process of revision of all the types of educational standards, which will result in having new textbooks in all spheres. I will not reveal a secret by saying that recently one of the most discussed issues was the textbooks of the *History of the Armenian Church*, and then – in second place – of the *Chess* class, and then the remainder of the issues, but I'd like to say that I would prefer to see people discussing not those textbooks, but rather those of *Physics* and *Mathematics*.

And from that perspective, it is important to understand one thing, namely: what the purpose of a given subject is, and what every subject wants to teach. What is the purpose of the subject *History of the Armenian Church*? Is it to teach the history of the Armenian Church or to prepare a citizen, a person, equip them with knowledge, including on the Armenian Church and on other religions as well, so that when they walk out of Armenia, they do not feel barefoot with their knowledge, but rather are able to communicate with the representatives of other cultures and religions, feeling protected by their knowledge in the environments of different people.

This is quite important, because, for instance, in the same textbook of the *History of the Armenian Church* there used to be a question [to the children] written at the end of one of the lessons, a question which I was confronted with during the course of one of our studies, namely: "What is the danger posed by the Evangelical Church?" So, the answer was already implied in the very wording of the question and it was expected that the child would give a similar corresponding answer, and this cannot develop critical thinking. That means that the child is already being directed into answering the question in a way the author of the textbook is expecting of him. From that perspective, there were other issues like that, which are quite important. As to the *Toledo Principles* that you mentioned, it was me who was translating them into Armenian a while ago. And there is an important thing there, which I am impressed with since then: "Teach about religions, not teach religions". We need to adopt this principle, so that we teach about and not *the* religions. Here it is especially so, because we speak about the public education schools and not about the schools adjunct to religious

organizations or the Sunday schools, since the religious organizations are free, they provide the funding and they also teach. Nevertheless, in public education schools the children should study about religions. For instance, the textbook for the seventh grade starts, if I am not mistaken, with the topic on Armenian paganism and ends with Islam. Consequently, there comes a question: what do the pagan religion, Islam, Buddhism and Hinduism have to do with the curriculum of the *History of Armenian Church* subject? Perhaps, there is a need to have a standalone subject *History of Religions*? I know that different discussions will be held on this proposal with participation of specialists, and the outcomes of such discussions might vary. Nevertheless, there can be a subject on intercultural communication which will teach the children to engage with different cultures. That is, the issue is a quite delicate one, because I remember when the question was raised at the Ministry in relation to this subject, hundreds of people were writing to us warning against approaching this subject because it seemed to them that the new people in charge were against the Church. Not at all: there was just one goal: to have the education serve its very purpose: bringing up a citizen and a person, which was the most important thing for us, and there was nothing against either Armenian identity or our traditional church. I think, I said everything I had to say; maybe I will summarize the remainder in the form of questions. Thank you.



**Ms. Eka Chitanava,  
Director of the Tolerance and Diversity Institute, Georgia**

Good Afternoon, dear ladies and gentlemen. In this panel, I would like to talk about the intersection of freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) and education in Georgia. I shall underline the main challenges and opportunities in this regard.

Education is a major milestone for fostering tolerance and understanding the value of society and diversity. I will focus on public school education, as well as informal education opportunities. The school is itself both a community and a learning laboratory for participation in a larger community at local, national and global levels.

Tolerance, like all aspects of education for peace, human rights, democracy can and should be brought into schools with two fundamental approaches. These are: an instruction designed to achieve the intended learning goals and the experience through infusion of ethics and tolerant behaviors within the school environment.

Here I would refer to the Toledo Guiding Principles on Teaching about Religions and Beliefs in Public Schools. It is explicitly outlined in the document

that teaching about religions and beliefs shall not be denominationally oriented. Public schools should strive for student awareness about religions and beliefs, but should not press a student to accept of them. Schools may expose students to a diversity of history of religions and religious views, to look at them from different philosophical, anthropological, sociological and political perspectives. A school educates about religions and beliefs without promoting or denigrating any of them. Thus, when we talk about public education, we envisage the role of the State to be neutral and impartial when it touches upon the issue of religions and beliefs.

Let's closely look at the specific context of the country.

When I was in secondary school, I had the class of religion. It was all about Orthodox Christianity and it took the form of preaching. A friend, a Jehovah's Witness, was forced to stay in the classroom and be a part of the worship ritual. She didn't have an opt-out option. If she left, she would be offended even further. I remember this traumatizing episode. At the time, I could not fathom what kind of possibilities she could have to protect herself from coercion.

Despite the fact that Georgia is a multi-confessional and multi-ethnic country, diversity and non-discrimination principles are not observed or respected at public schools. After I graduated, the Law on General Education of Georgia changed in 2005. Now it defines religious neutrality and non-discrimination as one of the key principles of public schools and aims to create an environment based on equality for all the students. On the one hand, school settings aim to be religion-neutral, and at the same time, the law allows the accommodation of students' religious beliefs.

However, in practice, "neutrality" and equality principles prescribed by the law are often violated. Religious indoctrination, proselytism (the attempt to convert students to a certain religion or beliefs), and the display of religious symbols for non-academic purposes (i.e. lighting candles, putting out icons for prayer) for the advantage of the Georgian Orthodox Church adherents, frequently occur and remain a systemic problem. Representatives of non-Orthodox Christian religious communities refer to multiple facts of differentiation based on religious grounds.

Another issue: sometimes the State imposes limitations on expression of religious conviction (*forum externum*) when these are not legally prescribed

nor necessary to pursue a legitimate aim – the protection of public safety, order, health, or morals or the fundamental rights and freedoms of others.

Here is a case: religious attire can form a significant element of religious identity and is an important aspect of religious observance and practice. The question of how to respond to religious attire in public spaces has traditionally been considered from a human rights perspective. Although a number of countries have different approaches to ensure religious accommodation and balance it with other rights, at the same time, it is significant that any prohibition on religious attire should comply with the test of proportionality after a detailed factual examination which reflects the context of the prohibition and the rights of others, such as students and teachers.

In 2017, in one of the villages of Georgia, Mokhe, the school administration imposed an extra-legal ban on wearing a headscarf for a Muslim student. The law on General Education, as well as Mokhe school administrative regulations do not mention any ban on the hijab or any other kind of religious attributes in public schools. It also comes in conflict primarily with the Constitution of Georgia.

The Ministry of Education audit department studied the case and concluded that neither restriction of FoRB, nor discrimination on religious grounds were identified. While analysing the case, it is important to take into consideration the context and political events occurring in the same village. The majority of the Mokhe population are Muslims. They have long sought the return of their half-ruined mosque, which had been confiscated during the Soviet times and later registered by the local municipality as its property. In 2014, the State tried to dismantle the former mosque, which turned into verbal abuse and physical violence against Muslims, including allegedly by police officers. No perpetrators were brought to justice.

After these incidents, the Georgian Orthodox Church also claimed its ownership on the building, referring to the argument that the former mosque had been built by using stones from the churches previously located in the same area. However, no substantial historical evidence was provided by the Church. The head-teacher of Mokhe public school proved to be a member of the Orthodox Christian parish, organised a series of prayer vigils in front of the former mosque and publicly stated that the building belonged to the Orthodox congregation. Consequently, the same head-teacher banned the Muslim school student from wearing a headscarf during school hours.



In this particular case, the Ministry did not find any violations of the law or restriction of a person's freedom of religion or belief, based on several arguments. Firstly, according to the Ministry's conclusion, wearing a headscarf and all types of head covering was prohibited not only for a particular student, but for all students. This argument lacks cogency since the internal regulations of the school do not mention any prohibition about religious head-covering or other clothes. It was set out in the regulations that students shall not wear hats and dyed hair. Hence, the administration ignored the religious attribution of the headscarf. Secondly, the neutrality principle set out in the law was confused with the obligation of the school administration to provide accommodation of religious convictions for all students. When assessing the proportionality of any restrictions on religious expression, the principle of equality should be taken into account. Thirdly, prohibition was justified on the grounds of avoiding religious conflict, against the backdrop of the events occurring in connection to the mosque. However, the no arguments were provided as to how wearing a headscarf by a school student could foster confrontation between Muslim and Christian population of the village and pose any threat to public safety.

