

FRANCE/RUSSIA: FECRIS Russian branch behind the persecution of non-Orthodox minorities in Russia

For years, the French anti-sect umbrella organization has been funded – almost entirely – by the French government which, under the principle of laïcité, is supposed to be neutral in religious matters

- The concept of ‘spiritual security’
- Extremism without violence
- The Russian Orthodox Church hailed the ban of Jehovah’s Witnesses
- FECRIS member association in Russia: St. Irenaeus of Lyons Religious Studies Research Centre
- FECRIS involvement in the hate campaign against religious minorities in Russia
- French laïcité betrayed
- Conclusions

HRWF (12.06.2017) – “The persecution of non-Orthodox minorities of foreign origin, or without a ‘historical’ presence in Russia, is based on the philosophy of ‘spiritual security’ which is promoted by the Kremlin, the Russian Orthodox Church and the Russian branch of the France-based European Federation of Research and Information Centers on Sectarianism (FECRIS),” declared French attorney Patricia Duval at a conference on religious freedom in Russia co-organized by MEP Hannu Takkula (Finland, ALDE) and *Human Rights Without Frontiers* on 6 June at the European Parliament in Brussels.

The concept of 'spiritual security'

In the 2000 *National Security Concept*, the Putin Administration stated:

“Assurance of the Russian Federation’s national security also includes protecting the cultural and spiritual-moral legacy and the historical traditions and standards of public life, and preserving the cultural heritage of all Russia’s peoples. There must be a state policy to maintain the population’s spiritual and moral welfare, prohibit the use of airtime to promote violence or base instincts, and counter the adverse impact of foreign religious organizations and missionaries.”

This spiritual understanding of national security began with the adoption of the Russian federal law on security in March 1992. The law was a clear rejection of the old Soviet model of security. The first article of the law puts an emphasis on the importance of ‘spiritual values’, which in 1992 indicated the end of the Soviet militant atheism and the State persecution of religious believers.

However, the developments that ensued stifled the principles of liberalism established in the post-Soviet period and in the 1997 Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations, and ultimately put to bed the brief period of religious freedom that Russia experienced following the 1990 law on Freedom of Worship. The 1997 law, as well as the ideological position and policy which were later adopted by the Russian authorities, were all inspired by the desire to ensure the ‘spiritual security’ of Russia through the purported role of the Russian Orthodox Church in safeguarding national values and security.

Once the 1990 law guaranteed freedom of conscience, large numbers of missionaries flooded into Russia, believing that the former Soviet Union was to be a vast missionary territory.

[\[1\]](#)

In 1996, the Metropolitan Kirill of Smolensk and Kaliningrad commented on the problem of proselytism facing the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC). It was thought that proselytizing groups did not aid the ROC, but operated against it “like boxers in a ring with their pumped-up muscles, delivering blows.”[\[2\]](#) This ‘attack’ was framed to be against the nation’s national and religious values. In turn, the population developed and adopted the idea that ‘non-Orthodox’ can be defined as those who attempt to dismantle and destroy the spiritual unity of the people and the Orthodox faith, that the ‘non-Orthodox’ are “Spiritual colonizers who by fair means or foul try to tear the people away from their church”[\[3\]](#)

The leaders of the ROC believed that Russia’s cultural identity as an Orthodox nation was crumbling. As Wallace Daniel and Christopher Marsh state, “Unless the government affirmed Russia’s traditional faiths against the aggressive actions of other religious groups and sects, the patriarch [Alexey II] maintained, the renewal of Russia’s own spiritual traditions stood little chance.”[\[4\]](#)

Therefore, in this atmosphere, where the ROC believed itself as well as Russian culture to be under attack, Boris Yeltsin passed the 1997 Law, differentiating traditional and nontraditional religions in Russia. [\[5\]](#)

Since then, the concept of ‘spiritual security’ as part of national security has been instrumentalized by the political authorities and the judiciary to restrict the rights of non-Orthodox minorities of foreign origin and to criminalize their beliefs, their teachings, their religious publications and peaceful activities. They erect such allegations on the basis of the 2002 law against extremism which in 2006 was purged of its violence element.

Extremism without violence

The year 2006 was a turning point when the law countering violent extremism was amended, removing the necessity for violators to be associated with extremism, violence or calls to violence, Duval commented.

