Religious freedoms and cultural diversity

European Parliament resolution of 17 April 2014 on EU foreign policy in a world of cultural and religious differences (2014/2690(RSP))

The European Parliament,

– having regard to Articles 2 and 21 of the Treaty on European Union (TEU) and to the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU),

– having regard to the Charter of the United Nations,

– having regard to the European Convention on Human Rights and to the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, in particular Articles 10 and 22 thereof,

– having regard to the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women,

– having regard to the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights,

– having regard to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights,

– having regard to the UNESCO Convention on the Protection and the Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions,

– having regard to the UN resolutions on freedom of religion or belief and on the elimination of all forms of intolerance and of discrimination based on religion or belief, in particular General Assembly resolution A/RES/67/179 of 20 December 2012 and Human Rights Council resolution A/HRC/22/20/L.22 of 22 March 2013,

– having regard to the EU Strategic Framework and Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy (11855/2012), adopted by the Foreign Affairs Council on 25 June 2012,

– having regard to the Council conclusions of 20 November 2008 on the promotion of cultural diversity and intercultural dialogue in the external relations of the Union and its Member States,

– having regard to the European Agenda for Culture (COM(2007)0242), which aims to promote awareness of cultural diversity and EU values, dialogue with civil society and exchanges of good practices,

– having regard to its recommendation to the Council of 2 February 2012 on a consistent policy towards regimes against which the EU applies restrictive measures¹,

– having regard to its resolution of 12 May 2011 on the cultural dimensions of the EU’s external actions¹,

¹ OJ C 239 E, 20.8.2013, p. 11.
having regard to its recommendation to the Council of 13 June 2013 on the draft EU Guidelines on the Promotion and Protection of Freedom of Religion or Belief² and to the EU Guidelines on the Promotion and Protection of Freedom of Religion or Belief, adopted by the Foreign Affairs Council on 24 June 2013,

– having regard to its resolution of 11 December 2012 on a Digital Freedom Strategy in EU Foreign Policy³,

– having regard to Rule 110(2) of its Rules of Procedure,

A. whereas the EU is founded on the principles of human rights, the rule of law and democracy enshrined in the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union and has the will and a legal and moral duty to promote and defend these values in its external relations with all other countries;

B. whereas Article 21 TEU recognises that the Union’s action on the international scene is to be guided by ‘democracy, the rule of law, the universality and indivisibility of human rights and fundamental freedoms, respect for human dignity, the principles of equality and solidarity and respect for the principles of the United Nations Charter and international law’;

C. whereas the notion of cultural and religious differences has often led to conflict between different groups of people and has been exploited by leaders and regimes to further their own goals, thereby fuelling conflict;

D. whereas an understanding of religious and cultural diversity which enables inclusion, mutual respect and an understanding of different mentalities is a firm means of fostering tolerance and reconciliation in post-conflict situations and a help in encouraging human rights and democracy;

E. whereas, in this era of globalisation, nations, states and civilisations are actively interacting with each other, and the rules and norms which guide the functioning of economic and political systems are becoming more closely linked and are facing common challenges such as climate change, terrorism and poverty, while at the same time reflecting national identities and cultural differences, a proper understanding of which is crucial to international dialogue based on tolerance;

F. whereas in all civilisations the national cultural heritage, which forms the basis of the cultural identity of citizens, is highly valued;

**Principles of EU foreign policy**

1. Affirms that respect for cultural diversity and tolerance vis-à-vis different concepts and beliefs, combined with action to combat all forms of extremism and fight inequalities, remains a necessary integral part of the successful construction of a peaceful international order based on universally shared democratic values;

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2. Reiterates its conviction that when defending its own interests in the world the Union must always base its policies on the promotion of the fundamental values on which it is founded (democracy, the rule of law and human rights, social justice and the fight against poverty) and on respect for other countries;

3. Insists that the protection of persons belonging to vulnerable groups such as ethnic or religious minorities, the promotion of women’s rights and their empowerment, representation and participation in economic, political and social processes, and the fight against all forms of violence and discrimination based on gender or sexual orientation must be among the EU’s goals in foreign relations;