Another problem within the public education system relates to the textbooks. They are basically written from the standpoint of the ethnic and religious majority. Especially striking is that a certain period in the history of Georgia is mainly considered in a mono-religious and ethnocentric context. Consequently, the narration in the textbooks is basically directed to the ethnic and religious majority, although the recipients of these textbooks are not ethnic Georgians and Orthodox Christians alone. In history textbooks, the historical narrative is constructed in such a way as to portray other religious denominations (especially Islam) as a hostile force or to minimize the role and degree of participation of different denominations in the history of Georgia. One can also find descriptions of violence in the narrative of "we" versus "them" and the violence that "we" committed against different groups, including religious groups is not described in a neutral manner, but presented as an event of positive significance.

In 2018, the Ministry of Education had an initiative to restore teaching of religion at public schools through the subject of history of religion. This initiative was brought by the Orthodox Church. Most of the non-dominant religious communities, education experts and NGOs criticized the initiative

and regarded it as an attempt to reincarnate an old model of confessional teaching, rather than reflect the cultural and religious diversity of Georgia. Currently, the process is halted and the idea is being reconsidered.

TDI is actively involved in the process of improving school textbooks, training teachers and educators, consulting authors and publishing houses, and provides the expertise to the Ministry of Education to achieve tangible results. Last but not least, we are using informal education as an instrument to create a platform for different and challenging ideas. For instance, our project, Images of Diversity, represents different community members from a positive perspective - some of them cherish Georgian language, others contribute to interreligious dialogue, some of them express patriotic narratives, others talk about emancipation of women within religious communities, some of them provide assistance to vulnerable social groups. The same multimedia content underlines the existing problems of discrimination, stereotypes and stigmatization of minorities and people of different identities. The context is represented through human stories, which enables one to identify oneself with the protagonists and conceptualize the mentioned problems.

I believe that formal and informal education plays a vital role in promoting the ideas of tolerance and cultural diversity. How can we all achieve better results? This is a topic for our discussion.



**Mr. Vigen Shirvanyan,  
Expert on Education**

I would like to continue from the comments made by Hovhannes Hovhannisyan, as well as with his observations on the education sector. Let me point out that to a great extent I agree with him and share his views.

I will divide my speech into four sections: in the **first section**, I will talk about the need of a forum for this kind of deliberation. When discussing the need for religious education at schools, or the issue of the presence or absence of the subject *History of the Armenian Church*, we need to realize that if there is no mutual understanding and the opinions voiced during the discussion turn into quarrels and personal insults, then such a discussion will fail to lead to any positive solution, especially if it is taking place on such a sensitive issue as religion. This means that a change in the situation may occur only if the parties are ready for discussion, ready to listen to each other.

**The second issue** that I would like to elaborate on here, is the unique similarity between education and religion. In both cases the human factor is of key importance: just as the teacher plays a huge role in education, likewise the clergyman has a huge importance in the church. In the spiritual

sphere, if a person does not believe in what he is saying or preaching or does not behave in a way taught by his religion, he will eventually lose his authority as a person, or the religious organization he is representing as a clergyman will become deprived of any value in the people's eyes. Also, I would like to note that I am glad that Father Garegin, Dean of the Theological Seminary, is present at this discussion. I do think that a well-prepared clergyman can have more impact on his community, not just by presenting his doctrine theoretically but also by serving as an example. In this sense, one of the priority issues for the church is to have the right clergymen, and this demand should come from society, rather than be imposed on it from above.

Results of research studies conducted within the course of recent years testify to the fact that in various schools there were instances of bullying and intimidation against the children. Such religious manifestations cannot lead to a happy outcome. I personally read some of the research papers and I am aware of stories concerning children who were ordered to leave the classroom so they would not be present at the prayer. In this case, it is not about the current law or any similar procedural regulation in the country, but rather about pedagogical ethics and the simple human factor. The issue here is of a deeper nature: the problem is not merely in the law itself but rather: in the wrong perceptions of the people's spiritual life and the spiritual field in general.

In reference to religious education, I will say the following: in general, the Finnish model has been frequently talked about as one of the best practices. Rarely is it mentioned, though, that in the same Finland, religious education is a constituent part of mandatory education. All those students who are followers of Lutheran Church, generally and in fact do study that branch of religion, and those who are not Lutherans study their own religions. Moreover, those who are atheists study *Ethics*. I do think that in the general context, this portion of the value system should be deferred to the children. It is a different question as to how this should be arranged and who should be the implementers.

**The third issue** relates to exclusion of falsification. Hovhannes Hovhannisyan mentioned political speculations. It really did happen and still occurs in many places. Sensitive spiritual topics are easily used and

disseminated via fake news. I would like to stress another important circumstance, namely that the role of religion in our society is dominant.

In our reality, many more important matters are getting pushed to the background, and topics which divide society are artificially being pushed forward. Unfortunately, famous people are also getting involved in dissemination of these topics, distorting the real picture. A vivid example is the issue of the LGBT or homosexuals which was mentioned by Hovhannes as being artificially brought into the agenda. That is, they try to bring these issues to the spotlight by referring to matters of national security, but one needs to understand that there are many more important national security matters which are worthy of a closer look.

For instance, problems in the country such as bribery, social injustice and the resulting en masse labor migration of young persons, as a consequence of which the majority of the precisely those same traditional Armenian families find themselves on the verge of destruction – those problems do not receive the same type of attention which is granted to the artificially created acute problems.

**The fourth issue** pertains to culture and heritage. My Danish colleague talked about their own experience and I went back 17 years and recalled an interesting episode. During a theological discussion which was taking place at Copenhagen University, one of the speakers, a Dane, mentioned that they could not escape from their heritage, that the cross is embroidered into their flag; and there are many other nations and countries who are in the same situation: you cannot escape from the culture and architecture. Other colleagues, Georgians, have very recently, as a result of revolution, changed their flag, and now it carries 5 crosses on it. It is impossible to think of our heritage without Christianity, just impossible. Many phenomena come through the Christian tradition, and one doesn't need to escape from that, this is a part of universal human heritage and wealth. But it is a different issue as to how this is all being presented, how it becomes a part of human identity, how it makes an impact upon the way of living of the new generation through the same clergyman or teacher, how it becomes a public asset. This always has been a challenge, but I think especially now, when every person is a medium and can have many followers on different fora and may have no lesser influence than any entity. Thank you.

**SESSION II:  
FORB UNDER  
THE LIGHT OF  
“CONFLICTING  
RIGHTS”**



Source: Geneva Academy of International Humanitarian Law and Human Rights

**Mr. Ibrahim Salama,  
OHCHR, Chief of Human Rights Treaties Branch - Faith  
for Rights (via Skype)**

Good afternoon dear participants. I'm glad to have this opportunity. I very much appreciate the title of the session Freedom of Religion or Belief in the light of conflicting rights and frankly for long we have been witnessing dichotomous and artificial divides between freedom of religion and other human rights.

Namely, there are two areas where the perception of conflicts between FoRB and other human rights are two in our experience. I should have started by presenting myself. My name is Ibrahim Salama and I am responsible for the human rights treaties at the office of the Commissioner of Human Rights in Geneva.

We note that freedom of religion or belief has been put in contradiction with two major human rights: freedom of expression on one hand and women's rights on the other hand. And these tensions were never addressed from a perspective of defining the responsibilities of religious actors in the area of human rights. So this is the ending that we and the office of the Higher Commissioner tried to explore and it actually started many years ago, in 2009

at the Durban debut conference there were many references to religion that were a little bit controversial among member states. One of them was the concept of definition of religions and whether or not there is a need to prohibit the definition of religions. And of course the clash of the tensions here was between the freedom of expression on one hand and the freedom of religion on the other hand.

How far or till which point could critical thinking be allowed in the religious sphere? This remains a very difficult question and it erupted in the most flagrant manner with the famous cartoon “crisis” concerning some cartoons in Denmark at that time, I can’t remember the year. So the issue was at the profound level, the legal issue is the clash of rights, that the freedom of expression allows anything and everything. Is a caricature that criticizes religious interpretations necessarily an offence to the rights of religion or belief or somebody else?

We started with three rules for religious leaders that were considered by experts regarding the attitudes of their responsibilities with respect to incitement to hatred and violence. Some misinterpretations of religions or some political actors manipulating the religions at times use religious arguments as tools for conflict ideology or violence and it was important to try to see how different legislations define incitement to violence and who is responsible for that and whether these responsibilities extend to religious leaders and faith actors or not.

