

Webinar: From the USCIRF Report on Persecution in Russia to Violations in Europe

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Organizer : Raffaella di Marzio, LIREC (Libertà di Religione, Credo è Coscienza)

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The Activities of FECRIS in the EU member states

Oral presentation by Willy Fautré, Human Rights Without Frontiers:

<https://youtu.be/VxAPSHKJI0w>

Last summer, the US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) published a paper about the anti-cult movement in present-day Russia and in the Soviet Union which highlighted the negative role of the *European Federation of Research and Information Centers on Sectarianism*, better known under its acronym FECRIS, founded in Paris in June 1994.

In its paper, USCIRF points at Alexander Dvorkin, a notorious extremist Russian Orthodox anti-cult activist, who has been the vice-president of FECRIS for about a dozen years. He is the liaison agent between FECRIS, an anti-cult organization largely financed by France, the champion of *laïcité* in Europe, and a constellation of Russian Orthodox clerical and missionary organizations characterized by their nationalistic, reactionary, homophobic and xenophobic agenda and discourse.

FECRIS appeared in Europe in the 1990s in the middle of a wave of collective suicides and homicides inspired by some marginal religious groups in North America, Europe and Asia. It was founded at the instigation of the French anti-cult association UNADFI (National Union of Associations for the Defence of Family and the Individual).

Since its inception, FECRIS has surfed on this worldwide wave of panic and has easily enjoyed the support of public powers and traditional religions.

In 2005, FECRIS got the participatory status as INGO (International Non-Governmental Organization) at the Council of Europe. This recognition was controversial. Movements defending religious freedom and scholars then voiced their disagreement.

In 2009, FECRIS obtained consultative status with the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) of the United Nations (UN) and has hereby access to the UN in New York, Geneva and Vienna.

Throughout the last two decades, FECRIS has been mainly financed by the French State which year after year has faithfully provided almost 100% of its budget, as Thierry Valle will explain you afterwards. It can therefore be said that France has been and still is the driving force of FECRIS, its aura at the international level and its influence on the policies of some member states of the European Union.

FECRIS anti-cult activities in some member states of the European Union

FECRIS is an umbrella organization which currently has member associations in 11 EU member states: Austria, Belgium, Croatia, Finland, France, Germany, Italy, Poland, Spain and Sweden. In each country, one local anti-cult association is affiliated to FECRIS while in France and Germany, there are four.

In the mid-1990s, the anti-cult ideology of FECRIS found a particularly sympathetic ear in **France, Belgium, Germany and Austria** which were the first and only countries in the EU to create a permanent state institution claiming to monitor the alleged intrinsic dangerousness of cults but in fact organizing cult hunting campaigns legitimized by public powers.

These four states decided to work out and implement a specific anti-cult policy.

Austria created a documentation and information center on cults in 1998. It was named *Federal Office on Cult Issues/ Bundesstelle für Sektenfragen* and placed under the authority of the Federal Ministry of the Environment, Youth and the Family. The mandate of this state-sponsored body was allegedly to warn and protect society against so-called cults. A brochure titled *Sekten – Wissen Schützt* (Cults – Knowledge Protects) stigmatizing such movements was also widely distributed. The establishment and operation of a Federal Office about Cult Issues and other similar offices at the state level with public funding was controversial.

Additionally, several provinces set up offices that provided information on “sects” and “cults” that was in reality stigmatizing such groups and their members.

The driving force behind the anti-cult campaign of the Austrian state was the FECRIS member association called GSK, *Society against Cult Dangers/ Gesellschaft gegen Sekten- und Kultgefahren*, which for several years was led by Friedrich Griess, a retired engineer and committed Roman Catholic. He became the third president of FECRIS from 2005 to 2009. He was known for his aggressive activities against the Norwegian group Smith’s Friends, an

evangelical non-denominational church, that his adult daughter had freely joined. Griess' anti-cult motivation was a personal vendetta that tore up his own family. The brochure *Sekten – Wissen Schützt* (Cults – Knowledge Protects) financed and published by the Federal Office on Cult Issues was a major tool of propaganda in the hands of GSK, other anti-cult movements and activists.