4. Considers that access to education in all its forms, especially through the memory of past events, history and the promotion of cultural exchange, is indispensable in understanding and respecting religion and the cultural heritage;

5. Calls for the EU to promote the ratification and implementation of key international human rights treaties, including those on women’s rights and all non-discrimination agreements, core labour rights conventions and regional human rights instruments; expects a swift ratification of the European Convention on Human Rights following the final ruling of the Court of Justice of the European Union;

6. Calls for the EU to promote the ratification and implementation of the UNESCO Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expression;

7. Stresses that the EU, which has achieved concrete results in the past in its fight against the death penalty, should take a more decisive stand, and calls on the institutions and the Member States to maintain and step up their political commitment to this cause with a view to seeing the death penalty abolished worldwide once and for all;

8. Considers that stable and modern democracies with a functioning rule of law are a tool of peace, international cooperation and willingness to constructively tackle global issues, and that it is in the interest of the EU to actively promote a political culture of freedom, tolerance and openness, the separation of state and religion, and the development of democratic institutions throughout the world;

9. Notes in particular that the transition towards democracy in numerous states throughout the world in the past two decades, and more recently the events of the uprisings in the Arab world, have shown that the aspirations for democracy, social justice, human dignity and equal participation are a universal driving force within and across diverse cultural and religious backgrounds and should not be viewed solely as a Western concern;

10. Considers that the notion of cultural and religious differences has repeatedly been instrumentalised to justify blatant violations of human rights by authoritarian regimes and radical non-state actors;

11. Rejects essentialist visions of cultures as fixed entities; believes that globalisation and the growing interaction between people from different cultural and religious backgrounds can lead to the development and strengthening of a common core of universal values;

12. Recalls that respecting and defending smaller and minority cultures and promoting their ability to express themselves peacefully in accordance with human rights is a way to avoid a
vision of cultural differences as a confrontation between irreconcilable blocks and to promote peace and stability;

13. Stresses that inclusive education should play a prominent role in development policy, crisis management and post-conflict stabilisation;

14. Emphasises that respect for religious freedoms is an important external policy principle, contributing to more sustainable international relations and promoting cooperation between nations on a basis of humanity, tolerance and mutual recognition;

15. Repudiates the advocacy and dissemination of fundamentalist religious tenets aimed at eroding or violating the rights of particular communities;

16. Expresses its concern at the proliferation of intolerance and strongly deplores acts of violence against religious communities, including Christians, Muslims, Jews and Bahá’ís who are being denied fundamental human rights solely because of their faith in various countries; strongly condemns, in particular, the numerous attempts to close or destroy churches, mosques, synagogues, temples and other places of worship worldwide;

17. Emphasises the importance of cultural diplomacy, cultural cooperation and educational and cultural exchange in communicating the values that make up European culture and in advancing the interests of the EU and its Member States; stresses the need for the EU to act as a coherent world player with a global perspective and global responsibility;

**The EU’s role in the UN system and in multilateral fora**

18. Recognises that the current structure of the UN system, in particular that of the Security Council, should reflect more adequately the diversity of global actors;

19. Notes, however, that the EU and its Member States have been able to find common ground for dialogue and cooperation towards achieving common solutions with UN member states which go beyond cultural and religious differences; notes also that the tensions and deadlocks that hamper the development of such solutions stem from the opposition of states and parties involved in conflicts to such agreements on strategic grounds rather than on the basis of conflicting moral values;

20. Highlights the importance of coordinating fora aimed at promoting dialogue and mutual understanding between cultures and religions; is of the opinion, nevertheless, that the effectiveness of these fora should be assessed and that means of leveraging their reach should be considered;

21. Recognises the value of parliamentary diplomacy and highlights the work of the parliamentary assemblies of international organisations for the promotion of intercultural and interreligious dialogue; welcomes, in this connection, such initiatives as the recommendation of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Union for the Mediterranean (March 2012, Rabat) to draft a ‘Mediterranean Charter of Values’;