So in 2012 a group of experts, after a number of workshops in different regions of the world, articulated what is known as the Rabat plan of action for reducing incitement, the advocacy of hatred that constitutes incitement of violence or discrimination. The notion of incitement is very difficult to define and that was the added value of this kind of action.

In so far as religious leaders are concerned, they shall be considered as a non-state actor with specific responsibilities in the area of human rights, namely regarding topic of incitement to violence in the name of religion. And there were three responsibilities articulated in this Rabat plan of action. Number one is that religious leaders should not use theology to advocate hatred that constitutes incitement to violence, number two that they should themselves denounce any such manipulation of religion to become an



incitement to violence or if it's committed in the name of religion, and number three when their own religious communities are victims of such incitement to violence they should advise communities and believers not to react to violence with violence.

So this one was in 2012, after that increasingly we noticed the phenomena of radicalization and violent extremism in the name of religion, we have seen organizations like Al-Qaeda and ISIS even occupying portions of territories in Iraq and Syria, so the phenomena became a truth again and many civil society actors and human rights experts were interested to complete the unfinished business of Rabat because they feel the responsibilities for religious leaders that I outlined were only related to the prohibition of incitement to violence, but what about human rights, what about freedom of expression, what about peaceful coexistence, what about discrimination, what about religious minorities and how to be with them?

So five years after Rabat namely in 2017 a group of about hundred human rights experts who are also active in the religious fields and freedom of religion or belief met in Beirut and articulated the "Faith for Rights" framework. This framework consists of a declaration and eighteen commitments on faith for rights.

The declaration is predominantly a methodological document; I quickly outlined what are the key elements of the declaration: one is that all the religions give high esteem to human dignity, two, that religions are among the oldest historical sources of human rights, so human rights is not a western construct and were not born in 1948 and human rights are as old as humanity. The third element of the declaration, which is fundamental, is that the declaration aims to capture what is common among all religions and beliefs so that faith actors when defending human rights through their own discipline and through their own religious and faith approaches do not come from a sectorial or sectarian point of view but speak about what is common, and it was an attempt to see what is common among religions.

And the proof is exactly at the heart of the title of this session, which is conflicting rights, because one cannot have freedom of religion or belief without freedom of expression because it's through the expression that you can exteriorize and share and promote your religious beliefs.

So they do not contradict each other in any way. Point number six in the declaration is that the artificial divides come from political manipulation. When the political leaders or states or governments or rulers want to legitimize any act of violence, they try to wrongly associate it with religion. The seventh principle of the declaration is that the faith for rights is an open framework. There has been a lot of emphasis on interfaith dialogues in the past decade or even two decades but these dialogues were missing precisely a common framework identifying what is shared out among all relations.

Then there were five methodological elements. Number one is that which immediately transfers the dialogue into projects, number two is that the “Faith for Rights” framework is not about theology and whatever is theology and is revised is not part of this framework. Number three is about introspectiveness and the sense to address more global issues collectively and consistently, after internal and inclusive deliberation.

The fourth methodology adopted by the participants was “Speaking in one voice” and the fifth principle was to “Act in an independent matter”. The idea is that by definition if freedom of conscience is absolute there can be no attempt to delegate authority in this area. So these are the principles of the declaration and then it led to the adoption of eighteen specific commitments called Ethnic Commitments on Faithful Rights, and these commitments are precisely the targets that the participants wanted to promote in practice. They relate to children’s rights, they relate to the incitement of hatred again because they both look at three obligations that are in Rabat so that the document is comprehensive enough, and then there is a specific commitment about women, commitment about reviewing the curriculums of religious teaching to ensure that there is no manipulation of religions against human rights.

The faith for rights framework was tested in Senegal, in Tunisia, in Marrakesh, Ethiopia and Egypt in the form of training sessions and when we say training. Almost every time we come up with new insights on complementarity between freedom of religion or belief and all other human rights as well as the complementarity between religions and human rights mechanisms and instruments. I thank you very much.



**Dr. Antenor Hallo de Wolf,  
University of Groningen, Assistant Professor of  
International Law and Human Rights**

First of all, please let me extend my gratitude to the Eurasia Partnership Foundation, and Mr. Nikolay Hovhannisyan for inviting me to participate in this interesting conference. I was asked to give a presentation on the issue of clashes between rights and interests, in particular about the potential clash between freedom of religion or belief and other human rights. As it's well known, human rights are generally not absolute. Most human rights can be limited to achieve reasonable purposes, in so far as this is done in a proportional manner. This certainly applies to freedom of expression, the right to privacy, but also for freedom of religion or belief, in particular if the enjoyment of these rights clashes with some interests, such as the rights and freedoms of others. Freedom of religion or belief may clash with other rights, such as freedom of expression (think for example about the response of religious followers to satirical or critical expressions towards their religions, or towards the acceptance of different ways of lifestyle or sexual orientation). To illustrate these clashes, let me give you a recent example ... and I'm talking about the outbreak of measles that happened quite recently in New York, for example, within the Jewish Orthodox community children

who have not been vaccinated against measles because of the religious convictions of their parents and they are going to a public schools. The public schools were not accepting them because they were afraid that the measles could spread around. And something similar is also happening in the Netherlands right now where I live. Some religious communities, but also some communities with anthroposophical world views don't think that children should be vaccinated, and this carries a number of problems or issues certainly in terms of having a clash with other human rights.

So for example, the freedom of religion or belief to not have the children vaccinated because of some religious concepts may have an impact on the right to life of the child or in general the public interest to protect public healthcare. Now, if you know how human rights may be limited, when they are subjected to limitations, especially when they are also clashing with other human rights, there is a specific scheme that human rights lawyers use, and which bodies like the Human Rights Committee under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the European Court of Human Rights apply. In terms of limiting these rights, in this case the freedom of belief or religion, States first have to allow this limitation through a formal law that is both foreseeable and accessible. This means that the law has to set out precisely what kind of limitations are possible, so that people can adjust their behaviour to them, and the law should be publicly accessible, for example through publication in a state or official gazette.

Secondly, this particular limitation by law has to serve one or more particular purposes to justify a limitation of freedom of belief or religion. In human rights treaties the purposes for limiting this particular freedom would be for example public order, public health, and the rights and freedoms of others. Thirdly, this particular limitation by law and with the aim of protecting one or more particular goals, has to be necessary and in the context of the European Convention of Human Rights it's phrased as being necessary in a democratic society. Now these limitations pertain to the external outings of freedom of religion: what we call the external manifestation of freedom of religion. One of the interesting questions in this discussion is what does this amount to? What do external manifestations of freedom of belief or religion entail? The human rights treaty bodies like the European Court of Human Rights and the Human Rights Committee in Geneva have mentioned a couple of activities that fall under the external manifestation aspect. These would be, for example, worship activities or rituals, the teaching of religious

precepts, and the practice and the obedience of certain rules within a religious community. One of the interesting questions here in this particular discussion would be whether the refusal on religious grounds to vaccinate children would also fall under this particular external manifestation of freedom of religion or belief, and this is something that is not entirely or not always necessarily obvious. This is because the limitation will be enforced on this external manifestation, but the manifestation actually has to be very closely related to the religious belief or idea. The act or practice has to have a sufficiently close and direct link with the religious belief. In other words, the practice being limited has to be actually part of an express belief. This is something that the European Court of Human Rights discussed in a particular case against the United Kingdom (*Eweida and Others v. the UK*). We can, thus, ask ourselves whether for example not allowing your child to be vaccinated would amount to such a practice that is very closely interrelated to religion and belief, and this is not entirely clear, and hence amenable for a limitation.

One could relate perhaps to the discussions dealing with conscientious objection for example with respect to military service. A particular case before the European Court of Human Rights involving Armenia (*Bayatyan v. Armenia*) involved the objections to participating in military service by Jehovah's Witnesses. In this particular case the European Court of Human Rights recognized the fact that conscientious objection can play a role in guaranteeing freedom of belief or religion, but this particular contentious objection has to be closely motivated by the religious beliefs. Thus, an objection to vaccination needs to be closely linked and motivated by religious beliefs, if it is not to be subjected to a limitation.