In 2016, Human Rights Without Frontiers published a documented research paper by Dominic Zoehrer about the financing of GSK, FECRIS member association. The author found out that it had been subsidized for many years by the City of Vienna (1992-2008) and the State of Lower Austria (2000-2010) but there was a disturbing lack of transparency concerning the precise amount of total public funds it had received and the ratio between public and private funding. According to its current website, the GSK still receives funding from the State of Lower Austria through the "Office Generations", which has been renamed to "Department for Families and Generations".

In **Germany**, the parliament set up a commission of inquiry in 1996 which published a report in June 1998. However, in the aftermath of this report, there was no political majority to create a state-sponsored cult observatory and to define a specific policy targeting so-called cults, except for the Church Scientology, created by Ron Hubbard in the US, and the Unification Church, created by Rev. Moon in South Korea. Both were viewed as a threat to the German Constitution.

The ban on Mr. and Mrs. Moon's access to the German territory commissioned by the Interior Ministry in 1995 was prolonged in 1998 by three more years and was only considered unjustified in 2007 by the Higher Administrative Court of Rhineland-Palatinate after 12 years of legal wrangling.

As to the Church of Scientology, it was placed under surveillance of the *Federal Office for Protection of the Constitution/ Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz*. The Church fought back on several fronts and in 2003 was granted the same tax-free status as other Churches. In April 2005, Saarland's Higher Administrative Court put an end to the Church of Scientology's intelligence surveillance on the grounds that seven years of such surveillance had failed to yield any results justifying any prolongation. However, a blatant discriminatory measure has persisted for more than 20 years: the so-called "cult filter."

In September 2019, Human Rights Without Frontiers addressed this issue in an oral and a written statement at the OSCE/ ODIHR Human Dimension Implementation Meeting in Warsaw saying:

In Bavaria and a few other German Länder, the authorities use what they call "sect filters" when someone applies for a public job, a public service contract or a government bid. These "sect filters" contain questions exclusively targeting the possible affiliation or relationship of the candidate with Scientology. If so, the

candidacy will be disqualified and so will it be if the applicant refuses to fill in the questionnaire.

This is not only intrusive and discriminatory but this gravely violates the international human rights standards and stigmatizes the followers of Ron Hubbard as sub-citizens. The teachings of Scientology are not banned in Germany and spreading them is not a criminal activity. Therefore, their followers should not be treated differently from the followers of the Bible, the Coran, the Bhagavad Gita, the Buddhist or any other teachings.

In fact, Germany did not need a specific state agency to elaborate an anti-cult policy and action plan. The report of its parliamentary enquete commission was sufficient for the four FECRIS member associations and dozens of anti-cult groups supported and funded by the Catholic Church and the Lutheran Church to legitimize their cult-hunting activities.

France and Belgium

Although I will leave it to Thierry Valle to speak about France, where four FECRIS member associations have been for decades the driving forces of a very aggressive state anti-cult policy, a common course of action has been adopted by France and Belgium:

- creation of a parliamentary commission,
- publication of a report about cults and a list of almost 200 allegedly suspicious religious groups
- creation of governmental agencies to fight against such groups
- close collaboration with private anti-cult movements, such as FECRIS member associations
- promulgation of specific laws targeting the stigmatized groups
- implementation of large-scale policies targeting such groups
- harassment by the tax administration and other state agencies

In **Belgium**, a parliamentary commission of inquiry was set up in April 1996. A report about the illegal practices of cults and the danger they can pose to society and individuals, particularly minors, was published a year later. A controversial list of 189 allegedly suspicious movements was attached to the report. The magnitude of the stigmatization that this report and this blacklist created was heavily criticized by European and American scholars in religious studies, at the OSCE and at the UN.

On 2 June 1998, the Belgian Parliament promulgated the “Law creating an Information and Advisory Centre on Harmful Sectarian Organizations” (CIAOSN) and an “Administrative Coordination Agency for the Fight Against Harmful Sectarian Organizations”.

