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## **MARCH 2015**

**"On that day a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem,  
and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. . . .  
Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went. " Acts 8:1, 4**

### **Dear Friends,**

In February, two dozen religious liberty advocates from fifteen countries came together in Istanbul for the 13<sup>th</sup> European Religious Liberty Forum (ERLF). Among those in attendance was Bulgarian attorney Latcho Popov, President of Advocates Europe (AE), and German Judge Peter Gegenwart, AE's newest Global Council representative. We joined together with lawyers, law students, advocacy experts, journalists, and pastors—from Ireland to Georgia and from Turkey to Sweden, and countries in-between—to review the changes in freedom of religion and belief (FoRB) across Europe over the past year. And although the level of FoRB across the continent is declining (perhaps not quite as dire as in Acts 8:1), there are some encouraging reports (Acts 8:4).

One of the most encouraging things to come out of our time together was the introduction to yet another young Christian lawyer in Turkey. Latcho has been praying for God to raise up Christian legal professionals in Turkey for fifteen years. You may recall that at the 2013 ERLF gathering, we first met Egesu Ozkara, then a first year law student. She has about one year of school remaining and is doing well. This year, Egesu was joined by another Godly young lady like herself, Hurrem Cevik, who becomes a lawyer this spring. Hurrem is from Izmir (Smyrna) and her father is the head of the Turkish Baptist Alliance. Another amazing answer to Latcho's long years of prayers.

### **Challenges in Europe**

We opened our time together discussing the increasing problems across the continent. Several countries stand out as seeing a continued decline in religious liberty.

#### **Turkey**

In Turkey last year, among other things, hate crimes directed against Christians continued. The ability to use places of worship remains problematic. Compulsory religious education (read: "Islamic") classes still remain on curriculums. Identity cards still require a person's religion, which continues to increase the risk of discrimination. Finally, the five suspects who murdered three Christians in Malatya in 2007 were released under supervision, causing further stress on the Protestant community in Turkey. On a positive note, there were not any problems related to receiving permission for Christmas celebrations in public spaces, and some cities supported the celebrations, providing free space; some officials even attended the celebrations.

#### **Sweden**

In Sweden, one of the most disturbing trends was the absolute failure to provide any accommodation for religious conscience for Christian midwives who did not want to be involved in any way with performing abortions. It is certainly no stretch to say that religious minorities in Sweden are being treated with less respect than non-religious citizens. Thankfully, our friends at the Scandinavian Human

Rights Lawyers, led by Ruth Nordström, are giving their best efforts to fight for religious liberty and life. Pray for these brave advocates and for Christians in this increasingly hostile nation.

### France

In France, the January attack on the offices of Charlie Hebdo by Muslim terrorists re-ignited the public debate over Laïcité (legal separation between religions and state) and the place of religions in a secular society. According to the French Evangelical Association (CNEF), the public debate has led to several dangerous opinions on FoRB that are generally conveyed by the media and through politics:

- religion must be contained in the private area (family, places of worship) and cannot be expressed in public places (streets, public events, media, political debates, public discussions);
- to be French is to be “*laïque*,” understood as “neutral toward religion,” whereas French citizens are not “*laïque*” as they bear all kinds of opinions and religious beliefs, but the French Republic must be *laïque*. Some claim Laïcité as the highest value, whereas Laïcité is only a way to live together, “it is a container, not a content.”

Nevertheless, although the French context is very tense, there is room for hope. CNEF started a new campaign, Libre de le Dire (“Free to Say It”), which helps people to understand freedom of expression and freedom of conscience. Please pray with us for Nancy Lefevre, CNEF’s legal counsel, and her colleagues as they work to change hearts and minds in their country.

### Belarus

In Belarus, freedom of religion and belief is practically an afterthought. According to our colleague Dina Shavtsova, only about one in ten citizens in Belarus live out a religious world-view. Furthermore, the state requires compulsory registration of religious organizations, which includes criminal penalties for violations. One bright light, following years of unsuccessful registration attempts, was the founding of *Initiative FORB*, which now allows our advocates there to educate believers and church authorities about freedom of religion or belief, handle individual cases, and advocate before the UN. Pray with us for Dina and Sergei Shavtsov and their colleagues as they struggle in Europe’s hardest country.

### Advocates in March

March is a busy month for the Advocates staff. First, I travel to the Global Kingdom Partnership Network (GKPN) Marketplace Initiative gathering, which this year takes place in conjunction with the Pastor’s Table in Miami. Second, Ruth Ross will be back in Colombia where she’ll be meeting with our advocates in Santa Marta. Unfortunately, the full conference will be rescheduled, so please pray with us for wisdom and guidance as they gather on March 14 to plan. Then I travel to Bangkok for the Religious Liberty Partnership Consultation, with a stop on the way in South Korea to speak at Handong International Law School as well as at the church of Global Council member Dongsub Sim in Seoul. Please pray for safe travels and God’s wisdom for each talk I give. As always, thanks for your continued financial support as we encourage those who face Acts 8:1 and 4 situations.

May the Lord bless and keep you in His perfect . . .

Grace and Peace,



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