

The Role of FECRIS and Anti-Cult Organizations in Russia

This contribution concerns the role played by anti-cult organizations in Russia in the repression of religious minorities, and in particular the members of FECRIS, the European Federation of Centres of Research and Information on Sectarianism.

In order to understand how and when the anti-cult movement came into play, we should briefly discuss the background of religious unrest in Russia.

The concept of "Spiritual Security" – Background

In October 1990, a Law on Freedom of Religion was adopted under the Gorbachev regime, which was one of the last and most decisive liberalizing legislative reforms introduced in the old Soviet system. For the first time in Russian history, practicing religion was declared "the unalienable right of Russian citizens". This right also applied to all those residing in Russia, irrespective of their citizenship. The law maintained strict separation between Church and State, provided State ideological neutrality and guaranteed equal rights for all faiths, regardless of their origins and size.

As an immediate consequence of the Law, Russia's religious landscape started to be deeply modified. There was resurgence of the Russian Orthodox Church and other "traditional" religions, Muslim, Catholic, Jewish and Buddhist and their missionary activities from abroad, as well as proselytizing efforts of religions that were new to Russia.

This evolution gave rise to a strong anti-cult movement, focused in the Moscow Patriarchate of the Russian Orthodox Church, which started to push the concept that Russia's "spiritual security" and traditional values were somehow at risk.

In November 1996, then Orthodox Bishop Kirill, who was subsequently elected in 2009 as the Patriarch of Moscow and all Russia, publicly spoke about the problem of proselytism facing the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC). He noted that once the 1990 law allowed for freedom of conscience, "hordes of missionaries dashed in, believing the former Soviet Union to be a vast missionary territory."

According to him, instead of aiding the ROC in its missionary endeavors, these proselytizing groups worked against the Church "like boxers in a ring with their pumped-up muscles, delivering blows." He added that the blows were against the "people's national and religious sentiments," leading to a state where for many Russians, "'non-Orthodox' means those who have come to destroy the spiritual unity of the people and the Orthodox faith—spiritual colonizers who by fair means or foul try to tear the people away from their Church."

In the eyes of the religious leaders of the ROC, Russia was losing its cultural identity as an Orthodox nation. In this atmosphere, where the ROC believed itself as well as

Russian culture to be under attack, Boris Yeltsin passed a new religion law in September 1997, differentiating traditional and nontraditional religions in Russia.

The 1997 Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations provided serious restrictions on the registration of religious organizations and thus to the activities of religious groups of foreign origin. Religious communities registered under the 1990 law were submitted to the obligation of re-registration; many were denied the right to re-register and challenged the negative decision before domestic courts and then the European Court of Human Rights, in particular the Salvation Army, the Jesuits, Jehovah's Witnesses and the Church of Scientology.

The 1997 law, as well as the ideological stand and policy which were thereafter adopted by Russian authorities, were all inspired by the desire to ensure the "spiritual security" of Russia, a new concept expressing the purported role of the Russian Orthodox Church in safeguarding national values and security.

This concept has developed further as the idea arose that foreign missionaries were actually covert foreign intelligence workers, gathering information about "Russian policies and strategic activities."

Spiritual security, then, serves as the basis for a campaign based on paranoia of "foreign" enemies and "foreign" ideas, and for measures to unduly restrict freedom of religion or belief of Russian citizens who have decided to follow a non-consensual spiritual path.

Members of the European Federation of Centres of Research and Information on Sectarianism (FECRIS) in Russia play prominent roles in this campaign and repressive policy.

The Federation of Centres of Research and Information on Sectarianism (FECRIS)

To a large extent, the responsibility for the increasing religious tensions that culminated in the adoption of the 1997 Law must be borne by the Russian anti-cult movement, and by leading anti-cult crusader Aleksandr Dvorkin in particular. Dvorkin has been the key agitator responsible for popularizing the new term 'totalitarian sects' that he uses against peaceful religious minorities.

Aleksandr Dvorkin is the vice-President of FECRIS and heads the FECRIS member association in Russia, the *Saint Ireneus of Lyons Centre for Religious Studies* which was founded in 1993 with the blessing of the Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia Alexy II and is a missionary faculty department of St Tikhon's Orthodox University in Moscow. Its objective is "to spread credible information on doctrines and activities of totalitarian sects and destructive cults".