The amended law was criticized by the UN Human Rights Committee (28 April 2015), the PACE Monitoring Committee of the Council of Europe (14 September 2012), and the Venice Commission (1 June 2012) which called on Russia to correct the law so it requires an element of violence or hatred.

The amendment to the law opened the door to arbitrary and unrestrained interpretations of the concept of extremism, to the criminalization of freedom of thought, expression, worship, and assembly, to police raids, fabricated charges, arrests and sentences of members of peaceful groups such as Jehovah's Witnesses, Scientologists, Tablighi Jamaat, and Said Nursi followers. Their movements and their publications were all victims of bans. Jehovah's Witnesses had their assets confiscated and were fully banned nation-wide by the Russian Supreme Court on 20 April.

The Russian Orthodox Church hailed the ban on Jehovah's Witnesses

The Russian Orthodox Church called Jehovah's Witnesses a dangerous, totalitarian and harmful sect and supported its ban in the Russian Federation.

"Their doctrine contains a multitude of false teachings. They distort the teaching of Christ and interpret the New Testament incorrectly. They do not believe in Jesus Christ as God and Savior, they do not acknowledge the doctrine of the Holy Trinity, and therefore they cannot in any way be called Christian," the head of the synod's Department for External Church Relations, Metropolitan of Volokolamsk Ilarion, declared on the program "Church and World" on the Rossiia-24 television channel.

High-level members of FECRIS and its Russian branch played a prominent role in the campaign against non-Orthodox minorities of foreign origin and the adoption of the repressive policy aiming at their eradication.

Aleksander Dvorkin, Vice-President of FECRIS, is also Russia's most prominent « anti-sect » activist. He was appointed in 2009 by Russia's Justice Minister to head the *Ministry's Expert Council for Conducting State Religious-Studies Expert Analysis* whose mandate is to investigate the activity, doctrines, leadership decisions, literature and worship of any registered religious organisation and recommend action to the Ministry.

A. Dvorkin is also Director of the St. Irenaeus of Lyons Religious Studies Research Centre, FECRIS' member association in Russia.

FECRIS member association in Russia: St. Irenaeus of Lyons Religious Studies Research Centre

The ***Saint Irenaeus of Lyons Centre for Religious Studies***, which is FECRIS member association in Russia, was founded in 1993 with the blessing of the Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia Alexy II. The Centre is also a missionary faculty department of St Tikhon's Orthodox University in Moscow the objective of which is "to spread credible information on doctrines and activities of totalitarian sects and destructive cults". For that purpose "employees of the Centre pursue research, advisory, lecturing and publishing activity and liaise with state structures and the media." Since then, A.L. Dvorkin has been the president of this Centre affiliated to the Russian Orthodox Church.

The ***Saint Irenaeus of Lyons Centre for Religious Studies*** is the head centre of the ***Russian Association of Centres for Religious and Sectarian Studies (RATsIRS)***. The president of RATsIRS is also A.L. Dvorkin; the vice-presidents are

Archpriest Alexander Novopashin and Archpriest Alexander Shabanov; the executive secretary is priest Lev Semenov, Ph.D., associate professor.

Apart from the *Saint Irenaeus of Lyons Centre*, there is a global network of so-called “parents’ initiatives” and other similar organizations in Russia and the CIS the majority of which have become members of RATsIRS in Russia (some are missionary departments of Orthodox dioceses) and created RATsIRS representative offices abroad.

FECRIS’ member association in Russia and its affiliates are all financed by the Russian Orthodox Church and engaged in the fight against Evangelicals, Pentecostals, Mormons, Baha’is, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Falun Gong practitioners, Scientologists...

“Rehabilitating” followers of “non-traditional religions”

A number of the centres of the Russian Association of Centres headed by A. Dvorkin are “rehabilitation centres” for followers of “non-traditional religions”.

Under the pressure of families, followers are induced to go to these rehabilitation centres to be “enlightened” about the danger of sects, about how sects manipulate their minds, and to accept the Orthodox religion because, according to them, if one really believes in Christ he is protected from various sects.

Here follow a few of these centres:

– *Centre of rehabilitation of victims of non-traditional religions under the missionary department of Stavropolskaya and Vladikavkasskaya Eparchy.* Location: Russian, Novopavlovsk.

The Centre indicates on its website: “The basis of the department is to help people in the acquisition of real, true Faith in God and the Church”.

