

**Sympathy for the Devil:
The Anti-Cult Federation FECRIS and Its Support for Russian
and Chinese Repression of Religion**

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ABSTRACT: The war in Ukraine created a problem for the international anti-cult movement and for the European anti-cult federation FECRIS, which had Russian organizations that had supported campaigns of slander against Ukraine and the invasion in 2022 among its most visible affiliates and representatives. Reportedly, the Russian affiliates were expelled or suspended in March 2022, but without any press release or official communication to non-members. FECRIS and other anti-cult organizations and individuals, however, have a long history of supporting non-democratic regimes, including Russia and China, in their campaigns of repression of religious minorities. The paper argues that organizational interests are not enough to explain this symbiotic relationship, and the connection is in fact ideological.

KEYWORDS: FECRIS, Alexander Dvorkin, Anti-Cult Movement, Anti-Cult Movement in Russia, Xie Jiao, Anti-Cultism, Anti-Cult Movement in China.

Introduction

Last year, we published a White Paper on the anti-cult ideology and FECRIS, the European Federation of Centers of Research and Information on Cults and Sects (*Bitter Winter* 2021). We concluded that there are no criteria accepted by the mainline community of scholars of religion to distinguish “bad” “cults” from “good” “religions,” and that anti-cultism is just an ideology used to deny religious liberty to minority religions labeled “cults” by their opponents.

While we will not repeat here what was already included in the 2021 White Paper, Russia’s aggression against Ukraine, which had some consequences also inside FECRIS, and the continuing deterioration of the situation of religious liberty in China under Xi Jinping, have persuaded us that a supplemental White Paper is needed to address a complementary issue. To what extent Western anti-cultists, including those associated with FECRIS, support the bloody repression of religious minorities in Russia and China?

Some preliminary observations and disclaimers are in order. We have read statements by individuals anti-cultists, some of them associated with FECRIS, condemning the war of aggression waged by Vladimir Putin in Ukraine. FECRIS itself has published a short statement where it “joins in the condemnation of the Russian military aggression against the Ukrainian population and legitimate authorities” (FECRIS 2022a). We have not read anything similar condemning what the most recent report of the bipartisan and bicameral U.S. Congressional-Executive Commission on China described on March 31, 2022, as “the horrors

the Chinese government and Communist Party perpetrate against the Chinese people” (Congressional-Executive Commission on China 2022, 3), but perhaps we missed something.

We have also noticed that the Russian organizations that are, or were, part of FECRIS, still listed as such on March 31, 2022 (FECRIS 2022b) disappeared from the list of its member organizations on its Web site in April (FECRIS 2022c). Seeking clarification, one of us (Introvigne) emailed FECRIS’ board member Luigi Corvaglia, who kindly answered on April 6 that “we [FECRIS] voted on March 8 the expulsion of CRS [Center for Religious Studies, the umbrella organization federating the Russian FECRIS affiliates].” Another FECRIS activist we contacted used the word “suspension” rather than “expulsion.”

We have no reasons to doubt the sincerity of the organizations or individuals associated with FECRIS who have condemned the Russian aggression in Ukraine. As for FECRIS itself, we await an official position, which should also address the question of the presence on its board of directors of Alexander Dvorkin, which is not only the most notorious Russian anti-cultist but one who has consistently supported the politics of the Putin regime on Ukraine.

This White Paper, however, is largely about a broader problem. We argue that the position of Russia about “cults” cannot be separated from the Russian position about civil society, dissent, and democracy in general. Decades of support by FECRIS and other anti-cultists for Russian anti-cult policy also supported its general ideology of “spiritual security.”

Similarly, the Chinese position on *xie jiao* (an expression translated by the Chinese authorities in English documents as “evil cults” but in fact meaning “heterodox teachings”) cannot be separated from the Chinese position about controlling religion and surveilling the daily life of citizens in general. Whoever supports Chinese anti-xie-jiao policy supports, implicitly, its broader persecution about all forms of dissent. How this support by organizations that proclaim their love for democracy became possible is the subject matter of this White Paper.

A final disclaimer is that we are aware that not all anti-cultists are members of FECRIS. We agree that FECRIS as an organization is not responsible for statements by anti-cultists who are not affiliated with it. We know, for example, that Canadian anti-cultist Gerry Armstrong is not a member of FECRIS, and his

statements do not represent FECRIS. However, articles by Armstrong appear on the official FECRIS's web site (Armstrong 2009), and he has spoken at conferences organized both by FECRIS and by its affiliates, including in Russia. Even such a bizarre character as American deprogrammer Rick Ross, whom we mention here because of his connections with China, gets a link to his website on FECRIS's links page (FECRIS 2022d).

We know, a note has been included that "FECRIS is not responsible for the contents of the following websites." However, why would they include Ross' website if they did not share a common ideology with him? Our purpose here is to note that the Western anti-cult movement, a broader camp than FECRIS, supports totalitarian repression of religion in Russia and China. When we will mention anti-cultists not affiliated with FECRIS, we will direct the attention of our readers to this fact.

1. Three Models of Anti-Cultism—or One?

a. Problems of Terminology

Two terminological precisions should be first offered. The first is that as scholars of religion we all struggle with translators who try to translate the English "cult" with the Italian and Spanish "culto," the French "culte," and similar words in other languages—or, vice versa, they translate the Italian "setta," the Spanish "secta," the French "secte," the German "Sekte," the Russian "секта" (sekta), and so on, as "sect" in English.

These translations may be at first sight regarded as correct, but they are substantially wrong. In contemporary English language, "cult" is a negative word, indicating an organization that manipulates and harms its followers and whose activities are objectionable and perhaps even criminal. "Sect" is not a negative word. Several Buddhists would indicate in English that they belong to a certain "Buddhist sect," i.e., one among the many Buddhist schools. They would strongly object if somebody would accuse them of belonging to a "Buddhist cult."

In France there is a "Bureau central des [Central office of] cultes," and in Italy a "Direzione generale per gli affari dei [Central Direction for the affairs of] culti," both parts of the Ministries of Internal Affairs in the respective countries. They deal with mainline religions recognized by the governments, including the Roman

Catholic Church. Both in France and in Italy, there are also official agencies keeping a watch on supposedly dangerous religious organizations called “cults” in English. However, the name used by these agencies for the targets of their surveillance is “sectes” in French and “sette” in Italian, not “cultes” or “culti.”

The unavoidable conclusion, and one reached by academic scholars decades ago, is that the English word “cult” should be translated as “setta,” “secte,” “секта,” and similar, and these words in turn should be translated into English as “cult,” not as “sect.” For the same reasons, the organizations called in English “anti-cult movements” are designated in French as “mouvements anti-sectes,” and the same, again, happens in other languages where the words designating “bad” religions are similar to “setta.”

The second terminological precision concerns the Chinese expression *xie jiao*. As we will see, how this expression is used is at the center of the anti-cult ideology prevailing in the People’s Republic of China. In official Chinese documents in English, *xie jiao* is translated as “cults” or “evil cults.” This translation is in itself political, and is used to attract the sympathies of those hostile to “cults” in democratic countries. In fact, *xie jiao* has been used since the Middle Ages, should be more correctly translated as “heterodox teachings,” and is traditionally interpreted as indicating religious movements hostile to the regime or government in power. This is different from what “cult” normally means in English.

After reading articles by Western scholars criticizing the translation of *xie jiao* as “cults,” Zhang Xinzhang, a professor at the School of Marxism of Zhejiang University regarded as an authority on *xie jiao* in China, stated that he agreed that the translations “cults” and “evil cults” should not be used. To him, these translations are misleading. He recommends not to translate *xie jiao*, and to simply transliterate it, as is normally done for *qigong*, *kung fu*, and similar (Zhang 2020). We agree, although political reasons may prevent Chinese authorities from following his suggestion.

b. The Chinese Model

China has a draconian legislation making the mere fact of being active in a religious group labeled a *xie jiao* a crime, punished by Article 300 of the Chinese

Criminal Code. Scholars of law and religion in China have collected and analyzed hundreds of court decisions demonstrating that, contrary to what is sometimes argued by Chinese embassies in propaganda materials, any activity within or on behalf of a *xie jiao* is a crime in China. Sometimes, Chinese texts argue that the mere fact of being members of a *xie jiao* is not punished, only “criminal activities.” The fact of the matter, however, is that under the official interpretation of Article 300, expressed in circular letters by the Supreme Court and the Supreme Procuratorate and derived from Chinese case law, attending worship meetings of a *xie jiao*, sharing its faith with co-workers or relatives, and even keeping at home a certain quantity of books and videos of a banned movement are “criminal activities” leading to severe jail sentences (Introvigne, Richardson, and Šorytė 2019). Obviously, these activities are not illegal in democratic countries, and are protected by international conventions as typical expressions of religious liberty.

