

Freedom of Religion or Belief: UK voluntary report to the OSCE

Thank you Madam Chair for convening us today and to our key note speaker Dr Polak for her insights on how to tackle intolerance and discrimination. I have chosen to focus on freedom of religion or belief under this topic in light of our Foreign Secretary convening an [international conference on Freedom of Religion or Belief \(FoRB\)](#) in London this week.

Right across the world today, people are being discriminated against, marginalised, threatened, tortured, and killed because of their religion or belief, and too often by their own authoritarian governments – the very governments with a duty to protect them. No one should face discrimination, hatred or violence simply because of what they believe, and yet in the 21st Century, millions do.

In Copenhagen 1990 Russia alongside the other participating States reaffirmed that everyone will have the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. This right includes freedom to manifest one's religion in public or in private, through worship, teaching, practice and observance.

We have already seen over recent years that in temporarily Russian controlled areas of eastern Ukraine taken by Russian backed armed formations in 2014, freedom of religion or belief is severely restricted. A law passed in 2018 made it illegal for any religious community to gather, indeed therefore to exist, without permission from the authorities. All Baptists, Seven Day Adventists, Jehovah's Witnesses and Pentecostal and other protestant communities have been denied this permission.

We hear of unregistered groups meeting to worship in a climate of constant fear, being subject to surveillance and repeated raids. We hear of contact with other believers in other areas of Ukraine being made difficult or impossible, of social welfare activities carried out by these groups being stopped, and of an increasing list of allegedly extremist books being banned.

And now, during Russia's grievous war in Ukraine, we are hearing of church pastors simply disappearing. Freedom of religion or belief is one of the freedoms the leadership of Ukraine and its brave people today are fighting for right now, along with other essential fundamental freedoms – right to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly and association.

The UK hosted International Conference on FoRB brings together government representatives, faith leaders and civil society activists from over 50 countries around the world. Participants are looking at how countries, civil society groups, faith leaders, and individuals can together protect and promote freedom of religion or belief and prevent violations of it.

We are using the conference to focus on the positive role of education in combatting intolerance, and alongside international partners, we will call

for renewed support for education reform, promoting the benefits of pluralism and the importance of human rights.

Madam Chair – in conclusion, I would like to emphasise that freedom of religion or belief is important in and of itself but also because it is so closely connected with other rights such as the right to life, privacy, assembly and expression, as well as social, economic and cultural rights. Freedom of religion or belief can often be seen as “a bellwether human right” – and by that I mean that the targeting of others on the basis of their religion or belief can often be an early warning of other rights violations to follow. We must continue to keep this topic high on the agenda. Thank you.