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Over 80 Ukrainian scholars denounce to Macron a supporter of Russia's annexation

In 2019, Georges Fenech, now a member of a French state institution, participated in the commemoration of Crimea's invasion and annexation by Russia



The controversial visit of a French delegation in 2019. Georges Fenech is the fourth one starting from the right, hiding behind the other French participants. Credit: [Libération](#)

HRWF (16.03.2023) - On the eve of the 9th anniversary of Russia's invasion of Crimea, over 80 Ukrainian scholars in religious studies have written to President Emmanuel Macron to denounce the presence in an institution of the French state of a supporter of Russia's annexation in 2014.

On the 5th anniversary of Russia's invasion and annexation of Crimea, Georges Fenech, a former member of the National Assembly (2022-2008 and 2012-2017) was part of a controversial visit in Crimea of an unofficial French delegation led by MP Thierry Mariani.

Since 2021, Fenech has been a member of the Orientation Council of the MIVILUDES, a controversial state body monitoring the activities of a number of religious or belief groups, he had been the president of from 2008 to 2012.

The three-day visit of Crimea at mid-March 2019 was organized and financed by the "Russian Foundation for Peace," according to Mariani.

The participants were received by Leonid Slutsky, Chairman of the Committee on International Affairs in the Russian State Duma, and Vladimir Konstantinov, a Crimean MP accused of high treason in Ukraine, sanctioned by the European Union since 2014, and a strong supporter of Putin and the Russian annexation of Crimea. They also met Vladimir Putin himself in Simferopol.

The purpose for the unofficial French delegation was to testify in France about how well Crimea was doing under Russian occupation. French journalists from [Liberation](#) recognized Fenech in a Russian documentary that flanked the visit, and Mariani confirmed that Fenech who obviously wanted to go unnoticed was part of the delegation.

In 2011, Fenech also shared the stage at a conference with a Russian extremist Orthodox clergyman, Alexander Novopashin, number 2 of the Russian branch of the French FECRIS organisation known to stigmatize non-mainline religious or belief groups.

Recently, [Novopashin called Ukrainians "Nazis", "Satanists" and "cannibals."](#) He drives a car with a huge "Z" printed on it, insists that Western cults were behind the Euromaidan and Ukrainian authorities, that "the special operation of denazification is carried out not only to destroy the hydra in its lair, but to protect the whole Russian world." He preaches that "after an end will be put to Ukrainian Nazism, some other aggressor country will appear with which the United States will begin to threaten Russia. A civilizational war cannot be avoided."

France joins China and Russia by introducing special police techniques against "cults"

A new law allows officers to bug houses and cars, hack email, and even impersonate mail carriers delivering packages to those suspected of "cultic deviances."

by Massimo Introvigne



"Gendarmerie" in action in France. *Credits.*

Imagine that you live in a country where "cultic deviances" from what the majority of the citizens regard as the normal, and normally tepid, behavior in matter religious is looked at with suspicion by the authorities. Your neighbors, who do not like you for whatever reason, report to a specialized anti-cult agency or to the police that you behave strangely and perhaps are part of a "cult." At this stage, the police may be authorized to hack your email and your computer or place a hidden microphone in your house or your car. And beware when the mail carrier knocks at your door with a package: it can be an undercover police agent.

This is unfortunately daily routine in China, where thousands of police officers work full time to crack down on "cults," or in Russia where all members of a religious group regarded as "extremist," which does not mean violent but simply trying to convert members of the majority Russian Orthodox Church, may be visited by the Federal Security Service (FSB), taken to jail, and even tortured. The democratic world continues to denounce these blatant violations of religious liberty and human rights—and rightly so.

Most of those who protest the denial of religious liberty in Russia and China would be mightily surprised to learn that similar legislation has been introduced in a country normally considered as a beacon of democratic values, France.

A country with a strong secular humanist tradition, France has been suspicious of religion since the French Revolution, and has a specialized governmental agency and police units fighting against "cultic deviances" (*dérives sectaires*). It should, however, be remembered that being a member of a "cult" is not in itself a crime in France.

The so-called French anti-cult law of 2001 has been criticized by virtually all international scholars of new religious movements who have studied it, but even its provisions does not make belonging to a "cult" (*secte*) or engaging in "cultic deviances" a crime. Only putting a person through certain techniques in a "state of physical or psychological dependency" causing her serious harm is a crime. I, and most scholars in my field,

believe that these techniques do not exist, but at any rate in the French system that they are at work in a certain group should be proved on a case-by-case basis.