It is also not true that only leaders of the *xie jiao* are prosecuted and sentenced under Article 300. Professor Zhang, whom we already quoted, states that while from his personal point of view it would be desirable that only leaders would be punished, what currently happens in practice is that also “‘normal’ members [i.e., not ‘leaders’] receive heavy sentences” (Zhang 2020, 95).

But what is a *xie jiao*? When he agreed with Western scholars that *xie jiao* should not be translated as “evil cults” or “cults,” the main argument used by Zhang was political. He noted that the core feature of the *xie jiao* in China is being perceived as hostile to the government, which is not necessarily part of the meaning of the word “cult” in English. We believe that another strong argument in support of his idea not to translate *xie jiao* comes from history, as evidenced by the studies of Wu Junqing, a Chinese scholar currently teaching at the University of Liverpool (Wu 2016, 2017).

Translating *xie jiao* as “cults” is anachronistic. “Jiao” means “teachings” and “xie” means “twisted,” “bent,” and when applied to ideas “incorrect” or “wrong.” This application predates the Christian era. However, the compound *xie jiao* was first used by an identifiable historical figure, Fu Yi (555–639), a Taoist intellectual and Tang courtier. Fu was persuaded that Buddhism was a mortal threat for China and should be eradicated altogether, if necessary by exterminating Chinese Buddhists. In two texts written in 621 and 624, he

explained why this was necessary and Buddhism was a *xie jiao*, a term he coined to indicate “heterodox teachings” (Wu 2016, 8–9; Wright 1951).

Already in the first use of the term by Fu Yi, we may see that theological criticism of Buddhism was secondary. For Fu, the two key features of a *xie jiao* are not theological. First, a *xie jiao* does not recognize the absolute authority of the Emperor and does not support the state. Second, *xie jiao* are expression of a “barbarian wizardry” which is not part of the great Chinese religious tradition. Fu had nothing against magic in general. In fact, he was the Great Astrologer of the Tang court. What he meant was that Buddhism was using *black* magic (Wright 1951).

While Buddhism was finally not eradicated in China, although it was periodically persecuted, the Medieval Song and Yuan dynasties continued to use *xie jiao* to indicate movements they planned to eliminate. The two features of a *xie jiao* remained being perceived as antigovernment and being accused of using black magic, including raising goblins and casting malevolent spells (Wu 2017).

It was during the late Ming era that the prohibition of *xie jiao*, with the death penalty for those involved in their activities, was officially legislated, and movements were officially declared *xie jiao* first at the local and then at the national scale (Wu 2017, 94–6). In the 17th century, they included indigenous Chinese groups but also Christianity as a whole. Christians were also accused of practicing black magic, including tearing out the eyes and internal organs of children and using them in alchemical rituals (Folk 2017, 101). The Qing dynasty repeated almost verbatim the Ming provisions against the *xie jiao* (Seiwert and Ma 2003, 457).

Later, the case of Christianity continued to prove that listing a religion as a *xie jiao* or removing it from the corresponding list largely obeyed to political motivations. The Qing listed Christianity as a *xie jiao* in 1725 but took it off the list in 1842 due to pressures by the Western powers (Goossaert and Palmer 2011, 27–31). Communist China did not invent the category of *xie jiao* but inherited it from a century-old tradition, which had very little to do with Western controversies about “cults” (Melton 2021).

The use of *xie jiao* in contemporary Chinese political discourse, as Wu notes, remains coherent with this tradition. The old accusation of “black magic” has been secularized as “brainwashing” (Wu 2017, 157), which creates a similarity

with Western anti-cultism but is also paradoxical, considering that the word “brainwashing” was created by CIA propaganda during the Cold War to designate allegedly infallible psychological manipulation techniques used by Communist China (Anthony 1996).

However, the core feature of a *xie jiao* for the Chinese authorities is that it is a religious movement (or, more precisely, a movement that claims to be religious) that actively opposes the government and refuses to fit, as “legitimate” religions do, into the model of a spiritual organization that supports the political power and conveys its directives and slogans to the believers. Although this approach to the *xie jiao* is presented in Marxist terms, in fact the idea that *xie jiao* are politically subversive organizations derives from Imperial China. A *xie jiao*, i.e., in the official English translations a “cult,” is a religious (or “pseudo-religious”) movement that actively or passively opposes the government.

c. The Russian Model

Russian anti-cultists use the expression “destructive cult” or “totalitarian cult” (as mentioned earlier, they use “секта” [sekta] and translate this word into English as “sect,” but it should be translated as “cult.”) Although in international conferences where Chinese colleagues are also present, Russian “cult experts” claim that their respective definitions of “cults” are the same, in fact they are very much different.

While often coached in deceptively secular terms, in fact the definition of “cult” prevailing in Russia is deeply rooted in the theology of the Russian Orthodox Church. A “cult” (секта) is an “extremist” religious organization. “Cults” are mostly punished and banned by applying legislation against extremism.

Anti-extremism provisions were introduced in Russia after 9/11 and amended in 2006 after the “Russian 9/11” or “the 9/11 of children,” i.e. the terrorist attack in Beslan, North Ossetia, of September 1–3, 2004, where 354 were killed, including 186 children. The law was originally intended as a weapon against radical Islamic fundamentalism and terrorism. With the amendment of 2006, however, “extremism” can be found even without actual violence or incitement to violence (Kravchenko 2018).

“Experts” and courts in Russia have elaborated “religious extremism” as a subcategory of “extremism.” According to them, are “extremist” these religions and movements that claim that they preach the only way to salvation, and that all the other religions (including Christianity as taught by the Russian Orthodox Church) are false or limited (Kravchenko 2018).

Of course, all religions claim that they preach a way to salvation or enlightenment that offers something more than other religions—otherwise, why should anybody join them? However in Russia “extremism” is used as a falsely secular label to designate religions and movements that actively compete with the Russian Orthodox Church and try to convert Orthodox to their faith—or are perceived as such by the Orthodox hierarchy.

In Russia, a “cult” is a religious group that preaches its faith to Orthodox believers and creates a competition the Russian Orthodox Church is not prepared to tolerate. This explains why, for example, anti-cultists label as “cults” or “extremist” organizations Evangelical and Pentecostal Christian churches that very few people would designate as “cults” in the West. What these labels, which needs to be decoded, really mean is that these churches proselytize in what the Russian Orthodox Church calls its “canonical territory.” Russia tolerates Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, and Catholicism if they cater to historical ethnic minorities and have no proselyting activities targeting the Orthodox. When movements within these religious traditions try to convert Orthodox believers, they are immediately labeled as “cults” or “destructive cults” and persecuted.

There is a clear difference with China. The Chinese anti-cult (anti-xie-jiao) apparatus protects the ideological monopoly of the state against any religion that would presume to act independently of the state. The Russian anti-totalitarian-cults system protects the religious monopoly of the Russian Orthodox Church. The state is theoretically secular, but in practice, at least since Vladimir Putin came to power, there is a strict connection between the regime and the Russian Orthodox Church based on an unwritten but faithfully kept bargain. The Russian Orthodox Church organizes the consensus for the Putin regime, and the regime protects the Orthodox monopoly by cracking down on, or “liquidating” (as happened to the Jehovah’s Witnesses in 2017), any religious organization perceived as threatening it. There are some Orthodox theologians and laypersons who have elaborated a Christian discourse on religious liberty and disagree with this attitude. But their voices are silenced.

d. The Western Model

Western scholars distinguish between a counter-cult and an anti-cult movement. The old counter-cult movement presents some similarities with the Russian model. Counter-cultists were—and are, since they still exist—Christians who try to get rid of “heresies,” also labeled “cults,” which in their opinion preach a false Gospel and “steal their sheep” by proselyting among mainline Christians. There is a variation of this model in Israel, where Orthodox Jews call “cults” groups that try to convert Jews. The influence of these Orthodox Jews in the main Israeli anti-cult association, and local correspondent of FECRIS, the Israeli Center for Victims of Cults, is important, although the Center also includes some secular humanists (Fautré 2018).

