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Leaders condemn end of EU's Special Envoy for Religious Freedom

Rabbi Pinchas Goldschmidt called the move "the wrong signal" at a time "in which Jews and other religious minorities are increasingly being targeted online and offline by extremists.

By CELIA JEAN JULY 7, 2020 06:51



RABBI PINCHAS GOLDSCHMIDT: Jews become the collateral damage
(photo credit: FABRIZIO BENSCH / REUTERS)





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Religious leaders, politicians and campaigners have spoken out against the abolishment of the European Union's Commission's Special Envoy for Freedom of Religion or Belief outside the EU in mid June of this year.

The post was created in 2016 by former EU Commission president Jean-Claude Juncker as a response to the "mass atrocities and persecution of religious and ethnic minorities by ISIS in the Middle East," according to the website of Jan Figel, who was the first person appointed to the position. Juncker adopted the decision to create the function of special envoy for the promotion of the freedom of religion or belief outside the EU.

Figel's mandate ended in December 2019, and current EU Commission president Dr Ursula von der Leyen decided not to renew it, sparking condemnation among religious and community leaders across all over Europe.

Chief Rabbi of Moscow and President of the Conference of European Rabbis, [Pinchas Goldschmidt](#), spoke out against the move this week in an interview with *Deutsche Welle*. He called the move "the wrong signal" at a time "in which Jews and other religious minorities are increasingly being targeted online and offline by extremists, and the free exercise of religion is being undermined."

Speaking from the Muslim community, the chairman of the Central Council of Muslims in Germany, Aiman Mazyek, also voiced criticism of the Commission's move in an interview with *DW*.





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Referring to the attempts of some European countries to ban the wearing of headscarves and the banning of the slaughter of certain animals in accordance with religious food guidelines, Mayzek said that it was, "all the more important that the voice of such an envoy is not silenced particularly now."

Metropolitan Augustinos, Europe's top representative of the Orthodox Church made similar remarks. Commenting on how important such a position is during current times, he noted the debate surrounding the Hagia Sophia, also known as the Sancta Sophia Church, in Istanbul.

The Turkish government is currently attempting to turn the church, which is currently a museum, into a mosque; an incident that Augustino used as an example where he feels the Special Envoy could stand up for religious minorities outside the EU, the reason why Juncker created the position in the first place.

However, religious leaders were not the only ones to speak out against the current EU commissioner's decision to abolish the office, as political leaders had their say as well.

The move was also deplored by Austrian MPs, who said that religious communities were currently "exposed to discrimination and oppression in many forms," according to England's *Church Times*.

"The Special Envoy has played an immeasurable role in shining a light on human-rights abuses and facilitating dialogue in countries where religious





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persecution is most severe," the director of the Vienna-based Observatory on Intolerance and Discrimination against Christians in Europe, Ellen Fantini, said.

"Although the Commission has said it identifies religious freedom as a priority, it has not made clear how it intends to continue prioritizing its protection," Fantini added.

Many have questioned what the EU now intends to do.

In an [op-ed](#) published by *New Europe*, an EU affairs new outlet, Peter van Dalen, Member of the European Parliament, Co-Chairman of the Intergroup on Freedom of Religion Or Belief and Religious Tolerance and European Parliament, gave examples of the Special Envoy's accomplishments, in addition to the rise of "government restrictions and social hostilities have increased worldwide over the past decade."

He added that, "COVID-19 has only exacerbated the vulnerability of freedom of religion or belief minorities."

The growing wave of [antisemitism amid the coronavirus](#) pandemic is well known among the global Jewish communities, as multitudes of antisemitic reports both in relation to the pandemic, such as blaming Jews for the outbreak, and otherwise, have been made.

Moreover, Figel himself issued a [public call](#) for the renewal of the mandate.





Conference of
European Rabbis

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"The COVID-19 crisis notwithstanding, the Commission's hesitation despite letters by MEPs and civil society calling for the renewal of the mandate, sends a signal to Europeans and the international community about its reticence to continue to promote this fundamental right," reads a quote from the letter published on Figel's site.

<https://www.jpost.com/international/religious-leaders-condemn-end-of-eus-special-envoy-for-religious-freedom-634109>

