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## **Arbitrary de-registration of Jehovah's Witnesses: a case of discrimination denounced at the OSCE**

***Even the Russian Orthodox Church which supports Russia's war on Ukraine and the Catholic Church marred with sexual abuse are not de-registered or barred from state financing***

HRWF (05.10.2023) – On 5 October, Human Rights Without Frontiers denounced the arbitrary de-registration of Jehovah's Witnesses in Norway, at the Plenary Session of the Warsaw Human Dimension Conference on Tolerance and Non-discrimination.

« Norway is generally considered a country friendly to religious liberty.

Norway, which has a system of registration of religious communities amended in 2020, has registered over 700 different religious groups. Until December 2022, none had been de-registered on account of an assessment of its beliefs and practices.

Even the Russian Orthodox Church has kept five religious entities registered and goes on receiving state grants, despite its vocal support for the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Moreover, sexual abuse by members of the Catholic Church clergy has not led either to the denial of public subsidies.

For 30 years, Jehovah's Witnesses have received state subsidies. These are not "gifts" but allocations provided to ALL religious communities by the Norwegian Constitution and laws to respect the principle of equality, since the Church of Norway, the Lutheran Church, is supported by taxpayers' money.

In [an administrative decision](#) (1) of 27 January 2022, the County Governor for Oslo and Viken announced its decision to deny Jehovah's Witnesses State grants on the basis of allegations from three disgruntled former members and a biased interpretation of the exclusion system of members of the religious community. With this decision, Jehovah's Witnesses also lose the right to perform legally valid marriages.

Noteworthy is that [the European Court](#) (2) has found the practices of Jehovah's Witnesses not objectionable and deserving the protection of international principles on religious liberty in dozens of cases.

To date, the government of Norway has not submitted any reliable evidence to substantiate the claims of revengeful former Jehovah's Witnesses and no court has confirmed them either.

### **Recommendations**

Human Rights Without Frontiers recommends that Norway

- Cancel the unfounded discriminatory decision to remove the registration of Jehovah's Witnesses as a religious community
- Restore the State grants they have been deprived of since 2021 as a consequence of this illegitimate decision."

#### Footnote

- (1) <https://bitterwinter.org/norway-decision-against-the-jehovahs-witnesses/>  
 (2) <https://cne.news/article/2569-european-court-rejects-jehovah-s-witness-complaint>

#### More information on our website:

<https://hrwf.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/Norway-2023.pdf>  
<https://hrwf.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Norway-2021.pdf>

## Side-event addressing anti-religious hate crimes in the OSCE area

### *Speech of Christine Mirre (CAP/ Liberté de Conscience with ECOSOC status)*

HRWF (06.10.2023) – On 6 October, the Tolerance and Non-Discrimination Department of the OSCE/ ODIHR organized a side event focusing on the factors leading to intolerance and hate crimes against religious minorities in a side-event held by the OSCE/ ODIHR in the framework of the Warsaw Human Dimension Conference (2 -13 October). Christine Mirre analyzed the nefarious role of the anti-cultists and some media in the stigmatization targeting new religious or belief movements. Here is her presentation:

"First, I would like to underscore the great value of the considerable amount of work that ODIHR has done to combat hate crimes in our European societies through a range of programs and resources to assist participating States in recognizing and properly combating hate crimes.

In my NGO's field of expertise, which is freedom of religion or belief, with a special focus on religious minorities, these tools are invaluable to us, and we make full use of them.

Today, I'd like to highlight a European phenomenon that leads to intolerance, stigmatization, and discrimination against religious minorities, which can ultimately result in hate crimes, and the various actors involved in this phenomenon.

First, what do I mean by "religious minority"?

I mean new or non-traditional religious movements and communities, identified by the notorious and stigmatizing term: sect or cult.

Recently the European Court of Human Rights condemned Bulgaria, stating that calling a religious minority a "cult" exposes it to negative consequences and that such slanderous language should be avoided by public authorities.

At the root of this stigmatization and discrimination are the "anti-cultists", which are in fact either individuals, apostates, or anti-cult associations under the umbrella of a European federation.

The misuse of this derogatory label, used without restraint by anti-cultists and the media, cause a lot of damage to these religious minorities and their members in their personal lives.

In addition, the media have their share of responsibility in this damage when out of sensationalism they fail to check and echo the false accusations of the anti-cultists, spread their fake news, create a climate of suspicion and hostility leading sometimes to hate crimes.

Unfounded accusations amplified by the media not only influence public opinion. They also shape the ideas of political decision-makers, and they may be officially endorsed by some democratic states and their institutions. It is the case in Germany, Austria, France or Belgium, just to name a few.

This climate of intolerance and hate was clearly denounced in the last report of USCIRF ([United States Commission on International Religious Freedom](#)). In the section devoted to anti-cultism, it stressed that *"several governments in the EU have supported or facilitated the propagation of harmful information about certain religious groups"*.

To sum up:

- anti-cultists create from scratch cults that they describe as "dangerous or harmful to society",
- the media, which thrive on sensationalism rather than facts, seize on the cult issue as a good topic because that boosts the sales or the audience,
- the States, misinformed by anti-cultists, feel obliged to protect their citizens from this scourge, and create exceptional laws and specialized repressive bodies, such as the Miviludes and the "cult police" in France.

This sends a signal of distrust, threat, and danger, and creates a climate of suspicion, intolerance, hostility and hatred in society.

Indeed, when these groups are labeled as dangerous to society by the media and state institutions, it sends a signal to some unstable minds that getting rid of these dangerous elements is a legitimate "civic" act.

Unfortunately, we have received numerous reports of

- vandalism of places of worship of Jehovah's Witnesses' community buildings in Italy,
- anonymous bomb threats,
- death threats,
- armed individuals entering places of worship, as in the case of the Church of Scientology in France,
- the shooting of 7 Jehovah's Witnesses in Germany.

This phenomenon and intolerance towards religious and belief minorities does not exist in countries where there is no anti-cult organization.

Taiwan, where I was recently invited to participate in an international forum on religious freedom, is a good example in this regard.

In fact, I did not find any victim of distorted or false information, marginalization, discrimination, hate speech or hate crimes.

Nothing as such reported in the Taiwanese media, and consequently no unfounded government attitudes and policies toward such groups.

Jehovah's Witnesses or Scientologists in Taiwan will tell you they are not victims of any form of intolerance or stigmatization by the media and state institutions.

In conclusion, European democracies are not entitled to teach lessons to others concerning religious intolerance and discrimination. They should be humble enough to follow the good practices of other countries.

To eradicate the spread of intolerance and hate crimes against religious minorities in the OSCE space, and in Europe in particular, I would recommend that:

- The OSCE/ ODIHR organize workshops for journalists and media people in some sensitive countries about how to cover issues related to religious minorities, without inciting illegitimate suspicion and hostility,
  - Media outlets abide by internationally recognized ethical standards when covering religious issues,
  - States refrain from stigmatizing specific religious or belief minorities."
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