However, for reasons explained in our first White Paper on FECRIS, since the last decades of the 20th century, a secular anti-cult movement became much more important in North America and Europe than the traditional Christian counter-cult movement. In fact, anti-cultists, sometimes with success, tried to exert their hegemony on religious counter-cultists, and include them in organizations and coalitions where the religionists became the junior partners.

The anti-cult movement built a secular discourse (illustrated in our previous White Paper) that establishes a distinction between “cults” and “religions” based on the pseudo-scientific theory of “brainwashing.” It maintains that “cults” are not religions. One joins a religion through a free choice. One joins a “cult” because of techniques called mental manipulation, mind control, or “brainwashing.” Some anti-cultists would say that the test for them is whether a group causes “harm” to its followers, but the tool for the harm is in fact “brainwashing” or mental manipulation.

We will not repeat in this second White Paper the criticism of “brainwashing” and the Western anti-cult ideology. This criticism is a main theme of the scientific study of new religious movements, as it developed in the late 20th and in the 21st century (Ashcraft 2018).

What interests us here is the different origins of the Chinese, Russian, and Western anti-cult models. Chinese anti-cultism wants to protect the regime, the government, and the Communist Party against the threat represented by uncontrolled religion. Russian anti-cultism wants to protect the monopoly of the

Russian Orthodox Church and its alliance with the regime. Western anti-cultism wants to protect individuals from themselves.

As Dutch scholar Wouter Hanegraaff has demonstrated for the opposition to esotericism—but the same is true for opposition to “cults”—this ideology has its roots in a Protestant criticism of both Roman Catholicism and magic, and was developed first by the Enlightenment and later by Marxism (Hanegraaff 2012). The core idea is that when irrational beliefs are not confined to the periphery of life and become the dominant influence determining the main choices of one’s existence, they are dangerous and harmful. In particular, strongly held irrational beliefs may lead to the voluntary sacrifice of a part of individual liberty and to a relationship of “voluntary servitude”—to borrow the expression of Étienne de la Boétie (1530–1563: La Boétie 2016 [1576])—with a religious organization or a religious leader, be this leader an Indian guru or the mother superior of a convent of cloistered nuns. The modern secular society does not believe that a normally rational individual may choose voluntary servitude, hence the belief that this happens because of brainwashing.

“Cultists” do not know that their choices are wrong, harmful, and caused by brainwashing. Anti-cultists supposedly know better, and they see themselves as being on a mission from rationality and the common good. If some do not believe in their idea of freedom, then paradoxically their freedom should be denied and they should be “rescued” and “liberated” both from “cults” and from themselves.

e. Why They Cooperate

At first sight, the three models are incompatible. The individualistic concept of liberty at the core of Western anti-cultism seems far away from the Chinese totalitarian approach calling for a strict control of religion by the government, and from the Russian theocratic idea that one church represents the national identity and should be protected from competition.

However, slowly but effectively, the three anti-cult movements have decided to cooperate and struck a bargain. The Chinese and Russian anti-cult movements need Western anti-cultists for propaganda purposes. Without this cooperation, their crackdown on groups they decide to label as *xie jiao* or “totalitarian cults” would be seen for what it is, part of a broader brutal repression of any dissident

voice. On the contrary, if the Chinese and Russian regimes may claim that “cults” are an international problem, what they do may seem less unique and even justified. This is the very reason why the Chinese regime, when it publishes documents in English, translates *xie jiao* as “cults,” even if it is told that the translation is wrong by its own scholars.

It is clear why the Chinese and Russian regimes find the support of Western anti-cultists useful. It may appear as less clear why Western anti-cultists believe they have something to gain by associating with disreputable regimes with abysmal human rights records. In fact, there may be different reasons for this unholy alliance.

We would not insist or speculate on possible financial motivations. Although both Russia and China are well-known for their generous support of fellow travelers, as mentioned in our previous White Paper FECRIS is funded by the French government, and some FECRIS affiliates outside of France also receive official support. When somebody in the West roots for totalitarian regimes, money is always a possible hypothesis. In this case, however, it is possible that money is not the main reason for the cooperation.

While anti-cult movements in the West are small, the China Anti-Xie-Jiao Association (again, advertised abroad as the “China Anti-Cult Association”), which is basically a department of the Chinese Communist Party, claims to be the largest anti-cult association in the world. The claim is not false. It has thousands of members and associates in all Chinese provinces and regions. More importantly, local authorities are asked to cooperate with it. This is also true for the public security, and the association has an important role in designating what groups will be listed as *xie jiao*. Russian anti-cult organizations may have a smaller number of activists, but they also have an important official role. Russia’s most visible anti-cultist, Alexander Dvorkin, a board member and the former Vice President of FECRIS, became at one stage the President of the Justice Ministry’s Expert Council for Conducting State Religious Studies Expert Analysis, a key actor in Russian cases for banning groups and books as “extremist” (Human Rights Without Frontiers Correspondent in Russia 2012, 274–76).

Most Western anti-cult organizations have been able to develop a good relationship with the media, but remain in themselves small and struggling. By arguing that they are part of a larger international coalition including the

mammoth Chinese anti-cult organization and its powerful Russian counterpart, they may hope to be regarded as more important than they actually are.

There is also, despite the differences, a common point in the ideology. Even if they occasionally cooperate with American “cult experts,” most anti-cultists are anti-American, and believe there is an American conspiracy to weaken the national identities of secular post-Enlightenment Europe through “cults.” We find it surprising that after more than 20 years anti-cult and FECRIS publications continue to quote a book written in 1996 and an article published in 2001 by French anti-cult journalist Bruno Fouchereau, whose title says it all: “The Cults, Trojan Horses of the United States in Europe” (Fouchereau 1996, 2001). The article was published in *Le Monde diplomatique*, a militantly left-wing and sometimes conspiracy magazine that was in 2001, as it is today, independent from the more respected *Le Monde*.

Perhaps the article keeps being quoted because it accused some of us (Introvigne and Fautré) of being part of the alleged American conspiracy, but we are afraid that some if not most FECRIS anti-cultists really believe in the theory. This brings them close to Chinese anti-xie-jiao activists, who believe that *xie jiao* are promoted in China by the United States to undermine the regime, and Russian ideologists who also claim that Russia’s “spiritual security” is threatened by American conspiracies infiltrating “cults” into the Russian Federation (and Ukraine).

Actually, in Russia this is an old idea. Timothy Snyder has called the attention on how much Putin’s ideology owns to Ivan Ilyn (1883–1954), a well-known Russian philosopher who called himself a “fascist,” and was expelled from the Soviet Union for his monarchist and anti-communist positions (Snyder 2018). Snyder’s theory has been challenged for insisting too much on a comparison between Ilyn’s fascism and Putin’s anti-democratic ideas. In fact, it is not Ilyn’s fascism that exerts influence on Putin. It is Ilyn’s vision of Russia as a nation persecuted by the West through its propaganda of democracy, its heresies and “cults,” and its homosexual lobbies, and at the same time as a nation with a mission similar to Jesus Christ: it is persecuted, dies, resurrects, and saves the world (Ljunggren 2014, 115–23). Putin asked for and obtained from Switzerland the remains of Ilyn and had them reburied in Moscow in a tomb in front of which he went to pay his respects and draw inspiration (Snyder 2018). The Russian President has also expressed his personal concerns about “cults”

that come to steal “the souls and the property” of the Russians, vowing to eradicate them (“Путин: Тоталитарные секты растут как грибы” 2012).

The conspirationist belief in parallel American plots against Western European secularism, Russia, and China is probably the main motivation why Western anti-cultists, who claim to be liberal and democratic, are not ashamed to cooperate with the propaganda of totalitarian regimes that regard Western-style democracy and “cults” as twin evils.

2. FECRIS and Western Anti-Cult Cooperation with China

a. The Beijing Conference (2000)

The cooperation between FECRIS affiliates and China dates back to the very beginning of the current phase of Chinese crackdown on *xie jiao*. As all scholars of Falun Gong have pointed out, before 1999 the movement was not regarded as a *xie jiao* and even entertained good relations with the Chinese Communist Party, which regarded it as a group promoting traditional health practices rather than as a religious organization or a “cult.” It was only after Falun Gong, which had grown to several million devotees including high-ranking officers of the Communist Party, was attacked by militant atheists in government-controlled media as religion in disguise, took to the streets to protest, which in China is forbidden, and, worse still, staged a demonstration in the area of Beijing where the main Party leaders live, that in 1999 the regime decided to liquidate Falun Gong, and a merciless campaign of persecution started (Ownby 2008).