So, simply by being part of a “cult” (secte) or of a movement suspected of “cultic deviances” (dérives sectaires) you are not a criminal—not even in France. The problem is that you are treated like one.

A new [law of January 24, 2023](#), on the “orientation and programs of the Ministry of the Internal Affairs,” as its official comment specifies at no. 3.1.2, authorizes the relevant French authorities “to apply the special investigation techniques to the offence of abuse of weakness by an organized criminal gang (bande organisée) to facilitate the work of investigators in the combat against the cultic deviances.”



Entrance to the French Ministry of the Internal affairs, Paris. Credits.

The reference to an “organized criminal gang” is the key to allow the use of the “special investigation techniques.” The new law suggests in its article 16 that the typical crime of the 2001 anti-cult law, “abuse of weakness” through the famous and mysterious techniques creating psychological dependence (another incarnation of the discredit theory of [brainwashing](#)), can be perpetrated by an “organized gang”—and perhaps this happens in most or even all cases, since it is difficult to imagine a “cult” without an organization. This allows both to increase the penalties, up to seven years of imprisonment and one million euro of fine, and to apply the “special investigation techniques” in investigating the alleged crime.

The “special investigation techniques” are those listed in [Section XXV](#) of the Code of Criminal Procedure. The police officers will be able to hack mail accounts, bug homes and cars, send fake mails and use false identities on social media, impersonate “cultists” or potential converts and operate undercover, and even—as mentioned earlier—“deliver in place of postal service providers and freight operators objects, goods or products” to those suspected of “cultic deviances.” Note that according to article 706-79 police officers can be assisted by “specialized assistants” deputized on a case-by-case basis, and I wonder whether in the case of “cults” these may include the anti-cult activists.

The techniques of Section XXV were created to combat terrorism and organized crime. While always potentially dangerous for the rights of the defendants, a limited use of these techniques may in principle be admitted when the life of hundreds of citizens or the security of the country are at stake. Remember, however, that in the case of “cultic deviances” when an investigation is started there is not even evidence that the group will end up being accused of using forbidden techniques of brainwashing (or whatever France prefers to call them), even assuming they exist.

L'AMPLEUR DES MOYENS DEPLOYES PAR LES MOUVEMENTS A CARACTERE SECTAIRE FACE A LA FAIBLESSE DES MOYENS DE LUTTE CONTRE LES DERIVES SECTAIRES.

En ce début d'année 2022, force est de constater que le phénomène des dérives sectaires demeure plus que jamais prégnant en France et n'épargne aucun territoire. La Mission interministérielle de vigilance et de lutte contre les dérives sectaires (MIVILUDES), pierre angulaire de la lutte contre les dérives sectaires, ainsi que les autres acteurs y participant sont d'autant plus mobilisés aujourd'hui que l'évolution du phénomène sectaire témoigne d'un accroissement et de mutations, accentués par

la survenance de la crise sanitaire doublée d'une crise sociale instaurant un climat anxigène empreint de méfiance, propice à la déstabilisation des personnes vulnérables. Dans ce contexte d'un phénomène sectaire à l'état gazeux et multiforme, s'imposant dans chaque sphère de la société, la justice doit relever le défi d'une meilleure caractérisation des infractions commises et d'une plus grande protection des droits et libertés fondamentales dans un cadre sectaire dans la mesure des moyens

juridiques disponibles.

I. Les dérives sectaires à l'aune de la protection des droits fondamentaux

En France, le régime démocratique caractérisé par un État de droit s'inscrit dans la concrétisation juridique de la notion de pluralisme. Cette dernière incarne, comme l'affirmait Rousseau, « le principe de la démocratie, c'est-à-dire le point de départ logique d'où se déduit l'ensemble de l'organisation sociale, culturelle, politique, constitutionnelle. »⁽¹⁾ Le pluralisme, au travers d'une sémantique diversifiée, est ainsi consacré dans les textes comme principe fondamental garantissant la liberté de conscience, fondement indispensable du contrat social.

