

GSK: Is the FECRIS-branch of Austria becoming a shadow of itself?

Snapshot of Austria's anti-cult scene: Overageing of main actors and decline of public interest

By Dominic Zoehrer, MA, for *Human Rights Without Frontiers*

HRWF (14.11.2016) - The landmark survey "Freedom of Religion or Belief – Anti-Sect Movements and State Neutrality. A Case Study: FECRIS" published in 2012 already contained a comprehensive description of the affiliates of the European anti-cult formation FECRIS active in Austria, most notably the GSK, by Christian Brünner and Thomas Neger (1). The objective of this documentation is to present a snapshot of the intricate situation of the GSK in 2016 by reviewing its background, protagonists and methodology and by analyzing the diminished flow of public funds that used to sustain its activities.

1. Some Notes on the Background, Actors and Methods of the GSK

The "Association for the Protection of Mental Freedom" (*Verein zur Wahrung der geistigen Freiheit*) has been co-founded by Austrian psychologist Prof. Brigitte Rollett and officially registered in Vienna on the 29th of September 1977. In 1992 the association has been renamed as the Society against Sect- and Cult-Dangers (*Gesellschaft gegen Sekten- und Kultgefahren*, GSK)(2). Rollett has ever since served as the president of the association and has been active for many years in the information war against religious minorities and the alleged dangers emanating from those groups. Prominent anti-cultists in Austria and trained psychologists such as Dr. German Müller, executive director of the Federal Office for Sect Issues (*Bundesstelle für Sektenfragen*) founded in 1998, or the executive director of the FECRIS-affiliated GSK, Dr. Martin Felinger, have studied under Rollett.

According to the excerpt from the register of associations (*Vereinsregisterauszug*) (3), the following persons listed are authorized to represent the GSK while their respective period of function lasts from the 25th of June 2016 until the 24th of June 2020:

Chairman: Univ. Prof. e. Brigitte Rollett

Secretary: Friedrich Griess, DI.

Treasurer: Christine Colbert

Friedrich Griess DI, a retired engineer and committed Roman Catholic, was the third president of FECRIS from 2005 until 2009, and has become known for his aggressive activities against the Norwegian group Smith's Friends (official name: Brunstad Christian Church), an evangelical non-denominational church founded by Johan Oscar Smith in 1905.

Surprisingly, the GSK-protagonist Martin Felinger is not listed as an authorized representative of the GSK, although he professes to be its executive director since 1999 on his private website (4). He characterizes his work in a "private psychological counseling center" as offering "help and support" to "former sect members of destructive cults" [sic] and to relatives of persons who have entered "dubious groups of the diverse and problematic counseling market (*Lebenshilfemarkt*)". Felinger's language reveals that he clearly considers spiritual or religious alternatives to modern psychological counseling as tendentially superstitious, fraudulent and ineffective.

The official website of the GSK only consists of an opening page that already for several years states that "the website is being reconstructed" and only provides basic contact information (5). On its one-page website the GSK declares itself to be a "member of the European federation FECRIS". The given office address Obere Augartenstraße 26 – 28, 1020 Vienna is consistent with the address stated in the register of associations. However, there are no official opening times and contact can only be made via email or by phone. According to Felinger, the office is used as a meeting place on demand whenever he has counseling appointments with his "clients".

For one hour of counseling, Felinger charges 70,- EUR in cash (6). However, in the case that he is too busy for an urgent counseling session, he recommends his clients to speak with a "concerned father", a pensioner whose daughter has been damaged by a sect. (Flinger is most likely referring to his co-worker Griess who has accused the Smith's Friends of taking away his daughter, but lost several lawsuits against the group). When asked about his definition of a "sect", Felinger explained that a sect is basically a group characterized by "a unique ideology" and "intolerance".

2. Public Funding of a Private Anti-Cult Association

The GSK has so far never released any information on how much private funds it has raised, i. e. from churches or private supporters, or how much revenue it made from the persons it "consulted". What is certain is that the association has been publically subsidized by the City of Vienna and the State of Lower Austria for a period of more than 15 years. However, the private anti-cult association has generally lacked transparency concerning the precise amount of total public funds it received and the ratio of public vs. private funding.

(a) Subsidies by the City of Vienna

The local government of the City of Vienna has regularly approved the subsidization of the GSK from 1992 until 2008, resulting in a total funding expense of almost 220,000 EUR (see table 1) (7). Due to pressure applied by civil society formations, i. e. the Forum for Religious Freedom Europe (8), who questioned the ideological motive, the incoherent methodology and unconstitutional objective of the GSK, public funding of the association has been put to a halt in 2009 (see figure 1). The amount of subsidies provided for this private anti-cult group serves as an objective indicator for the intensity of the "sect debate" that took place in the sector of public administration and the media of German-speaking countries during the 1990s and early 2000s. To date, this debate has largely faded and has been replaced by the discourse on migration, terrorism and radicalization.