As the United States and leading human rights NGOs protested the arrests, the torture, and extra-judicial killing of Falun Gong practitioners, the Chinese regime sought to present the movement as a “cult,” and sought the caution of Western anti-cultists.

FECRIS French affiliate CCMM (Center of Documentation, Education, and Action Against Mental Manipulation) obliged, and went to Beijing to attend an “International Symposium on Destructive Cults” on November 9 and 10, 2000. How the CCMM bulletin for November–December 2000 tells the story is an extraordinary mixture of naivete and self-importance (“Invitation du CCMM en Chine” 2000).

The starting point is that the Chinese did not have the experience French anti-cultists had gained on “cults” (probably, the CCMM ignored that the Chinese discourse on *xie jiao* dates back to the Middle Ages).

How could they even be sure that a movement deserved to be qualified as a “cult” just as those we know? The Chinese, however, did make the connection, and decided to anchor their reaction to the emergence of this movement [Falun Gong] on an experience common to other countries, all of which are confronted with cultism. This is why the Chinese authorities decided to hold an international symposium.

We learn from the bulletin that

the organization was entrusted to the “Chinese Association for the Promotion of International Friendship.” Founded in 1985, this non-governmental association wants to be an open window on the outside world and strives to establish cultural, economic and technological links with foreign countries.

In fact, the association is well-known as the “public face” of China’s United Front for international propaganda (Edwards 2021).

The CCMM proudly reported that France was “cited as an example because of the scope and coherence of the measures taken to respond to the cults’ threat. The French representatives invited to the symposium received a warm welcome and were listened to with particular attention.” “The CCMM delegation was composed of Jean-Pierre Bousquet, who was also responsible for representing the president of FECRIS, Patricia Casano, and Hayat El Mountacir.” Note that FECRIS was, thus, officially represented.

There were also “other foreign speakers,” but unfortunately according to the CCMM “many of them continued to maintain the all-too-familiar controversy, immunity of the cults in the name of freedom of religion, which did not contribute to advance the debate.” “Finally the president of the symposium announced that other symposiums would be organized in the future and that China will try to establish information exchange streams as soon as possible.” “The Chinese expressed their desire to also create a non-governmental association, similar to the CCMM in its objectives and structure.”

The CCCMM-FECCRIS delegates went home persuaded that the Chinese needed to learn from French anti-cultists and FECCRIS how to crack down on “cults,” an art China’s governments have practiced since the 7th century. What the Chinese really needed from FECCRIS was a political caution that their bloody persecution against Falun Gong practitioners and other “cultists” was legitimate

and approved by Westerners. They got it, and the CCMM bulletin even reproduced part of a Chinese document claiming that the conclusion that Falun Gong was a “cult” was supported by “documents about foreign cults taken from books regarded as authoritative throughout the whole world,” by which the Chinese meant anti-cult literature.

The head of the French governmental Mission interministérielle de lutte contre les sectes (Inter-Ministerial Mission for Combating Cults), Alain Vivien, also attended the Beijing symposium, although as an “observer” and without speaking. It was a family holiday of sort, as CCMM delegate Patricia Casano was Vivien’s wife. In the words of a French scholar,

in addition to the dispute over whether the trip was funded by the French or the Chinese government, the moral result was disastrous, as the French “support” for a government that persecutes the Falun Gong movement and many other religions made a detestable impression outside of France, even if it received very little media coverage in this country (Chélini-Pont 2004, 192).

b. Israeli FECRIS Associates and China

On September 4, 2018, the Belgian NGO Human Rights Without Frontiers (HRWF) released a report on the Israeli Center for Victims of Cults (ICVC), the Israeli correspondent of FECRIS (Fautré 2018).

The report demonstrated that the allegedly secular ICVC (which also includes some secular humanists) has in fact deep ties with Yad L’Achim, an organization officially denounced by the U.S. Department of State as a radical expression of ultra-Orthodox Judaism, which promotes discrimination against religious minorities in Israel and violence against them (U.S. Department of State 2017).

The HRWF report (Fautré 2018, 13–4) notes that

in 2009, Yad L’Achim published a press release in which they boasted the fact that one of their organization’s representatives was invited to participate in a congress in China devoted to the fight against Falun Gong. The propaganda of Yad L’Achim against Falun Gong is accessible on their website,

which also offers

an article on Benjamin Kluger, a convert from Christianity to ultra-orthodox Judaism and a Yad L’Achim activist, who worked in the Department for the Fight against Missionary

Activity with Rachel Lichtenshtein, the current director of the ICVC. He was invited by the Chinese embassy in Israel as “an expert from Yad L’Achim about destructive cults”

to a CCP conference in China. The title of the article said it all, “Assisting the Chinese in the Struggle Against Cults” (Sheila 2009).

Rabbi Shalom Dov Lipschitz, chairperson of Yad L’Achim, was quoted in the article as stating that the government in Israel should have “learned from the Chinese authorities how to forcefully fight dubious and destructive cults” (Sheila 2009).

c. FECRIS Vice-President Alexandr Dvorkin in China

Alexander Dvorkin, one of the leading public voices of FECRIS and its Vice President from 2009 to 2021, supported the Chinese repression of *xie jiao* so publicly and consistently that listing all what he did would become tedious. Some examples would be enough.

While attending an event in Beijing in 2008 (at a time when he was not yet the Vice President of FECRIS), Dvorkin stated that Falun Gong operated with the support of “the governments and parliaments of some western countries.” He said that cultists

would turn individuals into tools of cults, and destroy their families... 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 (Xinhua 2008).

These statements sounds particularly sinister if one considers that they came in the middle of a ferocious repression of Falun Gong. By comparing “cults” to “cancerous cells,” Dvorkin dehumanized Falun Gong practitioners. Cancers have no rights, and the cancer comparison in fact legitimizes eradication through detention and even murder.

In 2016, Dvorkin attended in Wuhan a symposium on “cultic studies,” and reiterated that, “Absolutely, Falun Gong is one of the most destructive cults, which destroys human minds and physical health” (Liu and Zhang 2016).

In 2017, Dvorkin went to Harbin to lecture against “totalitarian cults” as enemies of both the Orthodox Church and government (Center for Religious Studies in the name of Hieromartyr Saint Irenaeus of Lyons 2017).

The relationship between Dvorkin and the Chinese repression of *xie jiao* may be described as symbiotic. On the one hand, Dvorkin publishes attacks against religious groups that have a very limited presence in Russia, other than by operating websites in Russian language, but are among the main targets of Chinese repression, such as The Church of Almighty God (CAG), a Chinese Christian new religious movement. While he pretended to be concerned because of the alleged growth of the CAG in Russia, where in fact it had only a handful of followers, what Dvorkin was obviously doing was supporting the Chinese repression. Parroting Chinese propaganda, he called the CAG a “Chinese-American cult,” and claimed it grew because of “strong political support from the United States” (Dvorkin 2021: note that in the video of his speech Dvorkin emphasized his affiliation with FECRIS). No scholar of the CAG would take this statement seriously.

On the other hand, the website of the China Anti-Xie-Jiao Association regularly reports about Dvorkin’s activities and conveys China’s support for the repression of “totalitarian cults” in Russia. In 2017, Chinese governmental media and scholars published articles supporting the “liquidation” of Jehovah’s Witnesses in Russia (e.g., Zhou 2017). Although the Jehovah’s Witnesses were not part of the official list of the *xie jiao*, Russian precedents played a role when several of them were arrested, prosecuted, and sentenced to heavy jail terms in Xinjiang in 2020 (Korla City People’s Court 2020).

Dvorkin makes no mystery of the fact that he considers the presence of “cults” in both China and Russia (and in France and Germany as well) as the result of an American conspiracy. In a lecture in 2008, Dvorkin stated that

Falun Gong is a tough totalitarian cult whose members are used by its leader in his vendetta against the Chinese government, and which, in turn, is used by the American special services for their foreign policy goals (Dvorkin 2008).

