

**Freedom of religion or belief**  
Statement by the Nordic-Baltic countries

19 October 2021

Delivered by: H.E. Mr. Martin Bille Hermann, Ambassador, Permanent Representative

Mr President,

I have the honour to make this statement on behalf of the Nordic-Baltic countries: Norway, Finland, Iceland, Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia, and Sweden and my own country, Denmark.

We thank the Special Rapporteur Ahmed Shaheed for his report on freedom of thought. As he rightly points out, despite its proclaimed importance and absolute nature, the scope and content of this right remain underdeveloped and poorly understood. We think this is especially true when looking at the intersectionality of freedom of thought and freedom of expression.

In your report you make a useful account of the spectrum within which this right is violated including through “re-education” camps and programmes, torture, expanded use of inference and predictive technologies, coercive proselytism and anti-conversion efforts, forced administration of psychoactive and other drugs and forced treatment for mental health. We know the list is not exhaustive.

We emphatically support the view that states must never punish or sanction people for their mere thoughts, including beliefs, desires, fantasies and unexecuted intentions, which are widely considered as an attribute of freedom of thought. Such protection is predicated on the principle that everyone is free to think whatever they wish within their inner mind and this must be preserved in all circumstances.

You mention how some state practices influence students and scholars, dissidents and human rights defenders among others to self-censor their expression.

To what extent is it permissible for governments to exploit the obvious power asymmetry it enjoys *vis-à-vis* its citizens. How can we ensure and even encourage free critical thinking and inquiry, including into ideologies, gender politics and religions on the one hand, and on the other hand promote concepts like respect for the sentiments of other groups, including political, religious etc.

To sum up in one question: In a world engulfed in discussions about identity and group sensitivities how can Governments best protect the individuals’ freedom of thought?