

Freedom of Thought, Conscience, Religion or Belief



Freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief (often shortened to FoRB) is enshrined in international and regional human rights frameworks, including Article 18 of the [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#) and numerous OSCE commitments, starting with its foundational document, the [Helsinki Final Act](#). Respect for FoRB, alongside other human rights and functioning democratic institutions, is essential to comprehensive and lasting security.

This right protects everyone, and is one of several freedoms that foster pluralism and coexistence in diverse societies and contribute to democratic participation, including the ability to challenge injustice. It enables individuals to live with dignity and integrity and guarantees respect for personal autonomy while fostering more peaceful societies. Restrictions on this right often signal a broader threat to rights, especially to freedom of expression and freedom of association.

What is FoRB?

Thought and conscience are often called the **internal** parts of the right (*forum internum*).

- **Freedom of thought** is the right of each individual to hold and form their own beliefs, opinions and ideas without coercion or interference. It includes the ability to think independently, question norms and develop personal views, e.g., on religion, politics and morality.
- **Freedom of conscience** empowers each individual to follow their inner sense of right and wrong in matters of belief, ethics and morality. It protects their ability to hold moral or ethical convictions, independent of external influence, coercion or punishment, including objection to actions that

violate deeply-held moral principles, such as conscientious objection to military service.

Religion or belief have more visible, external components (*forum externum*).

- **Freedom of religion or belief** is everyone's right to choose, hold, change or reject religious or non-religious beliefs, without coercion or discrimination. It is a right for people, not religions, and protects their choice to remain within, convert to, or leave a religion or belief, to be religious or an atheist, sceptic, or someone indifferent to such matters.

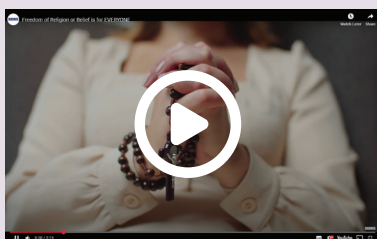
The external component concerns the freedom to practice, worship, teach and observe religious or belief customs, individually or in community with others. These cover wide-ranging forms of religious or belief expression, including meeting to worship, language, dress, rituals, observing days of rest or specific holidays, and public preaching.

States should guarantee the communal aspect of FoRB as individuals gather together. States should not require that religious or belief communities obtain legal personality to operate, but they should make it easy for any community to obtain legal status to perform basic community needs (e.g., opening a bank account or buying and maintaining a place of worship).

Importantly, the internal and external elements of FoRB are interdependent. The right also overlaps and is deeply interconnected with other rights, such as the freedoms of expression and opinion, assembly and association, or the right to privacy.

Guaranteeing the right to FoRB

States have a duty to guarantee FoRB, without discrimination, for everyone within their territory and jurisdiction. Unfortunately, social, cultural and legal barriers can limit how different people are able to exercise this right, alone or in community. Similarly, a person's sex, gender, health, age, ethnicity, religion, belief or social status may leave them more vulnerable to different types of discrimination, pressure or even violence, especially if they belong to minority groups, including within their communities. Challenging widely-accepted religious or belief norms, or choosing to change or leave a religious or belief system can place people at risk. In patriarchal societies, these challenges are often greater for women than for men, due to prevailing socio-cultural norms.



Getting (the right to) freedom of religion or belief right — short video series

Is it ever justified to limit the right to FoRB?

No one needs permission to enjoy this right in public or private, alone or with others.

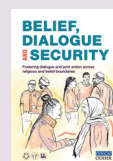
- **The internal components are absolute** — they cannot be limited, restricted or violated under any circumstances.
- **The external expressions of a religion or belief can be subject to certain legal limitations**, but only under strict criteria, as set out in **Article 18(3) of the ICCPR**. They must be **set out in law** and **necessary to achieve a legitimate aim**, such as public safety, order, health, morals or the rights of others. They must be **proportionate** and non-discriminatory. These safeguards ensure that any limitations are exceptional, justified and narrowly applied.
- **FoRB is non-derogable** — beyond permissible limitations, states cannot suspend or restrict its exercise, even during a state of emergency, such as a war.

FoRB can only be fully realized in a society that is governed by the rule of law, where legal frameworks ensure accountability, equality and protection for all.

ODIHR monitoring and support

ODIHR monitors FoRB across the OSCE region and offers guidance, resources and training on this right in line with OSCE commitments. In this, it is advised by the 17-member **ODIHR Panel of Experts on Freedom of Religion or Belief**.

Key ODIHR resources



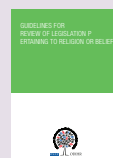
Belief, Dialogue and Security — Fostering dialogue and joint action across religious and belief boundaries



Freedom of Religion or Belief and Security: Policy Guidance



Guidelines on the Legal Personality of Religious or Belief Communities



Guidelines for Review of Legislation Pertaining to Religion or Belief



The Right to Freedom of Thought, Conscience, Religion or Belief of Women at Work

All ODIHR resources on FoRB are available at <https://www.osce.org/odihr/freedom-of-religion-or-belief>.



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