He added in an interview that,

Cults have long been a political factor that is actively used primarily in the foreign policy of the United States of America... The United States now supports a variety of cults around the world: in Russia, France, Germany, China, and so on. There is, for example, “Falun Gong”—a destructive Chinese cult.... If such a cult did not exist, the American intelligence services would have to invent it, this is a very convenient method of influencing China (Davydov 2010).

d. Chinese Cooperation with Rick Ross

American deprogrammer Rick Ross is not a member of any FECRIS affiliate. We quote him as an example of the broader support offered by Western anti-cultists to Chinese repression of *xie jiao*. Deprogramming has been banned by courts of law in almost all democratic countries, with the exception of South Korea, where it is still practiced, although not without legal challenges, by some Christian counter-cult ministers (Fautré 2020). It consists in kidnapping adult members of “cults,” who are then detained and bombarded with negative information about their “cult” in the hope they will collapse and surrender their faith. Deprogrammers charged high and sometimes exorbitant sums of money, and several of them physically abused their victims (Shupe and Darnell 2006).

Some deprogrammers, such as Steven Hassan, had learned the trade by having been themselves deprogrammed. Rick Ross was a different case. He had a past in petty criminal activities, which had nothing to do with “cults.” He had been convicted for burglary and grand theft before discovering that posing as a self-styled specialist in “cults” and offering deprogramming services was less dangerous than robbing jewelries, an activity he had engaged into before re-inventing himself as a “cult expert.” On 10 January 1975, Ross was charged for attempted burglary and pleaded guilty in exchange of an agreement lowering the charge to conspiracy (Justice Court, Northeast Phoenix Precinct, Maricopa County, Arizona 1975; Superior Court of the State of Arizona in and for the County of Maricopa 1975).

On July 23, 1975, Ross, with a store clerk as an accomplice, was able to steal 306 pieces of jewelry from a Phoenix shop, pretending he had a bomb in a box ready to detonate (Kastrow 1975). On April 2, 1976, Ross was sentenced to four years in jail for the robbery (Superior Court of the State of Arizona, Criminal Division 1976).

He later resurfaced as a “cult expert” and deprogrammer, and in this capacity he went to China to support the crackdown on Falun Gong. In 2010, he visited deprogrammed ex-members of Falun Gong in Beijing, and compared experiences with the Chinese about deprogramming (*Kaiwind.com* 2010). In China, deprogramming is carried out in state-sponsored facilities (Zhao 2021), and in Russia in “rehabilitation centers” managed by organizations affiliated with the

Russian Orthodox Church (Human Rights Without Frontiers International Correspondent in Russia 2012, 279–80).

e. A Sympathy for China

China is seen so much as an example in the anti-cult fight that FECRIS associates often defend it also on issues only partially related, or not related at all, with “cults.”

We would not revisit here the controversy on “organ harvesting,” i.e., the accusation that China “harvests” organ from executed prisoners of conscience and uses them for transplants. It is a sensitive issue, and to grasp all the facets of the controversy a knowledge of how the procurement of organs for transplant generally works is needed. It is true that this question was first raised by Falun Gong, which claimed that its detained practitioners were victims of organ harvesting, but a look at what is now a large literature on the issue would easily lead to the conclusion that similar claims have been made on behalf of Uyghur Muslims, Christians, and many other inmates of Chinese jails with no relations with Falun Gong. Governments and Parliaments continue to take these claims seriously (see e.g. U.S. Congressional-Executive Commission on China 2022, 76).

It is not surprising that Dvorkin in Wuhan in 2016 stated categorically that the organ harvesting claims are part of “a campaign, which has been spread by Falun Gong with the help of people in agencies that help them overseas” (Liu and Zhang 2016). In their blogs and Facebook postings, other FECRIS leaders have also denied the organ harvesting charges in general, and even ridiculed theories that the COVID-19 virus escaped accidentally from a Wuhan laboratory. This is again a controversial issue, but the interesting question is why these FECRIS fellows feel an urge to defend China’s totalitarian regime every time it is under attack. Perhaps leading the world in the fight against “cults” justifies many other peccadillos.

3. FECRIS and Russia

a. FECRIS in Russia

As mentioned above, until the expulsion, or perhaps suspension, of March 2022, the Russian affiliates were among the most visible branches of FECRIS. We have mentioned the activities of Aleksander Dvorkin and of his Center for Religious Studies in the name of Hieromartyr Saint Irenaeus of Lyons, founded in 1994 under the aegis of the Russian Orthodox Church, in our first White Paper on FECRIS, and do not need to discuss them again here.

The Saint Irenaeus Center is the head center of the Russian Association of Centers for Religious and Cultic Studies (РАЦИРС/RATsIRS), later called “Center for Religious Studies,” whose Moscow and Saratov branches were listed among the FECRIS affiliates until the war in Ukraine (FECRIS 2022b).

There are two essential documents we recommend to read on the Saint Irenaeus of Lyons Center, the Center for Religious Studies, and FECRIS. One is the chapter “FECRIS and Its Affiliates in Russia: The Orthodox Clerical Wing of FECRIS,” in the book *Freedom of Religion or Belief. Anti-Sect Movements and State Neutrality. A Case Study: FECRIS*, published in 2012 as a special issue of the respected German academic journal *Religion–Staat–Gesellschaft* (Human Rights Without Frontiers Correspondent in Russia 2012). The other is the 2020 report by the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) *The Anti-cult Movement and Religious Regulation in Russia and the Former Soviet Union* (USCIRF 2020). The USCIRF is an independent, bipartisan U.S. federal government commission created by the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA). Its Commissioners are appointed by the President and by Congressional leaders of both political parties.

These documents demonstrate that the Russian FECRIS affiliates were at the very core of the repression of dozens of religious minorities, including the “liquidation” of the Jehovah’s Witnesses. The Center for Religious Studies also denounced as “extremist organizations” or “cults” a number of religions it called “non-traditional,” including Pentecostal and Evangelical churches, whose sole sin was to be perceived as competitors by the Russian Orthodox Church. And, as we mentioned in our first White Paper, Dvorkin did not stop at that. He also offended believers of historical religions. As we wrote, he created considerable

problems in the relationships between Russia and India by attacking the *Bhagavad-Gita* as an “extremist” book and stating that “We won’t be mistaken if we say that, from the Orthodox viewpoint, Krishna is one of the demons” (CAP-LC 2014, 13). He called the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, also known as the Mormon Church, “a coarse neo-Pagan occult cult with fairly serious totalitarian tendencies” (Dvorkin 2002, 146). As for the Prophet of Islam, Dvorkin claimed that

either Mohammed suffered from a disease and it was a delirium vision; or it was a demonic obsession; or, once again, the Byzantine fathers claim that he was a sort of fantasizer who made it all up and then, which he hadn’t expected, his relatives believed in it. But of course, the combinations of all the three are possible as well [this generated a strong reaction by Muslims: see Golosislama.com 2013].

b. FECRIS’s Support of Russian Religious Repression

In short, the massive repression of religious minorities that took place in Putin’s Russia was not only supported, but was often organized by the Russian FECRIS affiliates. Before the war in Ukraine, this situation was known, and had been denounced in dozens of international human rights reports and scholarly works about religion in Russia. Yet, FECRIS never distanced itself from its Russian affiliates and Dvorkin. In fact, it continued to give Dvorkin a podium in its international conferences, and actively supported the Russian narratives on the crackdown on religious minorities in Russia.

The extent of this support was revealed in a court case decided by the District Court of Hamburg on November 27, 2020. FECRIS had been sued there by the Jehovah’s Witnesses for thirty-two statements published on the FECRIS’s website they regarded as defamatory. The court found seventeen of these statements defamatory, one partially defamatory, and fourteen non-defamatory (Landgericht Hamburg 2020). On March 24, 2021, the magazine *Bitter Winter* (with which some of us are associated) published a commentary of the decision (Introvigne 2021a). The article led FECRIS, which had until then remained silent on the case, to issue a press release on March 30 (FECRIS 2021) where it tried to persuade the most gullible of its followers that it had “won” the case since not all its statements were declared defamatory (but seventeen out of thirty-two were). Later in 2021, on September 13, *Bitter Winter* published an internal document

of FECRIS where FECRIS's legal consultant admitted that the organization had been taught "a lesson" in the Hamburg case, and should learn that in the future FECRIS speakers "should be able to prove what they assert" (Introvigne 2021b).

The Court of Hamburg also warned against any use of its decision to argue that the fourteen statements it declared non-defamatory were true, explaining that statements can be at the same time "inaccurate" and not defamatory. Ignoring this warning, FECRIS implied in its press release that the Court of Hamburg had certified that these statements were not false. Among them, there was one numbered as 1.6 in the court case, which read: "All tales of alleged 'persecution' against Jehovah's Witnesses [in Russia] are nothing more than a primitive propaganda stroke. This information is not true."

