

# Figel': "Action for Religious Freedom is a Moral Obligation"

Interview by **FOREF Europe** with **Ján Figel'**,  
EU Special Envoy for the promotion of FoRB



Vienna, 3.08.2016 (**FOREF Europe**) - During his short stay in Vienna, Ján Figel', the first Special Envoy for the promotion of freedom of religion or belief outside the European Union, met with Peter Zoehrer, the executive director of FOREF Europe. Mr. Figel' previously served as Slovakia's deputy Prime Minister and EU Commissioner. After having been nominated on 6 May 2016 by Jean-Claude Juncker, President of the European Commission, he will focus on some of the most crucial challenges facing Europe today: the quest for religious freedom, radicalization and intercultural dialogue.

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**FOREF Europe:** Dr. Ján Figel', congratulations to your nomination as the Special Envoy for the promotion of FoRB. Thank you for giving the Forum for Religious Freedom Europe the opportunity to interview you. First of all, we would be interested to know what freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) means to you.

**Ján Figel':** Before we can clarify the issue of religious freedom, allow me to explain my understanding of the notion of freedom in general. Freedom is always rooted in both moral values and human rights. A free society can only be achieved and sustained on the basis of shared moral values. Already the English philosopher John Locke saw the difference between

liberty and license. While liberty is the freedom to do what we ought to do, license is the freedom to do what we want to do. On a similar note Benjamin Franklin stated that “Only a virtuous people are capable of freedom.” In other words, there can be no freedom without certain moral obligations.

Already long before the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, George Washington realized that "Human rights can only be assured among a virtuous people." Now extending this understanding of freedom to the particular theme of religious freedom as a fundamental human right, I believe that to defend the freedom of conscience, thought and belief is our moral obligation. This moral commitment to freedom is the starting point for both reasonable policies and effective action in field of religious freedom. In a nutshell, this is my personal approach to FoRB.

**FOREF Europe: Would you like to share any personal experiences you had in the matter of religious freedom?**

**Ján Figel’:** In terms of personal experience, I should mention that I come from the post-communist part of Europe. I remember the times when real freedom of religion was non-existent. I came to know how detrimental a totalitarian regime can be, not only for individuals' lives, but also for society as a whole. The fight for freedom and democracy in Czechoslovakia and later Slovakia united civic, political and religious dissidents. This was a clear proof that human freedom and dignity are indivisible and that these values are universal for all people.

After the fall of the Berlin Wall and Iron Curtain in 1989, the development and preservation of civic, religious and political freedoms was always at the heart of my work as a Christian Democrat. In my role as Slovakia's Member of Parliament, deputy Prime Minister and subsequently the EU Commissioner responsible for Education and Youth, I have worked hard to promote intercultural dialogue and to help persecuted people, including political prisoners in Iran, Belarus and Cuba. One of the Cuban prisoners of conscience became my “adoptive” brother and we met after his release.

So, I could tell you a lot of heart-warming human stories of hope and freedom. But let me just state that today, there is an increasing awareness in the general public and in international institutions about the importance of FoRB and related issues, such as genocides on religious grounds. Religious minorities face oppression and discrimination in many countries, predominantly in the Middle East. Within international law, the UN principle of “responsibility to protect” marks a global political commitment endorsed by all UN member states, including members of the EU. This responsibility to protect also includes the duty to protect the freedom of thought, conscience and belief. This was also underlined in the European Parliament’s resolution on the systematic mass murder of adherents of religious minorities by the terrorist group ISIS in February of this year. Therefore, the Parliament started to take action by introducing the position of the Special Envoy for the promotion of FoRB, a post of which I am honored to be its first holder since the 6<sup>th</sup> of May.

**FOREF Europe: How is FoRB connected to other fundamental rights, such as the freedom of speech, the freedom of thought or the freedom of conscience?**

**Ján Figel'**: Freedom of religion or belief is a fundamental right that belongs to the basic value system of the European Union. We understand fundamental human rights as indivisible, interrelated and universal. The right to the freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief belongs to every human being. This means people may manifest their faith individually or in community, in private or in public and they may change their faith. To be endowed with religious freedom encompasses the freedom to worship, observe religious duties and teach religious ideas. The right to religious freedom should be equally protected and also applies to atheistic or non-theistic belief.

Logically, FoRB is intrinsically linked with the freedom of opinion and expression as well as the freedom of association and assembly. Religious freedom is thus a decisive element to pluralistic, democratic and tolerant societies. Therefore, any sound society respects, protects and promotes this fundamental right. A culture of human rights counts on FoRB as a cornerstone of a free and just society.



**FOREF Europe: As you mentioned, you are the first person to hold the position of Special Envoy for the promotion of FoRB outside the EU. What exactly will your tasks be?**

**Ján Figel'**: The persistent persecution of religious and ethnic minorities makes protecting and promoting freedom of religion or belief all the more essential. My task as a Special Envoy was defined by the President of the European Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker, when he stressed on the day of my nomination that we must focus on this important issue and ensure its visibility.