All these legislative steps clearly indicated an alignment on the FECRIS anti-cult ideology. This bias was confirmed by the appointments of the successive CIAOSN boards of directors. At that time, the FECRIS affiliated member association in Belgium was an obscure group created by some activists who were unknown by experts on religious matters. The influence of FECRIS on Belgium's policy was and is to be mainly attributed to the very aggressive policy of France inspired by the FECRIS four member associations.

After two decades of international criticisms, the composition of the new board of directors put in place in July 2020 now shows a very different face from former appointees but the original objective remains the fight against so-called "harmful sectarian organizations." The board comprises four French-speaking and four Dutch-speaking members: magistrates, lawyers, jurists, police, intelligence services, politicians.

Guy RAPAILLE, the current president was the director of the "Comité R" in charge of the oversight of the Belgian intelligence services from 2006 to 2018;
Thierry WERTS, former francophone spokesman of the Federal Prosecutor's Office from 2015 to 2017 before being appointed as advisor at the Court of Appeal of Brussels;
Eric ROBERT, president of the peace judges and the police courts judges of Namur district;
Dany LESCIAUSKAS, retired Federal Police officer;
Luc WILLEMS, a lawyer, co-rapporteur of the 1997 Belgian report on cults as an elected Flemish Christian Democrat member of the House of Representatives, retired from Belgian politics;
Frank JUDO, a Flemish Christian Democrat politician, historian, jurist and philosopher;
Bert BROECKAERT, a specialist in ethics and comparative religion teaching at the Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies, KU Leuven;
Yvette DE WEYER, a Flemish jurist at 'Bruxelles Formation'.

The list of substitute members also comprises of eight members, including five members of previous boards. One of them, Mireille STALLMASTER-DEGEN, is worth mentioning as she presents herself on her LinkedIn page as FECRIS secretary general. It is also worth stressing that Eric BRASSEUR, retired director of the CIAOSN, is on the list of substitute members.

The anti-cult ideology continues to permeate the activities of the CIAOSN as it is evidenced by a study of its website: support for the activities of FECRIS and two of its member associations in France. There is also a bias against the movement of Jehovah's Witnesses about which the CIAOSN mainly relies on press clippings while largely ignoring academic studies.

The publicity in favor of four Belgian anti-cult organizations also raises some concerns. One of them, AVISO (Aid to Victims of Cults), was created in 2012 and is FECRIS member association in Belgium. The composition of its nine-member board speaks for itself. A few examples:

André FRÉDÉRIC, AVISO president, member of FECRIS board since 2018, Socialist senator and promoter of the 2012 Law on the abuse of weakness specifically targeting cults;

Eric BRASSEUR, former director of CIAOSN;
Mireille DEGEN, FECRIS secretary general, former member and currently substitute member of CIAOSN board;
Dany LESCIAUSKAS, member of CIAOSN board;
Roland PLANCHAR, a well-known journalist at La Libre Belgique, a major newspaper of Catholic orientation, who has regularly supported CIAOSN activities.

Obviously, the anti-cult ideology of the CIAOSN continues to be strongly influenced by FECRIS ideology despite the warnings of the US Commission on International Freedom and the cult issue in Belgium is still politically perceived by the authorities as a potential cluster of illegal, criminal and security-threatening activities.

In conclusion of my presentation, I will quote the recommendations of the US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) to the U.S. Government:

Publicly censure Alexander Dvorkin, FECRIS vice-president, for his ongoing disinformation campaign against religious minorities;

Counter propaganda against new religious movements by the European Federation of Research and Information Centers on Sectarianism (FECRIS) at the annual OSCE Human Dimension Conference with information about the ongoing involvement of individuals and entities within the anti-cult movement in the suppression of religious freedom.

France, Belgium, Austria, Germany and other EU member states should seriously take these recommendations into consideration and implement social distancing from FECRIS and its affiliates.

By speaker:

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