This is a clear example of a statement that it is obviously "inaccurate" but was regarded as not constituting defamation by the German judges; stating that somebody who is clearly persecuted is not persecuted is silly and immoral, but is not defamatory. However, what is interesting here is that as late as March 2021, after documents from several international institutions and governments had condemned Russia for its persecution of the Jehovah's Witnesses, FECRIS was still claiming that there was no persecution and that reports of persecution were "nothing more than a primitive propaganda stroke." This attitude is highly significant, and indicates that support for the Russian persecution of religious minorities labeled as "cults" was so crucial for FECRIS that it would defend it even in court.

Just as they went to China to support persecution of Falun Gong and other religious minorities, FECRIS representatives went to Russia to support persecution of groups labeled as "destructive cults" there. The fact that FECRIS disassociated itself from its Russian affiliates in 2022 over the war in Ukraine does not change its decade-long support for the Russian aggression against religious liberty, nor have these positions been publicly repudiated.

On May 15–16, 2009, a FECRIS symposium was organized in St. Petersburg, during which Dvorkin became FECRIS' Vice President. Significantly, we read in a press release that

during the conference, the Minister of Justice of the Russian Federation A.V. Konovalov, met with the leadership of FECRIS and the Rector of St. Petersburg State University N.M. Kropachev, in a meeting which took place in the office of the latter. A similar meeting was also held in the Constitutional Court of the Russian Federation, where a

group of conference participants was received by the Judge of the Constitutional Court of the Russian Federation S.M. Kazantsev. During these meetings, the parties exchanged information and discussed ways to prevent the negative consequences of the activities of totalitarian cults (Dvorkin and Semenov 2009).

The then President of FECRIS, Friedrich Griess, later noted, as if it was not a coincidence, that

A few days later, on 20 May 2009, FECRIS was granted Special consultative status by the United Nations Organization's Department of Social and Economic Affairs, ECOSOC (Griess 2009).

At the same conference, Pastor Thomas Gandow from Germany presented the case for an American conspiracy and asked:

Is the USA using such pretexts with an anti-European political slant because of the organization or for them, or do the USA only use such organizations and cults as a pretext and means for interventions? (Gandow 2009).

A paranoid version of the same argument was offered by a representative from Belarus, Vladimir A. Martinovich. He claimed that the American CIA decided “to exploit missionaries in the interest of the secret service,” and connected the infiltration of “cults” into Belarus with the birth of local democratic movements criticizing the Lukashenko regime (Martinovich 2009). Hailing the Russian anti-cult campaign, Dvorkin said,

We felt that we are not alone and that the most sincere, responsible, honest, and wise people in Europe [meaning the FECRIS representatives] support our work and offer us to work together (Dvorkin 2009).

c. Gerry Armstrong's Letter to Putin

One speaker at the 2009 FECRIS conference in St. Petersburg was Canadian anti-cultist Gerry Armstrong (FECRIS 2009). He is not a member of any FECRIS affiliate, but showed up repeatedly at lectures and conferences in Russia organized by the Russian FECRIS organizations. He was a speaker even in remote Salekhard, on the Arctic Circle, in 2017 at an anti-cult conference, together with FECRIS leaders such as Dvorkin and the Italian Luigi Corvaglia, and Pastor Gandow (Lukashkin 2017).

Armstrong is not a representative of FECRIS, but is an interesting character. He is a former Scientologist who in 1986 entered into a settlement where he

received \$800,000 (Court of Appeal, First District, Division 4, California 2005; reportedly, \$300,000 went to his lawyer) against his undertaking to maintain in the future

strict confidentiality and silence with respect to his experiences with the Church of Scientology and any knowledge or information he may have concerning the Church of Scientology, [Scientology's founder] L. Ron Hubbard [1911–1986], or any of the organizations, individuals and entities

associated with Hubbard and Scientology, and to return to Scientology documents the Church claimed he had stolen (“Mutual Release of All Claims and Settlement Agreement” 2016; for details about the Armstrong case, see Introvigne 2021c, 54–58).

By his own admission, Armstrong breached the agreement hundreds of times, lost several court cases for this reason, and a warrant for arrest was issued against him in California (see e.g. Armstrong 2014).

Armstrong, thus, cannot go to the United States, but he can go to Russia. And he had been there several times (see e.g., Filippov 2011). While his anti-cult lectures are of no great interest, what is more interesting is his political propaganda on behalf of the Putin regime, which is propagated both by Armstrong's own web sites, which have a certain audience within the anti-cult circuit, and by Russian Orthodox and anti-cult media outlets (Armstrong 2014).

Going well beyond the issue of “cults,” Armstrong wrote in 2014 a letter to “Dear President Putin,” telling him that

US propaganda has been inciting enmity toward Russia with the sort of war level rhetoric and claims that were used to ratchet up support and pave the way for US military action in Iraq, Libya, Syria, etc. US media has worked assiduously to turn the term “pro-Russian” into something automatically negative.

“I am dead set against the west and the US's superpower hypocrisy,” Armstrong told Putin. Speaking about Russia's actions in Syria, Armstrong called Putin's attitude “highly intelligent, reasonable and presidential.” He wrote to Putin that his actions in Syria “averted a catastrophe in the region, and brought relief and hope to many other people like me around the world. Thank you” (Armstrong 2014).

This is another example of how the anti-cultists' support of totalitarian regimes tend to move from “cults” to a broader approval of their non-democratic attitudes

and even wars of aggression. Perhaps some anti-cultists believe that only by eliminating democracy and democratic control on the governments' actions, if necessary destroying one Syrian city or two in the process, may crackdowns on "cults" become really effective.

d. Russian FECRIS' Anti-Cultism Exported Abroad

The Russian FECRIS has also made a concerted effort to export its model of anti-cultism and governmental repression of "cults" into countries friendly to Russia. This has created serious problems for religious liberty in the countries of Central Asia, Armenia, and elsewhere, where Russian anti-cultists participated in conferences and lectures, and disseminated an ideology that led to the repression of Jehovah's Witnesses and other groups. Moscow-based rights advocate Sova Center confirmed in a 2020 report that "Russian extremist legislation has been and remains the model anti-extremist legislation for Central Asian countries" (Sova Center for Information and Analysis 2020a, 60).

In Kyrgyzstan, in 2021, when the Prosecutor General's Office tried to ban books and brochures of the Jehovah's Witnesses as "extremist," it largely relied on material produced by the Russian FECRIS affiliates, although it eventually lost the case at the Pervomayskiy District Court of the City of Bishkek (see Introvigne 2021d). On March 22, 2022, the European Court of Human Rights, ruling against Armenia in a case concerning the Jehovah's Witnesses, noted how this material had reached even the war-thorn Nagorno-Karabakh and was used to promote religious repression there (see Introvigne 2022).

In May 2020, President Vladimir Putin approved a new version of the "Strategy to Counter Extremism Until 2025," which included the promotion and funding of "international anti-extremist cooperation," including in the field of "religious extremism" and combating organizations endangering "traditional Russian spiritual values" (Sova Center for Information and Analysis 2020b).

e. The FECRIS Affiliate in Serbia

One country where the Russian FECRIS' and Dvorkin's material has been largely disseminated is Serbia. There is a FECRIS affiliate in Serbia too, the

Center for Anthropological Studies, which during the course of its history had among its leaders some curious characters. One is Colonel Bratislav Petrović, a neuropsychiatrist by trade who, according to a critical report published in 2005, had been also involved in the ethnic hate propaganda of the regime of President Slobodan Milošević (1941–2006) (Duval and Jankovic 2005).

Another is Zoran Luković, a police captain who publicly stated that two homicides committed in 2007 by a madman (who was found by the court as having no connection with any “cult”) were clearly “modelled after the Satanist rituals of Count Dracula” (Jankovic 2012, 371: neither the historical nor the fictional Dracula of Bram Stoker’s [1847–1912] novel was a Satanist). Among “cults” (“секте” in Serbian) in general, Luković listed the Baptists, the Seventh-day Adventists, the Mormons, the members of the Theosophical Society, and the Freemasons (Luković 2000). He characterized “cult members” as “mental manipulators,”

mentally ill people, alcoholics and drug addicts who end up in psychiatric institutions or in cemeteries, perpetrators of the worst criminal acts like murder, robbery and rape, people who deal in prostitution (Luković 2000, 34 and 37).

Once again, there is no evidence that FECRIS has ever disassociated itself from the outrageous claims of its Serbian affiliate.

f. Russian Anti-Cultists’ Support for the 2022 War of Aggression Against Ukraine

After the Ukrainian war started, the groups listed until the end of March on FECRIS’s web site as FECRIS Russian affiliates unequivocally supported the war.