À cet égard, l'article 10 de la Déclaration des droits de l'homme et du citoyen de 1789 (DDHC) indique que « Nul ne doit être inquiété pour ses opinions, même religieuses, pourvu que leur manifestation ne trouble pas l'ordre public établi par la Loi » et la loi du 9 décembre 1905 proclame que « La République assure la liberté de conscience. Elle garantit le libre exercice des cultes sous les seules restrictions édictées dans l'intérêt de l'ordre public ». Ces deux textes seront confortés plus tard par l'article 1er de la Constitution de 1958 énonçant que « la France respecte toutes les croyances ». Enfin, il est à noter que le Conseil constitutionnel⁽²⁾ a reconnu en 1977 la liberté de conscience comme un Principe Fondamental Reconnu par les Lois de la République (PFRLR).

Au-delà des textes nationaux, le pluralisme des opinions et des croyances se voit également juridiquement protégé par le droit européen. Ainsi, l'article 9 de la Convention européenne des droits de l'homme consacre que « Toute personne a droit à la liberté de pensée, de conscience et de religion » et la Cour européenne des droits de l'homme (CEDH) estime quant à elle que la liberté de conscience « représente l'une des assises d'une société démocratique au sens de la Convention »⁽³⁾. Rappelant l'importance de la diversité des opinions porteuse de la richesse intellectuelle et argumentative des débats d'idées au sein d'une société, la Cour explique que cette liberté est l'un des « éléments les plus essentiels de l'identité des croyants et de leur concept de vie, mais elle est aussi un bien précieux pour les athées, les agnostiques, les sceptiques ou les indifférents »⁽⁴⁾.



Hanène ROMDHANE
Responsable de la Miviludes.
Magistrate et Docteur en Droit Public.

The June 2022 article where Romdhane asked for a law allowing the police to use special investigation techniques against "cultic deviances."

The governmental anti-cult agency MIVILUDES itself **admits in its reports** that in most cases in which it asks the police to investigate nobody is committed to trial. In an article she published last year in the magazine of the Bordeaux Bar Association ("Revue des libertés fondamentales," June 2022, 46-55), the then chief of the MIVILUDES Hanène Romdhane (who **left the mission in stormy circumstances** at the end of 2022) admitted

that French prosecutors succeeded “very rarely” in obtaining court decisions punishing the crime of “creating psychological dependence” through “cultic deviances,” due to “the difficult legal characterization of the notion of mental control, whose contours are vague and far from the usual legal concepts.”

Rather than concluding, as scholars and courts did in other countries, that the idea that “cults” use mysterious and magically effective techniques of “mental control” is a pseudo-scientific myth, Romdhane asked precisely for a law allowing “the use of special investigation techniques to effectively combat cultic deviances.” She expressed the hope that perhaps “the use of these techniques could allow to overcome the obstacles that make it difficult to prove the existence of the psychological subjection.” However, if there are no fishes, even the use of the most draconian fishing techniques, such as throwing bombs into the river, would not allow the fishermen to capture them.

Only the anti-cult ideology and rhetoric seems to justify the police fishing party looking for imaginary crimes, and the enormous and unnecessary intrusion in the private lives and daily activities of peaceful citizens whose only crime is, in most cases, to think and believe differently from the majority.

“Église de Philadelphie”: How MIVILUDES and French anti-cultists invented a “cult”

In 2011, the wife and four children of a French aristocrat were murdered. Anti-cultists tried to connect the crime with “cults.” Their legal case has now collapsed.

By Massimo Introvigne

Bitter Winter (06.01.2023) - <https://bit.ly/3CvCCUa> - The French anti-cult establishment tried to promote itself “to the detriment of deeply religious people who have no deviance prohibited by the law.” Stéphane Goldenstein, the lawyer representing Geneviève and Christine Dupont de Ligonès, tells Bitter Winter that “my clients are the scapegoats for a cause that is not their own.” The fact that the case against them has now been dismissed “comes to rehabilitate them in their dignities but the damage is done... ‘Slander boldly, something always sticks,’ as Francis Bacon rightly wrote.”

What is happening in France is another scandal hitting the MIVILUDES, the French 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.

The case against what the MIVILUDES calls the “Philadelphia Church” (Église de Philadelphie) [was dismissed](#) by the district attorney office of Versailles on January 3. This revealed a hardly believable story where the MIVILUDES and others tried to surf on the notoriety of an unsolved homicide case to further their propaganda against “cults.”

On April 21, 2011, the police discovered in Nantes, France, the body of Agnès Hodanger, the wife of the French aristocrat Xavier Dupont de Ligonès, and of their four children. Xavier was named by the police as the main suspect for the murders, but he disappeared

and has not been seen ever since. Although not well-known abroad, the affair has been the subject of hundreds of articles and several books and TV documentaries in France.