Dvorkin and the FECRIS chapter as part of the Missionary Department of the Orthodox University have been engaged in hate speech and disparagement against

the so-called "sects" or "cults" for the last twenty years, fueling suspicion and prejudice that lead to repression such as banning and imprisonment, not to mention incitement of hatred that leads to physical violence, threats, vandalism and similar aggression.

Hate Speech

Dvorkin spreads misinformation that religious minorities are actually foreign agents acting as enemies to Russia. For example, he stated that:

Mormons are a huge international business corporation that operates under the guise of a religious organization. Moreover, we can recall several instances when American Mormon missionaries were spotted on the territory of secret military facilities. For many years experts speak about a close relationship of this organization with the CIA. Their interest in Chelyabinsk region is completely understandable as there are many secret and sealed facilities here. Mormons are a danger on both the state and personal level, as their rites affect psyche. We know that Mormons organize secret occult rituals, where they grossly abuse the memory of our orthodox ancestors.

And about Pentecostals:

As for the "New Life", this is one of the Neo-Pentecostal sects which is also known for its destructive activities. During their ceremonies people are sent into a trance state, so that they almost lose their human form... We may also recall the political aspect of this sect's activity. One of the most famous Neo-Pentecostal preachers on the post-Soviet space - Alexei Ledyayev – openly speaks about the necessity to create a new world order in which Neo-Pentecostals will rule with the U.S. president at the head."

Regarding the group of spiritual practitioners known as Falun Gong who were persecuted in China, Dvorkin stated:

Falun Gong is a strict totalitarian sect, whose members are used by its leader in his vendetta against the government of China and who, in his turn, is instrumentalized by American secret services for their external policy purposes.

In Beijing, where he was invited to give a lecture in May 2008, Alexander Dvorkin stated in an interview about Falun Gong:

They would turn individuals into tools of cults, and destroy their families. Cults harm individuals, families, societies and countries like "cancerous cells" in a healthy body. Cults make no contribution to the society. But they kept absorbing human resources and wealth from it. Like cancerous cells, they obtain nutrition from the healthy body of society until it collapses.

This was done at a time when the international community and human rights organizations had issued numerous reports exposing persecutions and atrocities committed against Falun Gong by the Chinese authorities, including deportation and torture.

However, Dvorkin, the head of the Russian FECRIS anti-cult movement, has publicly supported the Chinese government's repression against Falun Gong and compared Falun Gong members to "cancerous cells", thereby implicitly advocating their elimination.

Dvorkin has used the media extensively to spread this hate speech, as some examples will show.

In October 2009, before a national audience, Dvorkin in an interview to NTV paralleled Jehovah's Witnesses with drug dealers and called them "slaves". Thereafter, the documentary was repeatedly used as a motive for violence against Jehovah's Witnesses.

In May 2010, on Russia 1, a national TV Channel, Dvorkin said that sects "should be fought" at the government level and that the literature of sects should be declared extremist. He also stated that more dangerous than Satanists ("who are an obvious evil") are Mormons, Hare Krishna, New Pentecostals, Falun Gong, and Jehovahists, who "conceal evil under the guise of good".

In May 2010, on NTV Channel, Dvorkin urged people to get organized and oppose the "threat" of sects. He expressed his hope that the court decisions declaring the literature of Jehovah's Witnesses and Scientologists to be extremist would stay in force.

Dvorkin has also forwarded the position that no dialogue should be established between the Orthodox Church and religious minorities.

In August 2009, Alexander Dvorkin commented for the news agency "Access" on the refusal of the Chelyabinsk Orthodox Diocese to participate in the opening day of an event because of the presence of Mormons and Neo-Pentecostals:

I think that the Chelyabinsk Diocese made the only right decision when they refused to take part in the event in which representatives of totalitarian sects are involved. Orthodoxy is a traditional religion in our country and any collaboration with such organizations is impossible. Imagine if some crooks have arranged their get-together and invited the police to participate in it.

This hate speech has fueled animosity against religious minorities in Russia and induced the government to adopt its current repressive policy. Such activities of the Russian anti-cult movement are clearly a factor in the persistence and aggravation of the situation in Russia.