Thus if the opposition to vaccination is motivated by a serious and insurmountable conflict between on the one hand compulsory vaccination of children and on the other hand a person's deep and genuinely held religious belief, this objection can be covered by for example article 9 of the European Convention of Human Rights which protects freedom of religion. Of course it may be very difficult to prove this link, and this may, in some occasions, depend on the consistency of the practice of not allowing your children to be vaccinated among a religious group, or on whether the objection to vaccination belongs to the core precepts or tenets within a religion which actually tells you that you shouldn't have your child vaccinated.

Of course this leads or may lead potentially to a clash with public health interests, as I mentioned before, and with the rights and freedom of others, for example the vital right of the child to live because if it gets infected with measles his or her life may be at stake. This requires usually making a determination of whether the protection of these particular interests (public health and the rights or freedoms of others) requires a measure that would make vaccination mandatory – is it necessary to guarantee the protection of those interests? In legal terms we call this determining whether there is a pressing social need that justifies a limitation of freedom of religion or belief to allow these particular interests to be protected. In other words: is the protection of the interests of public health or the rights and freedoms of others well served through limiting the objection to mandatory vaccination which is based on profound religious beliefs.

Now in the practice of human rights treaty bodies, in particular of the European Court of Human Rights, this discussion of whether it's necessary to limit one's practice based on religious beliefs is looked from several perspectives. On the one hand states are allowed what we call a margin of appreciation in deciding whether there is that pressing social need. States have a certain leeway giving them some space to determine whether and how to protect those interests like the rights of a child or the protection of public health. To determine how wide or narrow this margin of appreciation is, the European Court of Human Rights usually looks whether with regard to certain issues there is a European consensus on the matter or whether the nature of the right allows for a wide margin of appreciation (rights related to the bodily integrity of the person have a very narrow margin of appreciation, whereas freedom of religion or belief usually allows for a broader margin of appreciation). With regard to mandatory vaccination, it would appear that there is no consensus at the European level, leaving states a wide margin of appreciation to determine whether it is necessary or not to oblige children to be vaccinated. On the other hand, assessing the need for vaccination for the benefit of public health or the rights and freedoms of others entails balancing these interests with the rights of people to adhere to their beliefs and religious ideas and practices. This goes close together, hand-in-hand, with the issue of proportionality which entails asking questions like whether the measure limiting a religious practice, in this case mandatory vaccination contrary to the objections held by devout believers, is the least intrusive measure and would not impinge too much on their freedom of belief or

religion. Another question would be whether the measure of mandatory vaccination is effective? Does it really lead to the reduction of measles, and are there any other less intense or less intrusive measures that could be adopted to allow people with certain religious beliefs to continue with those practices? Thirdly, does this particular measure, the mandatory vaccination of children, deprive individuals of the right to exercise freedom of religion and belief entirely? Does the measure deprive it from the rights essence?

These questions are only relevant if there are there any viable and effective alternatives capable of accommodating the competing interests as decided in the Bayatyan case. Are there alternatives to vaccinations that are out there that would allow those individuals or those groups objecting to them to maintain their practices? In essence one needs to go into the question of whether there is a fair balance struck between these two competing interests. That's not an easy question to answer, and unfortunately I don't have the time to go more in-depth into this particular discussion. What is clear, is that a state may have positive obligations to ensure that this balance between competing interests is struck in a proper manner taking all the relevant options into account.

Certainly, with respect to this particular issue there has been until now no human rights case brought before a human rights body like European Court of Human Rights, or the Human Rights Committee or at least it hasn't been resolved. There is a case pending now on this matter before the European Court of Human Rights, Vavricka and others v. Czech Republic, but the Court has not yet answered this particular question, and I'm still curious as to how it will resolve it given the fact that these two competing interests go hand in hand. This is something that Mr. Salama pointed out during his presentation, that you shouldn't exclude each other. The question is in the details and how do you actually respect both sets of rights. Perhaps we can discuss it later on during the Q&A. Thank you very much for your attention.



**Rev. Rusudan Gorsiridze,  
Bishop, Evangelical Baptist Church of Georgia**

When I was listening to my colleague, may I say so? I said “wow” it looks like we work together on the same subject but I would not be as eloquent on human rights and legal issues because that’s not my cup of tea. I will speak from the theological perspective, I will speak as a religious person, as an insider.

When I started thinking on the offered topic – Conflicting Rights – the very first question that came up in my mind was this: if there are conflicting rights ( ... and, of course, there are things that cannot go together very smoothly in everyday life), then there must be some kind of hierarchy in rights. And if there is a hierarchy, then how is that order defined? I am not a lawyer, so I started to dig into the religious teachings. In Zoroastrian wisdom there are three main virtues for a good believer:

1. Think right;
2. Speak right;
3. Act right.



It is very subjective to think in terms of 'right' and 'wrong'. Still I like this formula and this can be applied to freedom. We are human beings who are to free to think, free to speak and free to act. What if the hierarchy of rights are set in that order?!

1. **Think Right/ Free to think:** - Even the most severe totalitarian regimes with their well-elaborated brain-washing mechanism have succeeded to manipulate people's brains. It does not matter how powerful the propaganda machine is, we are free to think. The thinking is the space that belongs only to us. Despite any restrictions, we think what we think. This is the level which cannot be limited and probably, on the steps of the hierarchy of rights freedom of thinking stands on the top.
2. **Speak Right/ or free to speak:** - We have the right to speak freely whatever we believe or whatever we think is right to speak. When we refer to "speaking", we do not only assume linguistic (or semantic) speaking. Having the right to speak means we have the right to express ourselves. We can express our ideas in so many different ways: in art, in music, choreography...

Let's consider the Cartoon Case in Denmark and France. Freedom of expression cannot be limited even if violates somebody's feelings (religious or patriotic feelings). If we allow any institution, whether governmental, or religious, or political, to control or limit freedom of expression, we are in danger of losing a precious achievement in the human rights field. But this is not really a black and white situation here. What happens when we face hostile language towards LGBT community, against women, or based on racial diversity?

Probably, if anywhere on earth there is a situation of "conflicting rights" it is on this level. On one hand, we speak about the freedom of expression, which means that any community is free to say whatever they believe, whatever they think is right to say. On the other hand, what happens if what one thinks is right to say is not right for the other group of people? Can we speak here about the responsibilities???? I understand that as soon as I speak about freedoms and responsibilities on the same level I fall in the same boat As Mr. Putin. This is how Russia speaks about human rights.

- 3. Act Right/ or free to act:** - It is not a very clear line between expressing yourself and acting. Because, whatever you do to express yourself, is an act. Still, acting is something that can be controlled and limited. The level of “conflict” between rights is much more obvious here. We are not free to do whatever we think is right to do. We are not allowed to kill anybody, to beat somebody up only because we think they are not the right people, or they do not think right, speak right or even if they do not act right.

Unfortunately, religions have gained a very bad reputation in this conflict. In the history of humankind, if somebody causes pain or aggression towards those who are not like them, they are the people of faith.

Unfortunately, humans keep forgetting that the most ancient human rights institution in the history of civilization was religion. Every religion was created to help people to live together in harmony, not to kill each other, not to persecute each other but to live together in harmony and I will quote from a Christian perspective, that “Shabbat was made for men (humans), not men (humans) for Shabbat.” - Mark 2:27.

Therefore, everything that was created to regulate humans’ coexistence in society, whether it was a secular or religious law, was made for people to live in a harmony. It is very hard to believe, especially from the gender equality perspective. It is the religious laws that are quoted to justify discrimination and violence against women.

One of my students, while speaking about the gender equality issues in Christianity, said: “It is not right to speak about the modern understanding of gender equality from the perspective of the Old Testament or New Testament or whatever religious text, because it resembles their own time. Just as it is not correct and adequate to judge the texts from the 21<sup>st</sup> century perspective”.

For instance, when in the Old Testament we say that a childless widow must marry her brother-in-law (Deuteronomy 25:5), this was created to protect women, as in those days a childless woman without man’s protection was destined to physical or social death. But, of course, it would be absolutely inappropriate to bring this law in live to protect women.

The same can be said about a lot of religious law or religious practices: polygamy, dress code for women, issues about menstruation and many other topics... What was and seemed good for women and children in ancient times cannot be automatically copied into modern lives without considering context and meaning.