The Dupont de Ligonnès are a conservative Catholic family. Xavier's mother, Geneviève, and his sister Christine did not endear themselves to the authorities by continuing to claim that Xavier's guilt had not been proven, and other possibilities for the murder should have been considered. In general, French media do not like conservative or traditionalist Catholicism either.

Geneviève and Christine operate a conservative Catholic prayer group, which is also interested in private revelations Geneviève claims to receive from God and Jesus. There are thousands of similar Catholic communities in the world, hundreds in France, as described inter alia by historian Jean-Pierre Chantin in his recent book "Catholiques malgré Rome" (Paris: Cerf, 2022).

The name "Philadelphia Church" may sound strange and even "American" (aren't most "cults" American?) in a country like France where Biblical literacy is low, but in fact dozens of Christian groups throughout the world use the name "Philadelphia," referring to a city not in Pennsylvania but in present-day Turkey where one of the earliest churches was established. The church of Philadelphia is mentioned in the Book of Revelation 1:11. Although Revelation 1 was one of the texts they studied, the Duponts deny that their group was ever named "Church of Philadelphia."

In 2019, disgruntled ex-members of the Dupont de Ligonnès community—again, such ex-members do exist in most religious groups—[contacted the MIVILUDES](#) claiming they had found "cultic deviances" there. Not being particularly skilled in the sociology of religions, which would have told them that crises often reinforce religious groups, [the MIVILUDES commented](#) that it was surprising that the community, which had been founded before the 2011 homicides, had not disbanded after the notorious case.

Not surprisingly, the MIVILUDES found that "cultic deviances" were at work, and [sent the case](#) to the office of the District Attorney of Versailles, which opened an investigation based on the French anti-cult About-Picard law of 2001, which created a strange crime of abusing of a state of weakness created through psychological techniques (yet another incarnation of the discredited theory of [brainwashing](#), without using this name).

Enter the then French Minister Delegate for Citizenship at the Ministry of Interior, [Marlène Schiappa](#), who had decided to jump on the anti-cult bandwagon for her own political purposes. The controversial politician gave several interviews where she [denounced](#) the "Philadelphia Church" as a dangerous "cult" that the police should investigate and the MIVILUDES should "alert the public opinion" about.

And the public opinion was duly alerted. [Marie Drilhon](#), the president of the local branch in the Yvelines region of the main French anti-cult organization, UNADFI, explained that, "We are aware of much more dangerous and widespread movements in terms of recruitment, about which we must be more alert. However, this highly publicized story can help us to revamp the public vigilance against the cults."

The cat was thus out of the bag. Perhaps there was no dangerous "cult" but because of the association with the 2011 murders the story will be "highly publicized" and will support the anti-cult propaganda, not to mention UNADFI's claims that it needed more money to fight the "cults."



Attorney Stéphane Goldenstein told Bitter Winter that “what disturbs me mostly in this case is that law-abiding citizens are harassed for their religious beliefs.” Goldenstein explains that “Geneviève’s revelations have never been approved by the Catholic Church, but they have not been formally condemned either. Some priests read them and found them quite surprising. She claims she receives them through a sort of automatic writing and they are in an antique language.” Not a believer in the revelations himself, Goldenstein insists that “there is nothing illegal there, nor do they include the prophecies about the end of the world some media mentioned.”

Goldenstein remembers that Xavier too was part of Catholic circles nostalgic of pre-Vatican-II times, and because of this Georges Fenech, who was at that time president of the MIVILUDES, “[tried to create the image](#) of a crime that had religious motivations and was born in a climate of ‘cultic deviances.’”

“It seems to me that the situation of a family who has suffered a lot, concludes Goldenstein, has been exploited for publicity purposes. In the process, their religious liberty was violated.”

The police and the prosecutor have now determined that there are no “cultic deviances.” A couple of French Catholics gathered friends to pray and study private revelations and the Bible. A quick look at the Internet would persuade the MIVILUDES that there are hundreds of similar prayer groups in France. Their values may not always be those of the French République, particularly when they are led by old aristocrats, but what they do is not illegal.

What happened is, simply, a shameful attempt to exploit a sensational murder to fuel the French campaign against “cults.”

Photo: Xavier Dupont de Ligonnès (screenshot) and the Nantes home where the bodies of his wife and children were found in 2011 ([credits](#)).