**Challenges of religious influence in the international political arena**

22. Notes with concern that, besides the threat that terrorist networks represent for the Union and for the rest of the world, extremist religious groups which use violence as a means of
promoting hatred and intolerance and influencing societies and legislation with a view to restricting people’s human rights and fundamental freedoms undermine the very principles that the Union promotes in its foreign and development policies and operate with the support, whether open or covert, of certain states;

23. Considers that the EU should be more assertive in its support for the promotion and protection of human rights and social and political rights by civil society, as well as for more open and inclusive interpretations of religious dogma in countries whose governments promote or condone intolerant views of religion and culture;

24. Notes that, in many non-European countries, even where diverse religious expressions are tolerated, secularism and atheistic or agnostic views are nevertheless often subject to legal or social discrimination and that atheists are facing threats, pressure and danger and should be afforded the same protection as religious or other minorities by EU programmes and policies; points out that freedom of religion and conscience implies the right to both religious belief and practice and to the absence thereof, the right to choose or promote religious beliefs as an integral part of freedom of expression, and the right to change or abandon one’s belief; expects all of these aspects to be present in the EU’s initiatives for intercultural dialogue;

25. Proposes that the religious leaders of the three Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity and Islam) engage in interreligious dialogue, in a spirit of unity and tolerance for all their own different organised expressions;

**Credibility, coherence and consistency of EU policy**

26. Considers that the effectiveness of EU action rests on its exemplariness and consistency between internal practice and external action;

27. Calls on all Member States to repeal any existing laws which contradict the fundamental freedom of religion and conscience and freedom of expression;

28. Stresses the importance of the EU promoting respect for freedom of expression, freedom of religion or belief, freedom of the press and freedom of access to media and new information technologies in its external actions and actively protecting and promoting people’s digital freedoms;

29. Calls for a coherent EU policy on human rights based on common fundamental standards and a constructive, results-oriented approach; stresses that, when faced with human rights violations, the EU should make use of the full range of instruments at its disposal, including sanctions;

30. Reaffirms its support for the inclusion in all EU agreements with third countries of reciprocal conditionality and political clauses on human rights and democracy, as a common reaffirmation of the mutual commitment to these values and regardless of the state of protection of human rights in a given country, with appropriate safeguards to ensure that the suspension mechanism cannot be abused by either side;

**Recommendations to the European External Action Service and to the Commission**
31. Calls on the EEAS and the EU Delegations worldwide to further engage with third countries and regional organisations in the promotion of intercultural and interreligious dialogue;

32. Expects that in their political statements EU representatives will make it clear that intolerant interpretations of any religion or faith that allow violence and repression against the followers of other beliefs are incompatible with the EU’s values and universal human rights and must be opposed with the same assertiveness as any repressive political regime;

33. Calls on the EU to make culture an even stronger part of political dialogue with partner countries and regions around the world, promoting cultural exchanges and systematically integrating culture into development programmes and projects; stresses, in this connection, the need to streamline the Commission’s internal operations within the various DGs which focus on external relations (foreign policy, enlargement, trade and development), education, culture and the digital agenda;

34. Stresses the importance of providing EU staff with appropriate training to this end and underlines the relevant work of many organisations such as the Anna Lindh Foundation and the KAICIID Dialogue Centre in Vienna;

35. Recognises that the internet and communication technologies are key enablers in facilitating freedom of expression, pluralism, exchange of information, education, human rights, development, freedom of assembly, democracy and intercultural and interreligious interaction and inclusion, thereby fostering tolerance and understanding; urges the Commission, therefore, to implement the recommendations set out in the Report on a Digital Freedom Strategy in EU Foreign policy;

36. Highlights the multiple possibilities afforded by new technologies in promoting intercultural and interreligious dialogue and EU principles and values; encourages all Heads of EU Delegations to make full use of digital diplomacy tools through their active and consistent presence in the social media; calls on the EEAS to explore the possibilities of new virtual programmes;

37. Instructs its President to forward this resolution to the Council, the Commission, the Vice-President of the Commission/High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, the EU Special Representative for Human Rights and the governments of the Member States.