When modern society comes in conflict with religious beliefs, laws or practices, the only way to deal with the situation is to criticize or undermine them. Of course, criticism, asking questions is a very powerful and important instrument to deal with the problem, but unfortunately, we never go beyond the criticism. Humour is a very good instrument, but if you want to build a house, you cannot do it only with humour. I believe there are many more other tools which are not yet used in situations of conflicting rights. I believe education is one of them; religious dialogue; cooperation...

When I speak about education, it can be considered as an instrument to help people to think freely. Freedom comes with good education and with well-informed decisions. When you are sure about your freedom of thought then you are free and confident to express your thoughts freely without aggression and violence. When there is a good education, it means that you are well aware about the needs of the other side. Then you come to speak to the other side and this dialogue is not from a position of superiority, but from the egalitarian, partnership spirit.

So everybody, whether majority or minority, when they come to the dialogue table they need to speak to each other from the perspective of equality. Cooperation is to put in action all the resources the society has to build harmony that human beings can have together.

I will end with a little story, which we often use in our sermons: the story is about a group of people swimming in the same boat to cross the lake. One of the passengers said: I have bought this ticket, so this chair belongs to me. Everybody agreed. The passenger continued: so, if this chair belongs to me I can do whatever I want with my chair, right. And the other passengers said: you can do whatever you want. So here he started drilling his chair. And he keeps saying: this chair belongs to me and I can do whatever I want.

Unfortunately, or fortunately this is not how we can work and act in our societies. None of the communities in our societies is completely

autonomous or can live in isolation. Nobody can say, this is my area and I can do whatever I want. We live in the same boat and we need to talk to each other and to coexist together despite all the differences and conflicting rights or values.

















**SPEAKERS,  
MODERATORS  
AND  
RAPPORTEURS**

## Mr. Nikol Pashinyan

*Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia*

Nikol Pashinyan became the Prime Minister of Armenia on May 8, 2018. It was the result of a non-violent, velvet revolution that he initiated and led. He started the Movement from one of the major cities of Armenia, Gyumri, walking all the way to Yerevan, the capital of Armenia. He started the walk from Gyumri to Yerevan with several of his proponents. Before they had reached Yerevan thousands of people joined their movement, and started blocking streets, demanding the resignation of Serzh Sargsyan, the third President of the Republic of Armenia who became the Prime Minister of Armenia after the constitutional amendments. When Sargsyan resigned, Nikol Pashinyan was elected as Prime Minister of Armenia by the Parliament that continued to have the previous ruling party as its majority. To ensure the legitimacy of his party, Nikol Pashinyan resigned and snap parliamentary elections were held on December 9, 2018. The result was a landslide victory for Pashinyan's "My Step Alliance", which received 70% of the vote and won 88 of the 132 seats in the parliament.

Before becoming Prime Minister, Pashinyan was a deputy, elected to the National Assembly by the electoral list of "Yelk Block" in the general elections of April 2, 2017. From May, 2017, he headed the National Assembly's "Yelk" parliamentary faction.

In 2013, he founded the "Civil Contract" public-political association. From 2013 to 2015, he was on the governing board of "Civil Contract" public-political association. Since 2015, he has been a board member of "Civil Contract" party. In May 2016, he was the commander of "Civil Contract" party volunteer detachment.

In the parliamentary elections of 2012, he was elected to the National Assembly by the proportional list of the Armenian National Congress Alliance. In 2012-2013, he was Chairman of the NA Ethics Committee. During the 2008 presidential election, he participated in the campaign of Levon Ter-Petrosyan, then a presidential candidate. After the elections ended with the victory of the Republican Party, thousands of Armenians – proponents of Ter-Petrosyan's alliance – including Nikol Pashinyan came out into streets, claiming that the entire electoral process was a fraud and

demanding the annulment of the election results. The authorities used force against demonstrators and started an investigation against the organizers of these demonstrations, Nikol Pashinyan among them. Following these events, Pashinyan was sought by the police for almost a year and spent four months in hiding. On July 1, 2009, he came out of hiding and surrendered himself to the Office of the General Prosecutor. In January, 2010 he was arrested for the second time and sentenced for seven years on charges of organizing mass disorders on March 1, 2008.

He has been widely recognized as a prisoner of conscience both in Armenia and by the international community. After spending one year and 11 months in prison, he was released on May 27, 2011 as a result of a general amnesty declared by the Armenian authorities.

In 2007, he founded the Alternative Public-Political association. He headed the proportional list of Impeachment alliance in 2017 Parliamentary Elections. In August, 1999, he was sentenced to one year in prison for political motives. Later, at the request of international and Armenian journalists, the Court of Appeals delayed the imprisonment for a year. As a result, the imprisonment was never enforced.

Before actively engaging in politics he was a journalist. He worked for several newspapers, such as Dprutyun, Hayastan, Lragir, Lragir-Or and Molorak. In 1998, he founded Oragir daily, which was closed down by a court decision in 1999 for political reasons. In 1999, he was appointed editor-in-chief of Haykakan Zhamanak daily and held the post until 2012.

Nikol Pashinyan was born on June 1, 1975 in Ijevan. After finishing a local secondary school, from 1991 to 1995 he studied at Yerevan State University. However, he was dismissed from his last year of studies for political reasons. Nikol Pashinyan is married, with three daughters and a son.

### **Mr. Arman Tatoyan**

*Human Rights Defender of the Republic of Armenia*

Elected by the Armenian Parliament for a period of 6 years (2016 February till present) as the Human Rights Defender of Armenia (Ombudsman), Dr. Tatoyan is also the head of the National Preventive Mechanism in Armenia,

an ad hoc Judge at European Court of Human Rights since 2016 and International Adviser of the Council of Europe since 2013.

Dr. Tatoyan has an LL.M degree from the University of Pennsylvania Law School, where he has been honoured the Distinguished Member Award of LL.M Class of 2013 for his professional accomplishments. During his studies he also completed the Business and Law Certificate Program of the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania. Dr. Tatoyan also holds a Ph.D. in Law from Yerevan State University. Currently, he is an adjunct professor at Yerevan State University and the American University of Armenia.

Prior to his election as the Human Rights Defender of Armenia, Dr. Tatoyan served as a Deputy Minister of Justice in Armenia (2013-2016). In this capacity, he served as Deputy Representative (Deputy Agent) of Armenia before the European Court of Human Rights (2013 –2016). He was also a member of the Council of Europe European Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (2011-2013). Dr. Tatoyan has extensive working experience in judiciary, including in the Constitutional Court and Cassation Court of Armenia, as well as in civil society and international organizations.

### **Mr. Jos Douma**

*Ambassador of the Kingdom of the Netherlands to Georgia and to the Republic of Armenia*

H.E. Johannes (Jos) Douma started his diplomatic career in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Kingdom of the Netherlands right after graduating from the Faculty of History at Groningen University in the Netherlands. Mr. Douma has held various diplomatic positions, including Head of the Central European Department, Head of the Political Department in Moscow, Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the Kingdom of the Netherlands to Slovenia and Iran. Serving as a Dutch diplomat for almost 40 years, in 2015, H.E. Mr. Jos Douma was appointed as an Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the Kingdom of Netherlands to Armenia and Georgia. Mr. Douma places particular emphasis on the proper protection and promotion of human rights, especially freedom of religion and/or belief in Armenia and Georgia, ensuring provision of equal opportunities by supporting various initiatives in these countries.

## **Mr. Shombi Sharp**

*UN Resident Coordinator*

Shombi Sharp (USA) has been appointed as UN Resident Coordinator for the Republic of Armenia and assumed his responsibilities as of 1 March 2018. Before this appointment, Shombi was Deputy Resident Representative with the UNDP Office in Georgia (2014-2018). He served as Deputy Country Director with UNDP in Beirut, Lebanon (2010-2014). From 2006-2010, Shombi was Regional HIV/AIDS Practice Team Leader with RBEC in Moscow, Russia and he spent a year as Programme Manager for the Western Balkans with RBEC in New York (2005-2006). Shombi was appointed Assistant Resident Representative with the UNDP Office in Russia (2002-2005). Before he joined UNDP, Shombi was a Program Coordinator at Naropa University in Colorado, USA (2001-2002). He began his career in development as a Strategic Planner, Project Manager & Crisis Response Coordinator with CARE International in Harare, Zimbabwe (1998-2000). Shombi holds a Master's degree in Economics from the University of Colorado, Boulder, USA and a Bachelor's degree in Business Administration from the University of Kansas, Lawrence, USA.

