

EUROPEAN EVANGELICAL ALLIANCE

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**DEFENDING FREEDOM  
OF RELIGION OR  
BELIEF - AN  
INTRODUCTION FOR  
NATIONAL  
EVANGELICAL  
ALLIANCES IN EUROPE**

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# Table of Contents

What Freedom?	2
The Law	2
Root causes of FoRB challenges	2
Fewer rights for some?	3
Level 1: Essential FoRB Tasks for All Evangelical Alliances	3
A little preparation	3
Serving your members	4
Level 2: Strengthening FoRB defences	4
Knowing what is happening	5
FoRB reports	5
Keys to success	5
Continuing to be bold	6
Your nation under UN scrutiny	7
Helping the authorities to understand FoRB	7
Level 3: Expanding FoRB horizons	7
Defending and working with others	8
International concern	8
Asylum seekers	8
Level 4: A better way	9
Influencing the values of your nation	9
A vision which maximises FoRB for everyone	9
Here to help	10

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## ***European Evangelical Alliance***

# **Defending Freedom of Religion or Belief – An introduction for National Evangelical Alliances in Europe**

From the very beginning when the Evangelical Alliance (EA) was founded in 1846, defending freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) has been a priority responsibility and activity. Indeed, much of this guide to defending FoRB is based on the fantastic work of Evangelical Alliances (EAs) across Europe.

We believe everyone should be aware of his/her own rights to believe and live by their faith or worldview. We recommend that this text be read in conjunction with the growing series of EEA FoRB resources found at <https://www.europeanea.org/forb-resources/>.

Some nations have a far deeper experience, past or present, of serious attacks on FoRB. The Christians there know what it means to stand in the Lord's strength no matter the pressure. This guide focuses less on that faith reaction and more on what can be done more practically to defend FoRB when a problem arises and also to work proactively to try to avoid problems.

However, it cannot be emphasised enough that prayer and trust in the Lord go hand in hand with any advocacy. In the end, our greatest defence is the full armour of God. And we are called to pray on all occasions and to keep speaking fearlessly of the hope we have in Jesus.[1]

1. Ephesians 6:10-20

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# WHAT FREEDOM?

## The Law

International human rights law (both United Nations and Council of Europe) prioritises freedom of religion or belief for all.[2] It is for every human being – in international law and, most Christian FoRB defenders argue, as a biblical principle.[3] And it is a vital right if people are to have a safe space to worship, to develop and live according to their beliefs and to share them. The law covers both private and public expression, as an individual or with others. There can be limitations but these are limited.



FoRB vigil outside the Swiss Parliament in Bern.

**EVERYONE HAS THE RIGHT TO FREEDOM OF THOUGHT, CONSCIENCE AND RELIGION; THIS RIGHT INCLUDES FREEDOM TO CHANGE HIS RELIGION OR BELIEF, AND FREEDOM, EITHER ALONE OR IN COMMUNITY WITH OTHERS AND IN PUBLIC OR PRIVATE, TO MANIFEST HIS RELIGION OR BELIEF IN TEACHING, PRACTICE, WORSHIP AND OBSERVANCE.[4]**

*ARTICLE 18 OF THE UNIVERSAL DECLARATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS*

## Root causes of FoRB challenges

So why do freedom of religion or belief difficulties arise? Beyond spiritual answers, sometimes the unwise or even dangerous behaviour of certain people of faith lead to FoRB restrictions. However, problems can also happen because of weak democracy and rule of law, the apathy, prejudices and even aggression of a dominant faith or worldview community, security or national identity concerns. Sometimes, politicians simply don't understand or value FoRB as a core human right. They may not accept the reality of pluralism in their nation or understand the need to find fair solutions to maximise the rights of everyone.

2. [https://www.europeanea.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/20201216\\_FoRB\\_What-is-it.pdf](https://www.europeanea.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/20201216_FoRB_What-is-it.pdf)

3. [https://www.europeanea.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/201709\\_Religious-Freedom-for-all-Christians.pdf](https://www.europeanea.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/201709_Religious-Freedom-for-all-Christians.pdf)

4. <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights>

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## Fewer rights for some?