Some of the texts they published were truly disturbing, such as the comment in an article republished on the website of Archpriest Alexander Novopashin, who is or was the Vice President of the FECRIS affiliate Center for Religious Studies, that Mariupol after 2014 was “occupied by pure, unalloyed Nazis,” which is the usual Russian propaganda argument to justify the atrocities perpetrated there (Kozyrev 2022). It would be no defense, in this as in other cases quoted in this paragraph, that Novopashin only reprinted articles from Russian media. Reprinting is in itself a political act, and implies approval.

On the same Novopashin’s website, echoing again the usual propaganda, another article explained that

Ukraine’s problem is fascism... fascism must be destroyed... Fascists cannot be defended. One of the main tragedies of Ukraine is that the neo-Nazis seized power and forced the army to fight for their ideology. Ordinary Ukrainian boys are dying—not for their land, no. No one takes the land from the Ukrainians, and even the leadership of the cities does not change when Russian troops enter there. The guys are dying defending the interests of the Nazis (Komarov 2022).

Yet another text republished on the same website, titled “May God Help Give Peace to Ukraine By the Hands of Russian Peacekeepers,” argued that

in reality, there is no Ukrainian statehood. There is, on the one hand, a gang of thieves and international speculators, and on the other hand, a gang of fanatics and murderers (Vasilik 2022).

As for the website of the St. Irenaeus Center, Dvorkin’s own organization, it summarized on March 18 an interview given by another leading Russian anti-cultist, Roman Silantyev, who mused about “the upcoming parade of victory over Ukrainian Nazism,” and claimed that what the media described as school shootings by disturbed teenagers in Russia had been in fact organized by “the centers of information and psychological operations of the Armed Forces of Ukraine.” Silantyev stated that “so far the majority of the population of Ukraine considers themselves Christians, but this was also the case in the openly anti-Christian Third Reich.” In fact, he claimed, the real religion in Ukraine is a ritualized hatred of Russia with the intention of destroying Russia. For Russians, it was “better to hit first” (“С началом операции на Украине в РФ заметно снизилась напряженность в межрелигиозной сфере – эксперт” 2022).

The Saratov branch of the Center for Religious Studies, still a FECRIS affiliate at that date, published a letter to its supporters and friends on March 2 claiming that “the West has long understood that we cannot be defeated in a war on the battlefield,” but was waging a proxy war through the “cults,” which contribute to spread such absurd theories as that “Russia is an aggressor” and it “bombs civilians.” The Saratov anti-cult center tried to recruit police informants

to help in monitoring the activities of this kind of provocateurs. Please send screenshots, the data indicated by them (names and surnames, phone numbers and e-mail addresses) for further analysis, which is carried out by our anti-cult organizations together with law enforcement agencies of the Russian Federation (Saratov Branch of the Center for

Religious Studies 2022; by the way, at the time of this writing the website still mentions that the Saratov Branch is affiliated with FECRIS).

FECRIS may tell us that the Russian FECRIS branches have been expelled or suspended. However, at the time of this writing Dvorkin is still a FECRIS board member. More importantly, the aggressive attitude against Ukraine is not something the Russian FECRIS branches developed only in 2022. It went on for many years before the 2022 war, without any criticism by the FECRIS leadership.

g. The Contribution of the Russian FECRIS to the Pre-2022 Campaigns Against Ukraine

The Russian policy on Ukraine was not created all of a sudden in 2022. It developed from 2004 on, when Russia built a narrative that the “Orange Revolution” was an American-Western anti-Russian conspiracy, and continued in 2014 when the second popular revolt against the filo-Russian politician, then President, Viktor Yanukovich, was again branded as an American plot, which justified the Russian invasion of Crimea and of Donbass, where the two pseudo-“independent republics” of Donetsk and Luhansk were proclaimed.

The role of the Russian FECRIS and the anti-cult movement was to insist that the American-Western conspiracy against Russia included “cults” as a tool to Westernize Ukraine. The importance of FECRIS’ role, of course, should not be exaggerated. “Cults” were certainly not the main theme of the Russian rhetoric about a Western plot whose aim was to separate Ukraine from Russia. However, the importance of the “cult” argument should not be underestimated either. As we have seen, Putin’s ideology derives from an old nationalist tradition dating back to Ilyn and the beginning of the 20th century, which promoted the idea that Russia is under siege and the West tries to destroy the Russian spirit through three main tools, the propaganda of democracy, the apology of homosexuality, and the “cults” used to undermine the Orthodox identity of Russia and the Russosphere. “Cults” are not the only element of this alleged conspiracy, but are a significant part of it.

Since the Orange Revolution of 2004 the Russian FECRIS devoted considerable resources to prove that “cultists” maneuvered by the United States were playing a key role in the creation of a Ukrainian identity separate from

Russia. They mentioned three smoking guns allegedly proving the Western conspiracy.

The first was that Arseniy Yatsenyuk, who was Ukraine's Prime Minister between 2014 and 2016, after Yanukovich was removed from the presidency, was a Scientologist, or at least he was "controlled by the CIA through Scientology," as Dvorkin told in 2014 a Serbian web site. "Behind the Ukrainian crisis, there is a secret plan of a group of religious cults and sects in which the political leadership of Ukraine itself is participating," Dvorkin claimed ("The CIA Controls Arseniy Yatsenyuk through Scientology" 2014). In an interview published in his own web site, Dvorkin offered more details. Scientologists

put Yatsenyuk into a trance, pumped out all compromising information about him. And the person passed under the control of the Scientologists. Scientology concluded a secret agreement with the U.S. CIA; therefore, it is clear under whose control Arseniy Yatsenyuk is (Shatilova 2014).

That Yatsenyuk is "controlled by Scientology" has been repeated time and again. There is only one problem about this story, it is not true. Not even Tony Ortega, one of the most extreme anti-cultists and critics of Scientology in the United States and one who would normally believe all sort of anti-Scientology propaganda, bought Dvorkin's story. From the beginning, he wrote in February 2014,

we had serious doubts about that story, which was thin on details. For its allegation about Scientology, it pointed to Yatsenyuk's Wikipedia entry, which claimed that Yatsenyuk, 40, was primarily involved in Scientology through his sister Alina Steel, 47, who lives in Santa Barbara and was supposedly an auditor and heavily into the church. But shortly after the Dallas story appeared, that allegation was scrubbed from the Wikipedia entry in English (the assertion still exists in Wikipedia's Russian-language version).

Ortega found no evidence of Alina's involvement in Scientology, either, and her daughter dismissed it as "crap" (Ortega 2014).

Perhaps because he became aware of criticism even within the international anti-cult network, Dvorkin later offered the version that "we cannot directly call Yatsenyuk a Scientologist. We can only say that, according to many experts, he had connections with them." But he insisted that,

There is a curious fact: As soon as the Kiev junta, which came to power as a result of a coup, where the prime minister is suspected of having links with Scientology, began to have problems, the director of the CIA arrived incognito in the capital of Ukraine and held secret meetings (Chernykh 2014).

The Atlantic also investigated the matter and concluded that Yatsenyuk was not a Scientologist. “Despite popular online rumors that he is either a Scientologist or Jewish, Yatsenyuk identifies himself as a Ukrainian Greek Catholic,” i.e., a “Uniate,” as Orthodox call those who maintain a Greek liturgy but are united with the Holy See. But perhaps, *The Atlantic* noted, for Russian propaganda “it’s a difference without a distinction” (Shamanska 2014). In fact, Dvorkin claimed in 2014 that

Euromaidan is an explosive religious mixture. Secretly influenced by Scientologists. Uniates, neo-Pentecostal, neo-pagan, Baptists spoke openly. First of all, Euromaidan was Uniate. The Uniate Church is one of the aggressive parts of Roman Catholicism (Chernykh 2014).

The second smoking gun was the fact that some Ukrainian anti-Russian politicians were Evangelical or Pentecostal. Oleksandr Turchynov, who was Acting President of Ukraine for a few months after Yanukovich’s fall in 2014 and held other important political positions, is a Baptist minister. He is associated with Word of Life Ministries, a missionary organization founded in 1940 by Jack Wyrzten (1913–1996), which has a considerable success in Ukraine. Very few people, even in the anti-cult camp, would call Baptist churches or mainline missionary groups such as Word of Life “cults.” However, this is what Word of Life is according to the Russian FECRIS. They maneuvered to have it banned as “extremist” in Russia, as well as in the pseudo-republics of Donetsk and Luhansk. Dvorkin’s website still calls it a “totalitarian cult” (Vasiliev 2022). Dvorkin acknowledges that Turchynov has internationally recognized credentials as a Baptist minister, but claims he “preaches not like an average Baptist pastor, but much more harshly, manipulatively,” and uses techniques of “manipulation of consciousness” (Shatilova 2014).