## **Mr. Gevorg Ter-Gabrielyan**

*EPF, Chief Executive Officer*

Gevorg Ter-Gabrielyan is an international development leader and writer with 35 years of experience working in public and private spheres in transitional countries across the Balkans and Central Asia with a primary focus on Armenia. His strengths include strategy development, consortium management, program design, fundraising, grant-making, project management, participatory training methods, facilitation and public speaking. Throughout his career, he has specialized in civil society, youth, media, regional studies, the European dimension and peacebuilding. He became the Executive Director of the Eurasia Partnership Foundation (EPF) in Armenia in 2007. At EPF, Dr. Ter-Gabrielyan's responsibilities include leading and implementing large-scale multi-year projects, overseeing grant management, developing the organization's strategy and designing programs. Furthermore, he is responsible for fundraising, networking, and representing the Foundation at events and in the media,

local and international. Dr. Ter-Gabrielyan has also worked as a Eurasia Program Manager and Senior Policy Advisor at International Alert, an organization working on conflict transformation and peace-building from London. He writes prolifically, contributing fiction and essays in Armenian and Russian, or journalism pieces in Armenian, Russian and English to a variety of media outlets, on topics ranging from international relations to conflict transformation and peace-building to European integration to Armenia's development issues; etc. He is a developer and editor of several handbooks and manuals, including on anti-corruption, project management, and conflict-sensitive reporting. He has teaching, research and editing experience. He has a Ph.D. in Turkic Linguistics from the USSR Academy of Sciences, 1989; an MA in Society and Politics from Lancaster University, UK, 1994; and an MPA in International Administration from Bowling Green State University, USA, 1996.

### **Ms. Isabella Sargsyan**

*EPF, Program Director*

Isabella Sargsyan is human rights and development specialist with 20 years of experience. Her specialization includes theory and practice of human rights, FoRB, conflict transformation, qualitative research and analysis. In 2016-2018 she was a member of the OSCE/ODIHR Panel of Experts on Freedom of Religion or Belief. The role of the Panel is to provide advice, guidance and recommendations to ODIHR, and through ODIHR to OSCE participating States, on matters pertaining to the freedom of religion or belief for all. Her work experience includes FoRB training provision to governments, civil society and religious groups in various OSCE countries. In 2017 for the work in the area of human rights she was awarded Freedom Defender Award. Her spheres of professional interest include issues of religion, ethnicity, identity, culture and nation-states; methodology of transformative change and critical thinking; history and legacy of the 20th Century; social movements and civic engagement. Isabella holds an MSc degree in Sociology and Human Rights from London School of Economics and Political Science and a BA/MA in Theology from Yerevan State University.



## **Mr. Ahmed Shaheed (video message)**

*UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief*

On 1 November 2016, Ahmed Shaheed assumed his mandate as Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief. He is Deputy Director of the Essex Human Rights Centre. Since he took up the mandate, he has conducted country visits to Albania, Uzbekistan, Tunisia and the Netherlands. He has also requested country visits to several other countries including Armenia. Furthermore, he presented several reports to the Human Rights Council and General Assembly that focused on the Restrictions imposed on expression on account of religion or belief, Relationship between freedom of religion or belief and national security; State-Religion Relationships and their Impact on Freedom of Religion or Belief; and The increase in religious intolerance worldwide and the gap between international commitments to combat intolerant acts and national practices.

## **Mr. Kishan Manocha**

*OSCE/ODIHR Senior Adviser on Freedom of Religion or Belief*

Dr Kishan Manocha has extensive experience in freedom of religion or belief and related human rights issues in Europe, the Middle East and North Africa, and Central and South Asia as an advocate, researcher, trainer and consultant to a number of international and non-governmental organisations. He has been Senior Adviser on Freedom of Religion or Belief at the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights in Warsaw since May 2015. Prior to that he served as Director of the Office of Public Affairs of the Bahá'í community of the United Kingdom. Kishan holds degrees in medicine and law from the Universities of London and Cambridge respectively. He first trained in psychiatry, completing a Research Fellowship in Forensic Psychiatry and becoming a Member of the Royal College of Psychiatrists, before studying law and practicing as a barrister. He has been a Visiting Research Fellow at the Carr Centre for Human Rights at Harvard University, a Fellow of the Montreal Institute for Genocide and Human Rights Studies at Concordia University in Montreal, and a Special Adviser to the late Shahbaz Bhatti, former Minister for Minority Affairs in Pakistan. Kishan is a Research Fellow at the Religious Freedom and Business Foundation, a Professional Associate at the Centre for Law

and Religion at Cardiff University, and a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts. He also chairs the Faith Matters Advisory Board and is a trustee of Beyond Conflict, a charity that supports the provision of counselling and mental health support to those who have been affected by violence in Iraq. Kishan was actively involved in interfaith dialogue activities at the local and national levels in the UK for over two decades and is currently a member of the Global Steering Committee of the Plan of Action for Religious Leaders and Actors to Prevent Incitement to Violence that Could Lead to Atrocity Crimes.

### **Mr. John Kinahan**

*Forum 18, Analyst*

John Kinahan works for Forum 18 <[www.forum18.org](http://www.forum18.org)>, which provides original, reliable and detailed monitoring and analyses of violations of freedom of thought, conscience and belief of all people - whatever their belief or non-belief. It publishes on Central Asia, the South Caucasus, Russia, Belarus, Russian-occupied Crimea and Donbas, and also publishes occasional analyses on Turkey. The name 'Forum 18' comes from Article 18 of both the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. John has worked on freedom of thought, conscience and religion issues since 1997, and was the Irish member of the former Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) Panel of Experts on Freedom of Religion and Belief.

### **Mr. Beka Mindiashvili**

*Head of Tolerance Center under the Auspices of  
Public Defender in Georgia*

Beka Mindiashvili has been the head of Tolerance Center under the Auspices of Public Defender in Georgia since 2005. Tolerance Center works to protect freedom of religion and belief for all, fostering tolerance and civic integration in Georgia. It also coordinates the work of two councils under Public Defender: the Council of Religions and the Council of National Minorities. Apart from this, Beka Mindiashvili is a co-founder of Tolerance and Diversity Institute (TDI), a human rights non-governmental organization in Georgia. Mr. Mindiashvili leads and teaches the course of religious tolerance at Ilia State University. He is actively engaged in promoting tolerance and equality in Georgia.

### **Mrs. Nina Pirumyan**

*Head of Human Rights Research and Educational Center at the RA Human Rights Defender's Office*

Nina Pirumyan currently holds the position of Head of Human Rights Research and Educational Center at the RA Human Rights Defender's Office. She is also the permanent representative of the Human Rights Defender at the Constitutional Court. Prior to this, she was the Advisor to the Human Rights Defender. She also worked at the Department for Relations with the European Court of Human Rights of the Ministry of Justice. Mrs. Pirumyan is an Assistant Professor at the Criminal Law Chair, Faculty of Law of Yerevan State University.

She is a graduate of the Faculty of Law of Yerevan State University, obtaining a Bachelor of Laws degree in 2010, and Master of Laws in 2012. Currently she is a PhD student at the same faculty. The sphere of her academic interests include current issues in criminal law and criminology.

### **Mrs. Mariam Gvartadze**

*Tolerance and Diversity Institute*

Mariam Gvartadze is a human rights lawyer. She is a co-founder and head of legal programs at the non-governmental organization, Tolerance and Diversity Institute (TDI), based in Tbilisi, Georgia. Her work is focused on freedom of religion and belief, non-discrimination and minority rights. The organization provides strategic litigation, free legal aid to people experiencing discrimination on religious, ethnic and/or racial grounds in Georgia, conducts various awareness-raising and educational activities, state policy research and strategic advocacy. During her work, Mariam has participated in reforms and advocacy for freedom of religion and belief and equal rights for religious communities in Georgia. With Ms. Gvartadze's participation and supervision, TDI has succeeded in several important strategic litigation cases in favor of freedom of religion and equality of religious organizations in Georgia. In parallel, since 2006, Mariam Gvartadze works at the Tolerance Center operating under the auspices of the Public Defender (Ombudsman) of Georgia. She is a legal expert at the Center, advocating for freedom of religion and rights of religious and ethnic

minorities. Mariam Gavtadze actively participates in local and international platforms on freedom of religion and human rights. Her research interests include religious studies, law and religion, religion-state intersection and secularity, racial studies, freedom of expression. Ms. Gavtadze holds a BA degree in law and an LLM in international law.