– *Center of rehabilitation of victims of non-traditional*

religions under the Church of Our Lady "Joy of All Who Sorrow". Location: Moscow.

Rehabilitation" is done by two priests and one graduate of Saint Tikhon's Orthodox University (where Alexander Dvorkin is teaching).

– *Rehabilitation Centre for sect victims under the Holy Trinity Monastery*. Location: Russia, Kursk.

Priests and psychologists work there to "rehabilitate" followers.

– *Rehabilitation Centre for victims of non-traditional religions in the name of St. Joseph of St. Volotsk*.

This Centre operates under the Orthodox Eparchy of Yekaterinburg city.

– As concerns the Saint Irenaeus of Lyons Centre for Religious Studies, FECRIS member association in Russia, in an article on their website they explain how to go with people "caught in sects": The process of exit through an external influence involves a psychologist, relatives and a "sect-specialist", to arouse critical thinking towards the "sect" and get rid of emotional dependency towards it. Then it involves connecting the person to the Orthodox catechist, preferably a priest offering the true religious and ideological alternatives.

This seems like a remake of the "deprogramming" technics used in the 1980s and outlawed in the US, which were used to remedy alleged "brainwashing" by religious communities. "Arising critical thinking" towards the sect is achieved through bombarding the followers with misinformation and twisted facts against the denomination they adhered to. After this phase, a phase of "reprogramming" is then done in the Russian "rehabilitation centres" by Orthodox priests so that the followers of non-traditional religions whose creeds have been destabilized through the "critical thinking arising" are now

persuaded to adhere to the “true” religion instead.

French laïcité betrayed

FECRIS was created in France and is financed by the French State, whose Constitution and laws provide a total separation of State and religions and the respect of all creeds. The FECRIS vice-President is currently Alexander Dvorkin, the leading Russian anti-cult crusader and key agitator responsible for popularising the term ‘totalitarian sects’, a term used by defenders of “spiritual security” to designate peaceful religious denominations considered as potential threats to the Orthodox Church.

FECRIS’ Russian member association headed by Alexander Dvorkin is an organ of the Orthodox Church and has been blessed by Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia Alexy II. Key member organizations of FECRIS’ Russian member association are led by radical Orthodox priests and archpriests or are missionary departments of Orthodox dioceses. They refer followers of non-traditional religions to “rehabilitation centres” where they are re-educated to the “right” Orthodox religion.

The question is “How can FECRIS be financed by the French State and support such activities in Russia?”

Conclusion

The European Convention on Human Rights guarantees the right to freedom of religion or belief, which entails the duty for signatory States to hold neutrality in religious matters. Both the Russian Federation and France have committed to the Convention and are bound by its obligations.

In spite of these obligations, Russia’s motivation behind the banning of a number of non-violent movements is narrowly linked to the spiritual security philosophy which encompasses the rejection of religious diversity for the benefit of religious homogeneity, the defence of the Orthodox Church

against proselytizing new religious movements, and the protection of Russian values against the contamination by unwelcome foreign values.

Moscow's fight against foreign religious groups and against the foreign funding of Russian human rights NGOs administratively renamed 'foreign agents' are a source of deep concern in the international human rights community because all the legal – but undemocratic – tools have been put in place to clean up the religious landscape.

A community of 177,000 members of the Jehovah's Witnesses movement in Russia has been banned, its members are being jailed, their children taken away, and their security is no longer guaranteed. Some have started to emigrate to the European Union. Members of the Church of Scientology are also prosecuted and jailed, the police raid their Churches with machine guns, and initiate liquidation proceedings. Peaceful Muslim groups of foreign origin, such as Tablighi Jamaat and Said Nursi followers, have been banned and a number of their followers have been arrested and sentenced to several years in prison.

Is the European Union willing to receive all the religious refugees from Russia?

Is the Council of Europe really able to have its member states fulfill their obligations under the Convention?

[1] Witte, Bourdeaux, *Proselytism and Orthodoxy in Russia*. Wipf and Stock Publishers. 1999. Page 73. http://www.jstor.org/stable/1465916?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents

[2] Payne, "Spiritual Security, the Russian Orthodox Church and the Russian Foreign Ministry: Collaboration or Cooptation?". <http://bit.ly/2r9nmG1>

[3] Ibid.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Ibid.

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