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## **FRANCE: MIVILUDES President resigns over Fonds Marianne scandal**

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*Another obnoxious story of taxpayers' money liberally distributed to dubious associations hit Christian Gravel, who had to leave the French anti-cult mission.*

by Massimo Introvigne

Bitter Winter (09.06.2023) – “Piscis primum a capite foetet”: “The fish starts stinking from the head,” according to a Latin saying that probably did not exist before Erasmus of Rotterdam made it popular during the Renaissance. There is a lot of bad smell when one approaches the MIVILUDES, the Mission for Monitoring and Combating Cultic Deviances (“dérives sectaires”: note that the French “secte” and its derivative words should be translated into English as “cult” and not as “sect”), a unique French anti-cult agency that is part of the government itself.

One time, it publishes false and slanderous information in its yearly report—and runs away from a court case where judges would have ruled on it. Another time, it is caught red-handed using false statistics and anonymous reports that can be equally false. Yet in another incident, its chief, Hanène Romdhane, resigns unexpectedly for mysterious reasons.

The fish stinks from the head. Its former chief and now member of its Orientation Council Georges Fenech went to Crimea to applaud Putin for his illegal annexation of that Ukrainian territory. More recently, he breached the law by failing to pay what he owed Scientology after having lost a court case against it. He had to suffer the humiliation of seeing a bailiff access his bank and taking the money forcibly from his bank account.

The fish continues to stink from the head. Another had to get off the carousel. On June 6, French media reported that MIVILUDES President, Christian Gravel, had also resigned. This time, the reason why he had to resign was less mysterious.

On May 31, the General Inspection of the Administration (IGA) issued a first report on what is known in France as the scandal of the Fonds Marianne.

On October 16, 2020, high school teacher Samuel Paty was beheaded by a terrorist after he had been accused of showing

to his students cartoons from the magazine "Charlie-Hebdo" offending Prophet Muhammad. One of the consequences of this crime was the increased support by the French government to organizations fighting Islamic radicalism and "separatism," a word indicating in France the self-organization of religious communities in a way deemed incompatible with the secular values of the French Republic.

From July 2020, Marlène Schiappa was the Minister Delegate in charge of Citizenship, attached to the Minister of the Interior. She launched a "Fonds Marianne" to finance, initially with Euro 2.5 million, private associations that had proved their effectiveness in combating "separatism." For her own political reasons, Schiappa also jumped on the anti-cult bandwagon, and repeatedly emphasized that she considered the "sectes" as no less "separatist" than Islamic fundamentalism.

The Comité interministériel de prévention de la délinquance et de la radicalisation (Interministerial Committee for the Prevention of Delinquency and Radicalization, CIDPR) was put in charge of selecting the associations to be funded through the Fonds Marianne. The chief of the CIDPR was Christian Gravel, at the same time the President of the MIVILUDES, which is administratively connected with the CIDPR.

The largest chunk of the Fonds Marianne (Euro 355,000) went to an association known as Union fédérative des sociétés d'éducation physique et de préparation militaire (Federation of Physical Education and Military Training Societies, USEPPM), connected with controversial journalist Mohamed Sifaoui, who had been often accused of Islamophobia. It came out that the USEPPM's application consisted of only seven sentences, and no serious investigation was performed on its ability to deliver serious results in the fight against radicalism. When the investigation started, some media commented that it could easily extend to private anti-cult organizations strictly associated with the MIVILUDES, which had also received funds from the CIDPR. While they were not

yet accused of any financial wrongdoing, they may be easily be involved in the “suspicions of favoritism surrounding the structure created by Marlène Schiappa.”

This may no longer be a problem for Marlène Schiappa, who was recently busy posing for the cover of “Playboy” magazine. But it is a problem for Christian Gravel. He tried to switch all the blame for the USEPPM scandal to Schiappa, but the inspectors did not buy his version. Finally, he had to resign.

The MIVILUDES should now look for another president. The fish keeps stinking from the head. French bureaucrats who care for their reputation would probably prefer not to touch the rotten organization with a ten-foot pole.

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**Massimo Introvigne** (born June 14, 1955 in Rome) is an Italian sociologist of religions. He is the founder and managing director of the Center for Studies on New Religions (CESNUR), an international network of scholars who study new religious movements. Introvigne is the author of some 70 books and more than 100 articles in the field of sociology of religion. He was the main author of the *Enciclopedia delle religioni in Italia* (*Encyclopedia of Religions in Italy*). He is a member of the editorial board for the *Interdisciplinary Journal of Research on Religion* and of the executive board of *University of California Press' Nova Religio*. From January 5 to December 31, 2011, he has served as the “Representative on combating racism, xenophobia and discrimination, with a special focus on discrimination against Christians and members of other religions” of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). From 2012 to 2015 he served as chairperson of the Observatory of Religious Liberty, instituted by the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs in order to monitor problems of religious liberty on a worldwide scale.

*Photo: Christian Gravel in happier times. Screenshot.*

**Further reading about FORB in France on HRWF website**

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