Does a government have the right in international law to favour one faith community, giving them more rights and resources than others? To a certain extent, national law can permit this. It is hard for smaller faith communities to accept this discrimination. But there must be no barriers to these groups being able fully to practice their faith. FoRB is a human right that all people are entitled to, regardless the regulations set by any political authorities.

Having said that, many Evangelical Alliances (EAs) have learned the importance of resisting the pressure Evangelicals may be under to stay silent because they are told “You’re a minority so be grateful for what you have.” Otherwise, they can end up both feeling and acting small, putting up with ill treatment and withdrawing the salt and light God asks them to spread. An Evangelical Alliance (EA) can help its members to be confident and bold – and also to care for the freedoms of those outside their own community.

## LEVEL 1: ESSENTIAL FoRB TASKS FOR ALL EVANGELICAL ALLIANCES

EA leaders are busy but it is vital that they know what to do if a major FoRB problem arises. EEA’s ‘When a religious freedom problem arises’<sup>[5]</sup> resource gives top tips, helping you to assess the facts, consider options, act wisely and get assistance at the right time from others.

### A little preparation

Even better than waiting for the FoRB crisis to arrive, why not think as a team what you can do to protect FoRB, even if your resources are stretched?

Consider the top FoRB risks and root causes. Work out what the most effective actions would be, who could be the main EA point person and which professionals (lawyers, political contacts, journalists, FoRB specialists) and partners could be persuaded to help – in the country and outside. Do take into account secular human rights advocates.

It is also good to gain a basic understanding of international human rights law and the relevant national laws.

5. <https://www.europeanea.org/when-a-religious-freedom-problem-arises/>

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## Serving your members

Can you consider how to communicate with your members? Do they have a basic understanding of their FoRB rights? Do they know who to contact if they have a FoRB problem? (EAs may want to consider appointing a human rights and FoRB point person). Do they even know what their rights are?

## LEVEL 2: STRENGTHENING FoRB DEFENCES

### Knowing what is happening

You can't defend FoRB if you don't know what is going on.

One EA, during its annual assembly, asks its members what FoRB difficulties have happened so that the EA can write a comprehensive report. Initially people did not see the point. But the EA helped them step out of the "You're a minority so just be grateful" attitude. And the EA gained their trust: Members know that what they say will be heard and communicated well. So, after an initial questionnaire to highlight issues, short interviews take place to gather accurate evidence for a major FoRB report. This helps the EA track developments - contact with the grassroots is essential. But the findings are also used in advocacy.

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## FoRB Reports

Several EAs publish these annual FoRB reports which go to the government, media, embassies, NGOs, EEA, the World Evangelical Alliance etc. The text is written with a respectful, confident tone, addressed to the authorities, asking to work with them to find solutions and thanking them for any FoRB improvements. But there is also a bold list of the problems faced by Evangelicals and clear recommendations for improvement. Feel free to ask EEA for examples of such reports.

## Keys to Success

EEA prioritises connecting with its members and many other FoRB groups so that we can all learn from one another. Looking at FoRB issues that have been favourably concluded, we can see some common threads. These include

- vigilance so that you start in good time, spotting issues as soon as they appear on the horizon,
- checking facts really carefully,
- basing your actions and arguments on human rights law,
- being confident rather than “playing the victim”,
- coping graciously and prayerfully with criticism,
- having some media and advocacy trained people ready,
- picking any legal case carefully so that any precedent set has a good chance of being positive,
- seeking support of other faiths and secular allies – often by inviting people to focus on the core human rights which so many will support,
- prioritising quiet diplomacy wherever possible,
- carefully choosing when to be louder in protest,
- committing for the long term to the struggle,
- looking for common ground wherever possible and
- knowing where compromise may be needed.

