

# **Declaration**

## **on the Importance of Strengthening the Fundamental Right to Freedom of Conscience**

**Brussels, 21 April 2016**

We, the undersigned Members of the European Parliament, note with great concern the growing limitations to the fundamental right to freedom of conscience in the EU and beyond.

Currently, many people across the world are facing an insurmountable conflict: either violate their conscience, or face material punishment according to the law of the land.

Several EU member states do not fully guarantee freedom of conscience including the right to conscientious objection. In such countries, staying true to deeply held moral beliefs may lead to dismissal from employment, severe financial penalties, bankruptcy, loss of reputation due to negative media coverage, permanent unemployment and social discrimination. In a number of non-EU states, choosing or changing one's religion can entail serious and often government-condoned discrimination and the denial of basic rights.

Freedom of conscience is a fundamental right that needs to be protected everywhere. Through its legal framework and underlying values, the EU is bound to the protection of freedom of conscience. We recall in particular article 10 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, Regulation (EU) No. 235/2014 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 11 March 2014, and the EU Guidelines on the Promotion and Protection of Freedom of Religion or Belief.

On this basis, we:

1. Urge the EU, in both its internal and external action, along with its member states to ensure robust protection of freedom of conscience;
2. Condemn the existence of and call for the amendment of laws that impose penalties and other sanctions on citizens who refuse to act against the dictates of their conscience, especially when there are less restrictive means available;
3. Urge member states to ensure that violations of conscience are addressed and proper remedies are afforded;
4. Call upon national legislators to pay due attention to the fundamental character of freedom of conscience and to enact legislation and adequate guarantees in accordance with the fundamental nature of this right;
5. Strongly encourage the inclusion of reasonable accommodation of religion or belief in all pieces of legislation to foster a peaceful living together in pluralistic and ever more diverse societies.
6. Support the establishment of a permanent EU Special Representative for Freedom of Religion and Belief, as called for by paragraph 10 of the European Parliament Resolution (2016/2529(RSP));
7. Urge member states and the EU as a whole to use all available means to offer strengthened protection to freedom of conscience, in view of the current increasing limitations to this fundamental freedom, especially in the workplace, in the provision of goods and services and in the medical field.

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