The European Parliament recognized that the ongoing persecution of religious and ethnic groups in the Middle East is a crucial factor that contributes to mass migration and internal displacement. Therefore, together with the European Commissioner, Neven Mimica, who is responsible for International Cooperation and Development, my priority will be to promote practical mechanisms of protection for the persecuted next to humanitarian aid for those in need in the most affected areas.

We will work harder together with the European Parliament, the Commission, the European External Action Service (EEAS), the European Council and our international partners to engage in a permanent dialogue on how the EU can best contribute to the promotion of FoRB in the world. The [European Parliament's Intergroup on FoRB and Religious Tolerance](#), which was introduced last year in January, is very supportive as well. There are already several programs and instruments to promote human rights in general and of FoRB in particular, such as the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR). The new EIDHR regulation for 2014-20 specifically includes FoRB as a priority. Out of a total allocation of 20 million Euros, 5 million Euros have been earmarked for the promotion of FoRB projects. Finally, as part of my mission, I will also present a report as part of the ongoing dialogue between the European Commission and churches, religious associations or communities. This exchange with religious bodies is led by the First Vice-President of the Commission Frans Timmermans.

**FOREF Europe: How will you determine your priorities and what principles will you apply to that process?**

**Ján Figel:** We are concerned about the rise of violence and threats in non-EU countries, particularly Syria, Iraq, the Central African Republic, Nigeria, Iran, Myanmar (Burma), Pakistan, Sri Lanka, India and others. We are determined to defend FoRB as a right to be exercised everywhere and by everyone. In multilateral fora, the EU focusses on consolidating the content of FoRB resolutions, both in the UN Human Rights Council and in the General Assembly. We also work closely with our partners such as the United States and Canada. In the end of July I represented the EU at an international conference in Washington where more than 30 national and international delegations discussed the threats posed to religious and ethnic minorities in the Middle East by ISIS as well as options for practical help to these communities.

My first regional priority is the Middle East, where we currently witness the genocide of the Christian, Yezidi, Shia Muslim and other communities. I want to invite more parliaments and governments to speak against this ongoing genocide. "Never again" must mean never again! We have to finally conclude the century of genocides, if we wish to live in a better time. The ongoing online presentations of the killings of innocent people is an appeal for urgent reaction by the international community. The problem of systematic murder against ethnic or religious groups is a much greater security threat than climate change! When should we apply international law against genocide and show the will to prosecute perpetrators if not now? The international community has to tackle this situation more actively and on all levels.

We need to support the liberation of territories from ISIS and in the long run prepare conditions for post-liberation stability and recovery. But what is now most urgently needed is humanitarian aid. Other important tasks concern the field of education and the prevention of radicalization, in particular among young people. In the most affected areas, such as the Kurdistan Region, we have to do everything we can to ensure that humanitarian aid is delivered to all civilians and offer protection to all ethnic and religious communities. According to UN estimates, the ongoing offensive to liberate Mosul and the Nineveh plains could result in 300,000 and up to 1.5 million refugees. We should be prepared for this situation, which could easily turn into a major humanitarian crisis.

Lastly, we have to work on local reconciliation and interreligious dialogue. But sustainable

reconciliation presupposes justice and the rule of law in place. That is a must, because lasting peace is the fruit of justice.

**FOREF Europe: In 24 UN member states, changing one's religion - an act known as apostasy - is considered a criminal offense. What steps should the EU take in order to abolish apostasy and blasphemy laws?**

**Ján Figel'**: As Special Envoy for the promotion of freedom of religion or belief outside the European Union I am aware of these legal realities and finding a solution remains a priority for us.

The European Council is working on this issue as well, and the new EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy adopted in June 2015 stressed the importance of “ensuring FoRB remains high on the agenda with third countries as well as in multilateral fora.” In its conclusions on Pakistan, the Council called on that country to prioritize and take further action to respect, protect and promote freedom of religion or belief and the rights of persons belonging to minorities. The situation is similar in Iran, Somalia, Sudan and some other countries.

Respect for religious freedom must also be monitored as part of the so-called Human Rights Impact Assessments that are carried out when the EU negotiates new bilateral trade and investment agreements. Where gross and persistent FoRB violations occur, no such agreements should be concluded. In addition to promoting religious freedom in bilateral relations, the EU delegations will also be more active in this field in its work with the UN.

Finally, we should remember that this arduous task is carried out not only by politicians and diplomats, but also by civil society representatives, NGOs, academia and all people of good will. And I would like to invite all these actors and people for closer and more intense cooperation. The 21<sup>st</sup> century may become better than the previous one, if we all care and bring into our times and societies more humanity, more responsibility and more solidarity.

**FOREF Europe: Dr. Figel', thank you very much for the interview. The Forum for Religious Freedom Europe wishes you the best of success with your new mission.**



Ján Figel' (r) with Peter Zoehrer, Executive Director of FOREF Europe