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## Continuing to be bold

Some EAs have spotted that, in order to avoid trouble, Christians may choose to hide their faith. So the National Council of Evangelicals in France created the Libre de le Dire (“Free to say it”) campaign. This then inspired the UK and German EAs to create similar resources.[6] These all explain FoRB legal rights, plus they encourage people to keep exercising those rights. Often, there are particular FoRB rules for workplaces and schools so let’s equip workers, parents, children and students to know their rights, use their freedoms and know what to do when a problem arises.[7]



There are also strategic reasons for inspiring Christians not to stay quiet for, if we do not use our FoRB and freedom of expression rights, we may lose them. The courts can argue that, since the case they are looking at appears to be unusual, then it involves someone who is unreasonable. If all legal procedures in a nation have been exhausted, it might be possible to take a case to the European Court of Human Rights. However, this court looks at a nation’s general culture and behaviour and can decide to grant the government a “margin of appreciation”: in other words, flexibility for their national context.

6. CNEF wrote <https://www.libredeledire.fr>, which inspired the British EAK <https://www.eauk.org/what-we-do/initiatives/speak-up-or> and the German EA [https://www.ead.de/fileadmin/user\\_upload/2020\\_Rede\\_Frei\\_online.pdf](https://www.ead.de/fileadmin/user_upload/2020_Rede_Frei_online.pdf)

7. EEA has specific resources on FoRB in the workplace [https://www.europeanea.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/20210112\\_FoRB\\_in\\_the\\_workplace.pdf](https://www.europeanea.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/20210112_FoRB_in_the_workplace.pdf) and FoRB & Education [https://www.europeanea.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/Human-Rights-and-Education\\_What-are-the-rights-of-parents-children-and-teachers-when-they-object-to-parts-of-the-curriculum.pdf](https://www.europeanea.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/Human-Rights-and-Education_What-are-the-rights-of-parents-children-and-teachers-when-they-object-to-parts-of-the-curriculum.pdf). See also the resources in footnote 5.

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## Your nation under UN scrutiny

Every 4.5 years, every nation on earth goes before the United Nations Human Rights Council to have their human rights record (not just FoRB) assessed in their Universal Periodic Review (UPR).[8] Countries do not like criticism on the world stage and many do their best to find at least partial solutions to any criticism aired. The World Evangelical Alliance's Geneva office is always keen to work with an EA to present a human rights report for the UPR on their nation. Many EAs have done this and have seen FoRB improvements as a result.[9]

## Helping the authorities to understand FoRB

Another proactive action is to consider how to help the authorities understand FoRB better. In many countries, local or national officials do not understand FoRB and its consequences for citizens. So let's help them. Why not try to meet with them, explain FoRB principles to them and talk about how FoRB for all will bring about more stability and cohesion (not less) in society? You might want to point to the resources developed by the FoRB Learning Platform [10] and try to set up training opportunities.

## LEVEL 3: EXPANDING FORB HORIZONS

### Defending and working with others

So far, we have focused only on defending Evangelicals in our own nation because that is the first responsibility of an EA. However, FoRB is for everyone: for other Christian denominations, for other faith and worldview communities in your nation and for such communities around the world. Defending the rights of others has



The Albanian Interreligious Council includes the Albanian EA (VUSH)

nothing to do with approving of their beliefs. It is simply working to help them enjoy this precious human right. We are called to work for the welfare of our nations and to model concern for all without discrimination. Also, EAs should not be afraid to join in with discussions and actions with other human rights movements in their country. It is an important way of ensuring our voice may be heard.

8. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/hr-bodies/upr/upr-main>

9. Other human rights can also be the focus of advocacy, e.g. the rights of human trafficking victims.

10. <https://www.forb-learning.org/>

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The EEA is a founding member of the European Platform against Religious Intolerance and Discrimination ([EPRID](#))[11], which brings together FoRB champions of different faiths and none who operate at European Union (EU) level. EEA is committed to EPRID because biblically it is right to defend the freedom of others. Also, by defending others, you often strengthen FoRB for your own community. This is because, if one group's rights are trampled on, anyone's rights could be removed. And, finally, EEA is pleased to be part of EPRID because people listen when they see faith communities working together. The attitude of EU officials towards FoRB has been transformed as they have seen the collaboration between faith and worldview groups. Might this kind of platform be suitable and possible for your nation?