### **Mr. Vladimir Shkolnikov**

*UN OHCHR Senior Human Rights Advisor for the South Caucasus*

Vladimir Shkolnikov is a UN OHCHR Senior Human Rights Advisor for the South Caucasus. Shkolnikov previously was the director of Freedom House Europe in Budapest, held multiple positions, including Head of Democratization Department, within the Warsaw-based Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), and was a part of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). In 2017, Shkolnikov attended a regional conference on the contemporary issues of freedom of religion or belief in Armenia, Georgia and Beyond. Shkolnikov holds a Ph.D. and Masters in Public Policy Analysis with specialization in Russian and Eurasian Studies from the RAND Corporation's Graduate School (Santa Monica, California).

### **Ms. Salpy Eskidjian Weiderud**

*Executive Coordinator of the Office of the Religious Track of the Cyprus Peace Process*

Salpy Eskidjian Weiderud is one of the two architects of the Religious Track of the Cyprus Peace Process under the Auspices of the Embassy of Sweden (RTCYPP) which is an unprecedented peacebuilding initiative in Cyprus launched in 2009, and currently serves as the main facilitator of the religious leaders' dialogue for peace in Cyprus. From 2006-2007, Salpy was Senior Policy and Advocacy Advisor for Church of Sweden, Norwegian Church Aid, DanChurchaid (focus on Human Rights, Peacebuilding and Security) based first in Geneva, Switzerland and later in Uppsala, Sweden). In 2005 she was invited to be the Special Representative of the General Secretary of the World Council of Churches to Jerusalem when it initiated and set up the Jerusalem Ecumenical Center, based in Geneva (Switzerland) and

Jerusalem. From 1995-2005, Salpy was the Programme Executive on International Affairs, Peace and Security (responsible for Middle East Policy, Disarmament and Peace Building), for the World Council of Churches – Commission of the Churches on International Affairs (WCC/CCIA) based in Geneva, Switzerland. During this period she was Founder and Director of the Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel (EAPPI) –the first ecumenical human rights accompaniment programme in Middle East working with Israelis and Palestinians.

Salpy headed the election monitoring team of the WCC under the EU umbrella for the first Palestinian elections and was one of the leaders of the WCC delegation to Iraq to monitor the Oil for Food programme and its humanitarian effects. Salpy was a founding member of the International Action Network on Small Arms and Light Weapons (IANSA) and initiated and led the Ecumenical Action Network Against Small Arms (ENSA). As the Executive Coordinator of the Programme to Overcome Violence (POV) of the WCC (1995-2000) she led its Peace to the City Campaign (1997-1998) and initiated and organized the WCC's Decade to Overcome Violence: Churches Seeking Reconciliation and Peace (2000-2010). Salpy holds a Master's diploma on Human Rights and Diplomacy from University of New South Wales, Australia, a Post Graduate Diploma on Development and Human Rights from the Graduate Institute in the Hague and a BA (Hons) in Sociology and Criminal Justice from the George Washington University in Washington D.C USA.

### **Ms. Anna-Carin Öst**

*Head of United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees  
(UNHCR) Office to Armenia*

Anna-Carin Öst is the Head of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) office to Armenia. Prior to her current position, Öst held a position as the UNHCR Representative to UNHCR in Poland for five years. She began working at UNHCR in 1996 as an Associate Field Officer in Tanzania. In 1997, her focus shifted to Europe, Asia, and the Middle East, where she found protections and solutions for refugees. Öst holds a Master of Arts in Political Science and Public International Law from Åbo Akademi University in Finland.

### **Mr. Arsen Kharatyan**

*AliQ media Armenia/Georgia, Former Adviser to the PM Pashinyan*

Arsen Kharatyan is the Founder and Editor-in-Chief at AliQ Media, an independent non-profit bilingual media platform based in Tbilisi, Georgia. During the first 100 days of the post-revolution Armenian government, Kharatyan served as an advisor on foreign relations to the Prime Minister of Armenia. Prior to this Arsen Kharatyan worked with Voice of America's Armenian service in Washington, D.C., as well as German Technical Cooperation (GIZ) Armenia. Kharatyan received his Master of Arts in Oriental Studies from Yerevan State University and also studied at George Mason University's School for Conflict Analysis and Resolution.

### **Mr. Filip Buff Pedersen**

*Project Consultant and Coordinator for the Network for Religion and Develop at FoRB Learning Platform, Denmark*

Filip Buff Pedersen is a Project Consultant and Coordinator for the Network for Religion and Development at FoRB Learning Platform in Copenhagen, Denmark. Pederson was a former Project Leader at Danish Mission Council where he worked with politicians, civil society organizations, and academia to promote freedom of religion or belief. Pedersen was also a part-time lecturer at VIA University College and The Diaconal College where he taught courses on religion and development, focusing on the role of churches and church-based organizations in global development cooperation.

### **Mr. Hovhannes Hovhannisyan**

*Deputy Head of the Standing Committee of Education of the National Assembly of Armenia*

Hovhannes Hovhannisyan was born in Yerevan in 1980. He received his B.A. in Theology from Yerevan State University, Faculty of Theology in 2000. In 2002 he graduated from the Public Administration School of Armenia. Mr. Hovhannisyan holds a PhD from the Department of the History and Theory of Religion at Yerevan State University. In 2010-2011 he did a German academic support post-doctoral fellowship at Tubingen

University, Germany. In 2012-13 he was a visiting fellow at Yale University under the Faculty Development Program. In 2014, he did a research work at Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity in Gottingen, Germany. From May 2018-January 2019 he was appointed as Deputy Minister of Education and Science of the Republic of Armenia. In December 2018, Mr. Hovhannisyan was elected as a member of the National Assembly. Prior to his political career Hovhannes Hovhannisyan was working at the Department of the History of Religions, Faculty of Theology, Yerevan State University as Associate Professor and at the Center of Civilization and Cultural Studies in Yerevan State University. He is the author of one monograph and over 40 publications in prestigious international magazines.

### **Mr. Vigen Shirvanyan**

#### *Expert on Education*

Vigen Shirvanyan is an education expert with more than 10 years of experience in education management, policy development and consultancy for state and non-government structures. In 2018-2019 Mr. Shirvanyan was the Advisor to the RA Minister of Education and Science on a voluntary basis. In 2017-2018, in close cooperation with the RA Ministry of Education and Science, state and non-governmental organizations, international and local donors, and as a team co-leader for education reforms at the Center for Strategic Initiatives, he was involved in development of various long and short-term reforms in the field of education. In the past four years, Mr. Shirvanyan initiated and implemented special educational programs at Children of Armenia Fund (COAF), as well as acted as a manager and senior advisor for relations between international donors and government agencies.

Vigen Shirvanyan has graduated from University College London (MA in Human Rights, specialized in child right to education), holds an LLM from the American University of Armenia, and also graduated Gevorgian Theological Seminary in Echmiadzin.

### **Mrs. Eka Chitanava**

*Director of the Tolerance and Diversity Institute*

Eka Chitanava is the Director of the Tolerance and Diversity Institute. Chitanava manages projects that promote freedom of religion and religious tolerance in Georgia, strengthen dialogue between religious minority communities and the government, and give greater opportunities to religious minority organizations through advocacy and counteracting discrimination. She was previously a Freelance Contributor to Forum 18, submitting articles on freedom of religion in Georgia. Chitanava received a Master of Arts in Journalism and Media Management from the Georgian Institute of Public Affairs and a Master of Arts in Sociology and Anthropology from the Central European University.

### **Mrs. Nino Tsintsadze**

*Tolerance and Diversity Institute*

Nino Tsintsadze, co-founder of the Tolerance and Diversity Institute, is an associate professor at Ilia State University and a director of the Child Development Institute at Ilia State University. During 2007-2017 she worked at the Tolerance center under the auspices of Public Defender of Georgia, in 2007-2011 as an editor of a monthly magazine of Tolerance Center “Solidaroba” (solidarity) and in 2011-2017 as an editor of the webpage: [www.tolerantoba.ge](http://www.tolerantoba.ge). Currently, she coordinates Promoting Tolerance through Education System project run by TDI and supported by the Embassy of the Kingdom of Netherlands.

