



# General Assembly

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## Human Rights Council

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Agenda item 4

**Human rights situations that require the Council's attention**

### **Written statement\* submitted by Coordination des Associations et des Particuliers pour la Liberté de Conscience, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status**

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[29 January 2024]

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\* Issued as received, in the language of submission only.

## **Stigmatization and hate speech towards religious minorities caused by French policy**

CAP Liberté de Conscience is a secular European NGO with United Nations Consultative Status, created in 1995 and dedicated to protecting the Right of Freedom of Religion and Belief. It combats all forms of discrimination based on religion or belief, inter alia, by alerting European and International bodies to abuses and violations of international standards. It collects testimonies of discrimination and human rights violations affecting religious or belief communities disseminating them to international bodies, to broadly raise awareness on the subject and to generate debate on the need for protection of freedom of religion or Belief.

We wish to draw the attention of the Human Rights Council to a European phenomenon that leads to intolerance, stigmatization and discrimination against religious minorities, which can ultimately lead to hate crimes, and to the various actors involved in this phenomenon.

First, what do we mean by “religious minority“?

We mean new or non-traditional religious movements, 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 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 without restraint by anti-cultists and the media, cause a lot of damage to these religious minorities and their members.

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 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.

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.

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.

We have received numerous reports of:

- vandalism of places of worship of Jehovah’s Witnesses in Italy,
- anonymous bomb threats,
- armed individuals entering in a Church of Scientology in France,
- and the shooting of 7 Jehovah’s Witnesses in Germany.

We identified a specific type of hate crime affecting women related to their involvement in religious minorities:

- Women reported harassment by husbands and families after joining a religious group.
- Cases of husbands forcibly removing wives from places of worship and harassing them at work.
- Husbands seeking divorce on the grounds that their wives have been manipulated by cult leaders.
- And the case of a woman whose husband sought “exit counseling” from an anti-cult association.

A case of concern : The Miviludes and its umbrella NGOs

Centre Contre les Manipulations Mentales (CCMM) and Union National des Associations de Défense des Familles et des Individus (UNADFI) are two French associations, which pretend to be NGOs while in fact they are GONGOs (Government Non-Government Organisations), being 90% funded by the French government. Their main activity is to make derogatory comments (under the guise of ‘information’) against religious minorities and spread propaganda aimed at discrediting and cast shame at such minorities.

CCMM and UNADFI are both part of the FECRIS (European Federation of Centres of Research and Information on Cults and Sects), a European umbrella association. In fact, UNADFI is the main co- founder of the FECRIS, the latter being registered in France and also directly funded by the French government.

FECRIS, its affiliated organizations and their leaders, have been convicted multiple times by various courts. The former vice-president of FECRIS and Board Member of Austrian FECRIS group GSK has been convicted for defamation a number of times against the religious group Norweger (Christian group present in over 60 countries).

UNADFI and its members (ADFI) also had their share of convictions.

In November 2015, UNADFI was convicted by the Court of Appeal of Paris for “abuse of legal process”, for having joined, and persisted unlawfully and in bad faith as a plaintiff against the Church, while UNADFI knew perfectly well that this action was inadmissible, its sole purpose being to “harm the Church and to illegally influence the judicial proceedings in progress.” This conviction was upheld by the Court of Cassation on January 12, 2017.

Moreover in 2020, FECRIS has been described by USCIRF (United States Commission on International Religious Freedom), a bipartisan U.S. federal government commission created by the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act, as a group regularly spreading negative

propaganda about religious minorities that needed to be countered. In a very well documented report named The Anti-cult Movement and Religious Regulation in Russia and the Former Soviet Union, USCIRF also described how Alexander Dvorkin, a Russian Orthodox anticult activist and Vice-President of the FECRIS, supported, amongst other things, “rehabilitation centres that claim to successfully deprogrammed ‘victims’ through a combination of psychological, theological, and pedagogical methodologies.” Such “victims” are in fact members of religious minorities considered as “destructive” “pseudo-religions.”

In its report, USCIRF wrote that, “the anti-cult movement continues to conduct a highly effective disinformation campaign against religious minorities with devastating consequences for their human rights (...) The anti-cult movement is fundamentally a propaganda outlet conducting a highly effective information war against religious minorities throughout Russia and many of the countries in which it retains influence.

It finally recommends to, “counter propaganda against new religious movements by the European Federation of Research and Information Centers on Sectarianism (FECRIS) (...) with information about the ongoing involvement of individuals and entities within the anti-cult movement in the suppression of religious freedom.”

In July 2023 the USCIRF again condemned France for its policy against religious minorities. Bloom shows in his report for the USCIRF that some EU governments have been spreading damaging information about specific religious groups, labelling them as 'sects' or 'cults'. The involvement of the French government with already discredited organizations such as FECRIS, through the government body MIVILUDES (which some would say is the "Sugar Daddy" of FECRIS) has provoked media reactions that negatively affect individuals associated with religious organizations. Often, the rights of these religions are fully recognized by the United States and even many European countries, and even the European Court of Human Rights.

In France, recent laws have given the authorities the power to use special techniques to investigate what they call "sects" and penalize people found guilty before a fair trial.

The consequences for religious minorities

CAP Liberté de Conscience en 2022/2023 has collected testimonies about the consequences of this government policy:

- Members of these minorities losing their jobs or their children being harassed by teachers at school, as soon as they knew they belonged to a minority.
- Places of worship vandalised (tags, fire...)
- An armed person threatened members of a community in their place of worship.
- Physical and verbal attacks on leaving places of worship.
- Administrative harassment of religious minorities and their members

Conclusion

Lack of transparency

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Miviludes is an opaque organisation that does not publish its working methods or results. This makes it difficult to evaluate its activities. In addition, Miviludes has been criticised for its

lack of consultation with religious movements.

A stigmatising approach

Miviludes' focus on religious movements has led to their stigmatisation, which has resulted in numerous hate crimes.

Despite criticism from international institutions, associations for the defence of freedom of religion and belief and international academics, Miviludes has continued its policy without ever questioning itself.

Recommendations

- The French government should stop funding anti-cult associations such as FECRIS, which for years has been at the forefront of Russian and Chinese propaganda against religious minorities and movements such as Falun Gong.

- Miviludes should be open to dialogue with all religious minorities and academics who study these movements.

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Source :

<https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/2020%20Anti-Cult%20Update%20-%20Religious%20Regulation%20in%20Russia.pdf>

<https://www.uscirf.gov/publications/religious-freedom-concerns-european-union>

<https://hatecrime.osce.org/france>

<https://freedomofconscience.eu/osce-odhr-hate-crime-reporting-france/>

<https://freedomofconscience.eu/43rd-session-universal-periodic-review-france-les-conditions-de-detention-en-france/>