## International concern

Regarding FoRB around the world, many EAs focus on strong links with specialist agencies which support the persecuted Church. They encourage collaboration between the FoRB organisations in their nation and work with them to promote the International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church ([IDOP](#)).[12] If such organisations do not yet exist nationally, perhaps the EA can help create them. And sometimes the EA takes a lead in organising political or media events or arrange vigils outside embassies etc.

## Asylum seekers

Some of the asylum seekers in any nation are likely to be people who are asking to be accepted as refugees because of a well-grounded fear of persecution because of their faith if they are sent home. EEA has produced a guide for churches[13] to help them support these asylum seekers going through the asylum legal process. There is also a good practice guide for immigration authorities.[14] We do encourage EAs to find out how their nation handles faith based asylum claims and to speak up for fair procedures. Too many brothers and sisters in Christ have been deported back to countries where severe persecution is widespread.

11. <http://www.eprid.eu/>

12. <https://idop.org>

13. [https://www.europeanea.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/20220127\\_guide-for-Christians-helping-asylum-seekers-through-the-legal-asylum-process.pdf](https://www.europeanea.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/20220127_guide-for-Christians-helping-asylum-seekers-through-the-legal-asylum-process.pdf)

14. [https://www.europeanea.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/20220127\\_religion-or-belief-based-asylum-claims.pdf](https://www.europeanea.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/20220127_religion-or-belief-based-asylum-claims.pdf)

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## LEVEL 4: A BETTER WAY

### Influencing the values of your nation

A nation where human rights are under threat is not a place where the benefits of democracy, the rule of law, righteousness and justice are safe for anyone. Can Christians model and spread a better vision for how nations can be run?

The Bible is full of values that are essential for a healthy society where all can flourish. These include love, justice, purity, mercy, compassion, freedom, stewardship, the dignity and importance of work, truth and forgiveness. What can an EA do to promote these within the Church and in society?

A great example of this is the Evangelical Alliance in the UK's What kind of society? resource.[15] This was created to equip people to discuss how essential love, freedom, justice and truth are for the health of the nation.

And many EAs promote a better vision for their nation through regular contact with and encouragement of politicians and also by inspiring and training good people into public life.

### A vision which maximises FoRB for everyone

Many people of different faiths or none promote the principles found in the Global Charter of Conscience.[16] The Charter was launched at the European Parliament in 2012 with the help of the then United Nations



Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief. It calls for the construction of a civil public square which maximises FoRB for everyone. In a civil public square, everyone's freedom is respected but everyone is also responsible to ensure that the freedom of others is equally respected. EEA resources on a civil public square can be found here.[17]

15. <https://www.eauk.org/resources/what-we-offer/reports/what-kind-of-society/the-evangelical-alliance-asks-what-kind-of-society>

16. <https://charterofconscience.org/>

17. <https://www.europeanea.org/a-civil-public-square-resources/>

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## HERE TO HELP

This guide started by stating that promoting Freedom of Religion or Belief has been a priority responsibility and task of the Evangelical Alliance family since the 19th century.

This means that there is huge experience among EAs and their many, many partner organisations. When a church or an individual faces a FoRB crisis, there are the EA, lawyers and organisations to help. And, when situations are especially serious, there is an international network which can act fast to give support.

But even better is when we work together regularly to learn from one another, reflect on FoRB trends and the wisest responses. EEA is here to serve. We trust that our members will engage in purposeful communication on FoRB matters with the EEA team. That way, EEA can be more effective in supporting you and others.

The EEA socio-political team is immensely grateful for all it has learned from its membership and partners. We hope that others will want to participate in this exchange.

For more information, contact [info@europeanea.org](mailto:info@europeanea.org)

The European Evangelical Alliance is happy for this resource to be translated and adapted for the use of organisations other than National Evangelical Alliances, provided the main content and the following phrase is included:

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