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EU needs to do more for religious freedom

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The EU Commission under Ursula von der Leyen has abolished the post of EU Special Representative for Religious Freedom. In an interview with DW, leading religious representatives express massive criticism of the decision.





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"At a time when Jews and other religious minorities are increasingly falling into the crosshairs of extremism online and offline and the free practice of religion is being torpedoed, it is the wrong signal, especially for Europe." Moscow chief rabbi Pinchas Goldschmidt is the chairman of the European Rabbinical Conference. And he warns and warns again and again about restrictions on religious freedom in Europe. Now he shows himself irritated in the conversation with Deutsche Welle that the EU Commission does not want to re-fill one position: the EU Special Representative for Religious Freedom outside the European Union.

In mid-June it was announced that no further special representative would be appointed. So far, the Slovak Jan Figel has held the office. The then EU Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker created the post of Commissioner for Religious Freedom in 2016 when Pope Francis received the Aachen Charlemagne Prize – a kind of gift for the Pope. Juncker is now a thing of the past. And his successor Ursula von der Leyen decided not to continue the position. Instead, the Vice-President of the Commission, Margaritis Schinas, and the Special Representative for Human Rights and Democracy, Eamon Gilmore, should now take care of religious freedom outside the EU.

"Does Europe have a problem with religion?"

Chief Rabbi Goldschmidt sees the process in a larger context and also as a symbolic sign. "Does Europe have a problem with religion?" He asks. This question arises all the more, "if in this country religious rites and traditions are not only questioned, but are also banned". Religious freedom is "a European value".

Aiman Mazyek, the chairman of the Central Council of Muslims in Germany, is also critical of the decision of the EU Commission and hopes to rethink. The actions of some European countries against the headscarf or religious slaughter (slaughtering) affect Jews and Muslims in a similar way.





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“Religious freedom is a human right,” Mazyek told Deutsche Welle, “and this human right is trampled on in many parts of the world.” And because there are attempts to restrict religious freedom even within the EU, “it is all the more important that the voice of such an officer does not come to a standstill right now”.

Lack of sensitivity: the dispute over Hagia Sophia

The highest Orthodox cleric in Germany makes a similarly clear statement. “Today it is more than ever necessary that we have this representative in Brussels,” Metropolitan Augoustinos told DW. The Greek Orthodox priest is the chairman of the Orthodox Bishops’ Conference in Germany, which unites around 2.5 million believers. He suspects the Commission’s lack of sensitivity to the subject. “This indifference among Christians is a disaster.”

He gives the current example of the Hagia Sophia debate in Istanbul. The former church, later a mosque, a museum for many decades, is said to become a mosque again according to the wishes of Turkish nationalists and also of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. The EU must protest against such a decision if Christians, Muslims and atheists alike have to speak out, Augoustinos demands. And the EU must pay special attention to such a process, which again violates the Christian minority in Turkey.

“It’s about religious freedom for everyone”

Criticism also comes from the highest ranking Catholics at European level. The Archbishop of Luxembourg, Cardinal Jean-Claude Hollerich, chairs the COMECE EU Episcopal Commission. He refers to the work of Jan Figel, who has been “continuously” recognized since 2016. Figel has made concrete the efforts of the EU to “campaign internationally for



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religious freedom for all". And he had contributed to better protection of those "who suffer from intolerance, discrimination and persecution".

In the current global context, the cardinal told DW, the repression "in some cases has reached the level of genocide of religious minorities and groups at risk". The EU should therefore continue to express its commitment and leadership role for an integrative understanding of the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, including with its own representative.

Hope for Merkel as EU Council President

In the past few days, 135 members of the German Bundestag – politicians from the CDU / CSU, SPD and FDP – had regretted the decision of the EU Commission. They called on the German government "during the German EU Council Presidency to work to ensure that the EU Special Representative for Religious Freedom continues to work successfully so far". There is also an example of such a representative in Berlin. In 2018, the Federal Government appointed a representative for religious freedom worldwide, the CDU MP Markus Grübel. At that time Ursula von der Leyen was Minister of Defense. It is not known that she viewed the decision for this new office critically in the Federal Cabinet.

It is questionable whether Chancellor Angela Merkel, as EU Council President, will talk to Commission President von der Leyen about the details of an EU Commissioner for Religious Freedom in all of the problems facing the EU.

For Chief Rabbi Goldschmidt it is clear that even without another representative, the Commission must pay more attention to the topic: He expects Schinas, the new Vice President of the EU Commission, who is now also responsible for the area of religious freedom, "to give this topic more weight ". Because it is "not only about worldwide religious freedom, but also about the integrity and security of European society".

<https://www.web24.news/u/2020/07/eu-needs-to-do-more-for-religious-freedom.html>