Incidents of physical violence have also resulted from their stirring up of hatred, such as violence against persons: verbal insults, physical threats or attacks, and violence against property, including vandalism and attacks against places of worship, community property, and residences of members of religious groups.

Another aspect of the activity of the FECRIS Center in Moscow is the referral of followers of religious minorities to so-called "Rehabilitation Centers".

"Rehabilitating" followers of "non-traditional religions"

The FECRIS Chapter, Saint Irenaeus of Lyons Centre for Religious Studies, is the head centre of the Russian Association of Centres for Religious and Sectarian Studies. Alexander Dvorkin is its President. This association of Centres operates with a network of so-called "parents' initiatives" and other similar organizations in Russia.

On the advice of the anti-cult movement, families who disagree with the choice of one of their relatives to adhere to a non-traditional religion take them to so-called "rehabilitation centres" where they are "enlightened" about the danger of sects and how sects manipulate one's mind, then persuaded to accept the Orthodox religion because, according to the centres, if one really believes in Christ he is protected from various sects.

Here are a few examples of these Centres:

- *Centre of rehabilitation of victims of non-traditional religions under the missionary department of Stavropolskaya and Vladikavkazskaya Eparchy.*
Location: Russian, Novopavlovsk.
The Centre indicates on its website: "The basis of the department is to help people in the acquisition of real, true Faith in God and the Church".
- *Center of rehabilitation of victims of non-traditional religions under the Church of Our Lady "Joy of All Who Sorrow".*
Location: Moscow.
Rehabilitation" is done by two priests and one graduate of Saint Tikhon's Orthodox University (where Alexander Dvorkin is teaching).
- *Rehabilitation Centre for sect victims under the Holy Trinity Monastery.*
Location: Russia, Kursk.
Priests and psychologists work there to "rehabilitate" followers.
- *Rehabilitation Centre for victims of non-traditional religions in the name of St. Joseph of St. Volotsk.*
This Centre operates under the Orthodox Eparchy of Yekaterinburg city.
Some news published on the Orthodox web-site "pravoslavie.ru" in April 2004 explained about the Centre:

For nearly five years, in the Yekaterinburg, the Eparchy has been operating rehabilitation centres for victims of non-traditional religions in the name of St.

Joseph of St. Volotsk. (...) The activity of the Centre's staff in the name of Joseph Volotsk is to help people in finding this genuine faith in God and the Church. (...) Since the existence of the Centre, a lot of people have called for the help of Orthodox specialists. As a rule, it is relatives and friends of those who fall under the influence of totalitarian sects.

- As concerns the Saint Irenaeus of Lyons Centre for Religious Studies, the FECRIS member association in Russia, an article on its website explains how to deal with people "caught in sects": The process of exit through an external influence involves a psychologist, relatives and a "sect-specialist", to arouse critical thinking towards the "sect" and get rid of emotional dependency towards it. Then it involves connecting the person to the Orthodox catechist, preferably a priest offering the true religious and ideological alternatives.

This approach recalls the criticized "deprogramming" which has been found to be illegal and to violate followers' right to freedom of religion or belief: "No one shall be subject to coercion which would impair his freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice" pursuant to Article 18.2 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. This right is also protected under the European Convention on Human Rights.

Conclusion

FECRIS and its anti-cult associations in Russia should be prevented from continuing their harmful and illegal activities which violate the right of peaceful followers to religion or belief.

The first recommended measure is that the French authorities should stop financing FECRIS, which is based in France and has been created by the French anti-cult movement, for over 92% of its budget, which allows it to continue to support these activities in Russia.

The French Court of Auditors (*Cour des Comptes*) recently examined the public financing of anti-cult associations, i.e. FECRIS and its three member associations in France, and recommended a closer supervision of their State financing. On 1st August 2017, Prime Minister Edouard Philippe answered and agreed with this recommendation.

This is a good start but the whole financing of FECRIS should be reconsidered in light of its real activities in countries like Russia and the present context seems appropriate to submit this concern to the French authorities.

States, like France and Russia, have a duty of neutrality in religious matters under international human rights law. They must not take sides or favor a dominant religion to the detriment of others – a duty which has been constantly affirmed by the European Court of Human Rights.

