



CAP Liberté de Conscience

Report on France 2023

Public funding of anti-religious associations in France. 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.

CAP Liberté de Conscience also advocates for any religious or spiritual group facing discrimination supporting the right to have their freedom of religion or belief recognized.

CAP Liberté de Conscience is committed to the defence of minorities throughout the world, but as a French NGO we remain concerned by the example set by France in its policy against the expression of religious diversity, and more particularly by the resumption of the fight against religious minorities in France since the recent reorganisation of MIVILUDES (Mission interministérielle de vigilance et de lutte contre les derives sectaires).

We have seen that this policy has been used by China, the Russian Federation¹ and other similar states such as Iran to combat religious minorities.

At the beginning of 2020, the French Prime Minister announced a reorganization of MIVILUDES in response to a report from the Accounting Court (*Cour des Comptes*) which denounced the lack of professionalism of MIVILUDES in its working method and questioned the relevance of such an organization.

At this time, the Prime Minister said that the work of MIVILUDES would be reoriented towards the fight against radicalism and would be attached to the Interior Ministry.

Finally, following the advice of the *Cour des Comptes*, the MIVILUDES was moved from beneath the Prime Minister office, to become a section of the Ministry of Interior.

The Minister Delegate for Citizenship at the Ministry of the Interior, Marlène Schiappa, then announced that she was in charge of MIVILUDES. On April 6, she stated that the MIVILUDES was going to be revived and she had decided to increase its present budget ten-fold, to 1 million euro per year, and that this million will be allocated to initiatives that would be run by anti-cult associations, namely CCMM and UNADFIⁱⁱ.

In 2023 Marlène Schiappa was forced to resign after a scandal involving the funding of an association to combat separatism.

A parliamentary enquiry clearly established that Ms Schiappa had favoured a friendly association.

Following Ms Schiappa's resignation, Ms Sonia Backès took over the post and the fight against religious minorities.

Ms Backès has strengthened Miviludes and has also endowed anti-cult associations with a fund of one million euros.

In an interview with the French magazine *Le Figaro* on 30 January 2023, Sonia Backès, Secretary General to the Minister of the Interior with responsibility for Citizenship, announced that she wanted to engage Europe on the issue of the use of social networks by "sects". To combat what she calls "sectarian drifts", she believes that "if we want to take action on social networks, we need to do so at European level".

Sonia Backès was eventually forced to resign from the government after her election defeat in September 2023.

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. Both groups have been integrated in the newly appointed Orientation Committee of the MIVILUDES. 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). Other examples include:

AIS/PRO Juventud – Spanish FECRIS group, used the technique of “deprogramming” (a technique that usually involves kidnapping an individual, keeping that individual against his or her will whilst enforcing the person to listen to negative statements about their group until

the person changes their mind). In 1999, in a judgement issued by the European Court of Human Rights (case Nr 37680/97, Ribera Blume and others versus Spain concerning a deprogramming case) the court stated that the group AIS/Pro Juventud had a *“direct and immediate responsibility for ... the applicants ... loss of liberty.”*

In 1990, two members of SADK – a Swiss FECRIS member group sentenced to prison in connection with a violent deprogramming attempt on a member of the Hare Krishna movement. Mr. Rossi, who at the time was the spokesman for SADK spoke out loudly in favour of the deprogramming, in which the victim had been subdued with tear gas, saying *“We support and approve the deed.”*

In a final judgement on 19th December 2001 by the Munich State Court, the founder of Sect-info Essen – German FECRIS group was ordered to stop telling or spreading a wide variety of falsehoods about Takar Singh (an Eastern religious group) otherwise they would be fined up to 500,000 DM and if not paid, would be sentenced to jail for up to 6 months.

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

On 15 January 1997, the Douai Court of Appeal convicted the president of ADFI Nord, for defamation regarding the Cultural Association of the Jehovah’s Witnesses in France.

On 29 March 2002, the Marseille Criminal Court condemned a well-known member of UNADFI and FECRIS, for defamation regarding the association of Jehovah’s Witnesses.

On 20 November 2001, the Paris Criminal Court condemned the president of UNADFI, for public defamation regarding a member of the Church of Scientology. On 5 February 2003, the Paris Court of Appeal confirmed this judgment.

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*ⁱⁱⁱ, 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 deprogramme ‘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.^{iv}

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 by Miviludes and its members.

Conclusion

Lack of transparency

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.

The representatives of Miviludes only listen to Civil Society, which it finances via State funds.

Representatives of this same civil society are also members of the Miviludes Orientation Council.

The representatives of Miviludes refuse any dialogue with the representatives of the religious minorities criticized in its reports. They also refuse dialogue with NGOs such as CAP Liberté de Conscience or other international NGOs recognized in the field of freedom of religion.

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.
- French funding gives moral support to the hate speech of FECRIS and its members.
- Miviludes should be open to dialogue with all religious minorities and academics who study these movements.

ⁱ <https://bitterwinter.org/une-deuxieme-lettre-de-plus-de-80-universitaires-ukrainiens-demande-au-president-macron-de-mettre-fin-au-soutien-francais-a-la-federation-antisectes-fecris/>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.interieur.gouv.fr/Actualites/L-actu-du-Ministere/Marlene-Schiappa-renforce-les-moyens-alloues-a-la-lutte-contre-les-derives-sectaires-1-million-d-euros>

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

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