### **Mrs. Nvard Margaryan**

*Project Director, “Socioscope”*

Nvard Margaryan is a projects director and a researcher at “Socioscope” Societal Research and Consultancy Center NGO. Nvard holds a Master of Arts in Social Work from Yerevan State University and is an alumnus of the Human Rights Advocates Program at Columbia University, Institute for the Study of Human Rights. Nvard has worked in the field of human rights



in Armenia for more than 10 years. She also undertakes consultancy on advocacy and human rights policies, advising decision-makers, civil society organizations on how to address general human rights issues, women's rights issues, minority rights issues, etc. in Armenia. Currently, Nvard is a board member of the "Non-Discrimination and for Equality" Coalition, "Human Rights House Yerevan" and Pink Armenia.

### **Mr. Ibrahim Salama**

*Chief, Human Rights Treaties Branch, Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (skype intervention)*

Since joining OHCHR in 2007, Mr. Salama notably chaired the UN Secretariat at the review process of the outcome of the Durban World Conference against Racism in 2009. He also led a major treaty body reform resulting in UN General Assembly resolution 68/268 of April 2014, as well as the OHCHR initiative on Faith for Rights which led to the adoption of the 18 commitments defining the human rights responsibilities of religious actors.

From 2003 to August 2007, Mr. Salama was Chairperson of the UN Working Group on the Right to Development and was a Member of the UN Sub-Commission on the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights.

From 1981 to 2007, he worked for the Egyptian Foreign Service where he served at the legal office up to the level of Director of the Legal and Treaties Department in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. After numerous postings in Paris, New Delhi and Geneva, he became Ambassador of the Arab Republic of Egypt in Lisbon in 2003.

Mr. Salama studied law at the University of Cairo, obtained a diploma in International Political Relations from the International Institute of Public Administration in Paris, a diploma of Post-Graduate Specialized Studies (DESS) in International Organizations and a PhD in Public Law from the University Paris XI. He is the author of many publications and papers on various human rights issues.

## **Mr. Antenor Hallo de Wolf**

*Assistant Professor in International Law and Human Rights Law,  
University of Groningen, Netherlands*

Antenor Hallo de Wolf LLM (Maastricht), PhD (Maastricht) is Assistant Professor of International Law and Human Rights Law at the Faculty of Law of the University of Groningen, and a former visiting fellow of the Human Rights Implementation Centre at the University of Bristol. His main research interests lie in the field of international law, international human rights law, regulation, privatization, non-state actors, the prevention of torture under international human rights law, and the use of force under international law. His PhD dissertation touched upon the topic of human rights and privatization. ('Reconciling Privatization with Human Rights,' Intersentia, Antwerp, 2011). Later academic contributions have focused on the link between regulation, international investment law, and human rights, as well as the implementation of the Optional Protocol to the UN Convention against Torture (OPCAT) both at the University of Bristol and Groningen University. He currently teaches international human rights law, the law of international peace and security, and public international law.

## **Rev. Rusudan Gotsiridze**

*Evangelical Baptist Church of Georgia*

Rev. Rusudan Gotsiridze is the first female bishop of the Evangelical Baptist Church of Georgia. Along with advocating against gender violence and for gender equality, Rev. Gotsiridze has coordinated many interfaith dialogues to support religious minorities. Gotsiridze initiated a meeting with recognized religious bodies while amendments were being made to Georgia's civil code. While these codes allowed religious minorities to be registered as official religious groups, she advocated for them to remove limiting language, giving all faith communities legal status. Rev. Gotsiridze has also spoken at the 6th United Nations Forum on Minority Issues about religious minorities in Georgia.

## **Mr. Nikolay (Kolya) Hovhannisyan**

*Project Manager, Eurasia Partnership Foundation*

Nikolay is a human rights activist and lawyer based in Armenia and works at EPF as a Human Rights Project Manager. Nikolay has more than 8 years of experience in the sphere of human rights protection in the nonprofit sector. He holds a Bachelor's degree in Jurisprudence from Yerevan State University in Armenia and a Master's degree in International Human Rights Law from the University of Groningen in the Netherlands. Nikolay has previously worked at PINK Armenia as project coordinator and human rights and advocacy expert. He has provided consultancy to different local and international organizations. Nikolay has expertise in human rights, sexuality, sexual and reproductive health and rights, LGBT rights, documentation, reporting, and program management.

ԱՄՓՈՓՈՒՄ

2019 թ. մայիսի 24-ին «Կայուն բարեփոխումներին ընդառաջ. կրոնի կամ համոզմունքի ազատության խթանումը Հայաստանում 2018-2021» ծրագրի շրջանակներում, Երևան քաղաքի Մարիոթ հյուրանոցում տեղի ունեցավ «Հայաստանում, Վրաստանում և աշխարհում կրոնի կամ համոզմունքի ազատության արդի հիմնախնդիրները» տարածաշրջանային համաժողովը: Ծրագիրը ԵՀՀ-ն իրականացնում է Հայաստանում և Վրաստանում Նիդերլանդների Թագավորության դեսպանության աջակցությամբ:

Ամենամյա համաժողովի նպատակն է հայաստանցի, վրաստանցի և միջազգային գործընկերների շրջանում բազմակողմանի քննարկումների ծավալումը կրոնի և համոզմունքի ազատության ոլորտում առկա զարգացումների և մարտահրավերների վերաբերյալ, հայ-վրացական կապերի ամրապնդումը և միջազգային համագործակցության խթանումը:

Միջոցառմանը հրավիրված էին ինչպես տեղական, այնպես էլ Վրաստանից կրոնական առաջնորդներ, կրոնական խմբեր և կազմակերպություններ, որոնք Նիստերի ընթացքում հնարավորություն ունեցան բարձրաձայնելու ոլորտում առկա իրավական և սոցիալական խնդիրները, ինչպես նաև հանդես եկան առաջարկներով: Համաժողովին մասնակցել են նաև Վրաստանի և Հայաստանի պետական պաշտոնյաներ, օմբուդսմենների գրասենյակների ներկայացուցիչներ, քաղաքացիական հասարակության ներկայացուցիչներ, միջազգային կազմակերպություններից և դեսպանատներից ներկայացուցիչներ, միջազգային փորձագետներ:

Համաժողովին ներկա էր Հայաստանի Հանրապետության վարչապետ Նիկոլ Փաշինյանը, ով ողջունելով համաժողովի մասնակիցներին՝ նշեց. «Կրոնի նկատմամբ մարդու ազատությունն ամենակարևոր ազատություններից մեկն է, մեզ համար սա սկզբունքային հարց է, որ ազգային կրոնական փոքրամասնությունները Հայաստանի Հանրապետությունում պետք է երաշխավորված լինեն, իրենց զգան լիարժեք, իրենց ինքնությունը պահպանելու, զարգացնելու և իրենց ինքնությամբ հպարտանալու հնարավորություն պետք է ունենան»:

Համաժողովի ընթացքում քննարկումներ են ընթացել «Կրոնի կամ համոզմունքի ազատության գլոբալ մարտահրավերները և իրավիճակը Հայաստանում ու Վրաստանում», «Միջկրոնական երկխոսությունը՝ կոնֆլիկտների վերափոխման գործիք», «Կրոնի կամ համոզմունքի ազատությունն ու կրթությունը», «Կրոնի կամ համոզմունքի ազատությունն այլ իրավունքների հետ բախումների լույսի ներքո» թեմաների շուրջ:

Ֆորմալ և ոչ ֆորմալ քննարկումների ընթացքում հղում կատարվեց նաև կրոնական կազմակերպությունների միջև երկխոսության և փոխադարձ հարգանքի ու հանդուրժողական վերաբեմնիքի որդեգրման կարևորությանը:

Սույն զեկույցն ամփոփում է համաժողովի ընթացքում հնչած ելույթները, ներկայացնում ոլորտում առկա խնդիրները, լուծումներ գտնելու հնարավոր ուղիները, ինչպես նաև տրամադրում է խորհելու և ուսումնասիրության հարուստ նյութ:

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# **CONTEMPORARY ISSUES OF FREEDOM OF RELIGION OR BELIEF IN ARMENIA, GEORGIA, AND BEYOND**

**REGIONAL CONFERENCE REPORT**

Layout and design: lucine talalyan

Size: 170X250

Typeface: Arial

ISBN 978-9939-1-1135-3



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