The Russian FECRIS also mentions that Leonid Chernovetskyi, another political opponent of Yanukovich, who was mayor of Kiev between 2006 and 2012 (and later moved to Georgia and became a Georgian citizen) was a member of the Embassy of the Blessed Kingdom of God for All Nations, known in short as Embassy of God, a Pentecostal denomination established in 1993 in Ukraine by Nigerian pastor Sunday Adelaja. The Embassy of God claims some 100,000 members in Ukraine and has expanded into several foreign countries.

Pastor Adelaja supported the Orange Revolution in 2004, something the Russians did not forget. After the Russian invasion of 2022, according to his

Facebook page, he was informed by the Ukrainian authorities that he had been placed on a Russian hit list, and had to leave the country. On the other hand, judging from the same Facebook page, Adelaja does not fit the profile of a rabid anti-Russian. He praised Putin for his opposition to same-sex marriage and criticized those who believed Ukraine should join the NATO.

Nonetheless, the fact that the Embassy of God has converted thousands of Ukrainians baptized in the Orthodox Church is enough for the Russian FECRIS activists to identify it as a “cultic” organization. The fact that Adelaja is a “Black native of Africa” is also regularly mentioned, with easily detectable racist implications. “Ukrainian Neo-Pentecostals” such as those in the Embassy of God, Dvorkin’s website proclaimed, are not Ukrainian at all. They are “Americans” and evidence that “the West has been diligently introducing, encouraging and financing cultic groups in Russia and the post-Soviet space” (“Зарубежные религиозные организации и современная ситуация в России и на Украине” 2015).

The third “evidence” the Russian FECRIS organizations offer of the presence of “cults” infiltrated by the West into Ukraine with anti-Russian purposes is that some of the right-wing Ukrainian nationalists opposing Russia are neo-pagans or even “Satanists.” Speaking in November 2014 at a conference in Stavropol, Dvorkin stated that “the neo-pagans were very active on the Maidan,” and that “the neo-pagan project is also sponsored from abroad. This is a very, very serious danger.” At the same conference, as Dvorkin’s website reported, Metropolitan Kirill of Stavropol and Nevinnomyssk, also spoke, and claimed that neo-pagan movements have their “funding roots in the West: this is the work of special services, this is the same as the creation of the NGOs that prepared the Maidan” (“Дворкин: неоязыческий проект спонсируется Западом” 2014).

Neo-pagans who dream to restore pre-Christian traditional religions do exist in Ukraine, as they exist in Russia and other countries. Scholars have evaluated their strength in Ukraine between 0.1 and 0.2% of the population (Ivakhiv 2005). The interest of mentioning Ukrainian neo-pagans for the Russian FECRIS affiliates is that some of them (not all) have right-wing political ideas, and neo-pagan symbols have been used by nationalist militias. Specialized scholars have warned that, apart from the symbols, neo-pagans are a minority (as are neo-Nazis, although they do exist) within nationalist Ukrainian militias (Umland 2019), and that there are as many, if not more, neo-Nazis and right-wing neo-

pagans fighting for, rather than against, Russia in the Donbass war (Likhachev 2016).

Yet, the Russian FECRIS affiliates offered their supports as “experts of cults” to the campaign depicting Ukraine as dominated by “neo-pagan Nazis” busy destroying its Christian, Orthodox, and Russian identity. They added the preposterous claim that Ukrainian neo-pagans are “sponsored” and “funded” by “the West.” In 2021, Father Alexander Kuzmin, signing as Executive Secretary of the umbrella organization gathering the various FECRIS affiliates in Russia, insisted about the alleged connection between neo-pagan movements and Western intelligence services. He wrote that

some ten years ago, when we, experts on cults, talked about the fact that intelligence services were involved in destructive cults, their creation, promotion and direction of their missionary activity, it sounded like exotic, like declassified counterintelligence information. Now information wars are not surprising to anyone, just as it is not surprising that cults have long become an instrument of political struggle (Kuzmin 2021).

Even Satanists were said to be part of the picture. In 2014, Dvorkin’s website reported that a “Church of Satan” was building a place of worship in the Ukrainian village of Pasty’rskoe. It claimed the temple was being built with the authorization of Ukrainian authorities, and commented that Ukraine was becoming a “laboratory for cults,” and “they are trying in every possible way to reduce the popularity of Orthodoxy” (Sokolov 2014). Unmentioned was that Satanists exist in Russia too. In 2016, a Satanic Church of Russia, established in 2013 and whose leader goes by the name of Oleg Sataninsky was legally registered in Russia—perhaps because Sataninsky expressed his support for Putin’s anti-extremism and anti-proselytization laws (“Official Russian Satanist Church Declares Opposition to Religious Extremism” 2017).

The triple infiltration into Ukraine, allegedly organized by “the West,” of the Church of Scientology, Evangelical or Pentecostal “totalitarian cults” such as Word of Life or the Embassy of God, and neo-pagans and Satanists, was used by the Russian FECRIS affiliates to slander the Orange Revolution and Euromaidan. The Greek Catholic Church was also attacked as an accomplice. “Maidan was compared by many experts of cults to a well-organized destructive cult,” Dvorkin’s website proclaimed (Sokolov 2014). In 2016, Dvorkin gave a lecture on “Totalitarian Cults and Color Revolutions,” where he explained that

the first Maidan [2004] was made by neo-Pentecostals and they got their own mayor of Kyiv, Leonid Chernovetskyi. The composition of the second “Maidan” is more complex: the Uniate [Greek Catholic] Church, Scientologists, and neo-pagans participated in it (Dvorkin 2016).

FECRIS Russian affiliates did not create the propaganda against Ukraine’s democratic movement. Yet, as “experts on cults” they provided the necessary caution to the theory that “cults” were one of the tools “the West” used to organize this movement, whose aim is to separate Ukraine from Russia. In 2014, they also immediately went to the newly proclaimed pseudo-republics of Donetsk and Luhansk, where “cults” and several Evangelical and Pentecostal churches were banned with the cooperation and applause of the Russian FECRIS (Slyusarenko 2015), giving a taste of what would happen in a “Russified” Ukraine.

Conclusion

FECRIS, whose role in spreading anti-cultism throughout the world we noted in our first White Paper, has consistently supported the crackdown of China and Russia, two totalitarian and anti-democratic regimes, against religious minorities labeled as “cults,” a crackdown that international organizations and democratic governments have denounced and which has involved arrests, torture, and extra-judicial killings.

From the infamous participation of French anti-cultists to the Beijing “International Symposium on Destructive Cults” in 2000, FECRIS and its affiliates have supported the merciless repression of Falun Gong and other groups labeled as *xie jiao* in China. As evidence of atrocities piled up, FECRIS and its affiliates never criticized the Chinese regime’s anti-cult policy. In fact, a symbiotic relation has continued, and FECRIS representatives have even defended Xi Jinping’s regime against criticism in fields unrelated to religion.

The most notorious Russian anti-cultist, and the main architect of the Russian repression of minority religions, Alexander Dvorkin, has been Vice President of FECRIS for twelve years, from 2009 to 2021, and one of its most visible public faces. At the time of this writing, he remains in the FECRIS’ Board of Directors. The Russian affiliates have remained among the most active branches of FECRIS until March 2022, when during the war in Ukraine they were reportedly expelled

or suspended—but somewhat secretly and without public announcements to the date of this writing.

Before March 2022, FECRIS never distanced itself from Dvorkin or its Russian FECRIS affiliates. At the 2009 FECRIS symposium in St. Petersburg, FECRIS leaders even met with the Minister of Justice of the Russian Federation, exchanging information and suggestions on how to better combat “cults.” Later, FECRIS went to great lengths to defend even the most absurd statements of its Russian affiliates. In Germany, in 2020, FECRIS defended in court the statement that the persecution of the Jehovah’s Witnesses in Russia is just the invention of “a primitive propaganda.”

For eighteen years, from the Orange Revolution of 2004 to the start of the 2022 war, FECRIS’ Russian affiliates contributed to the Russian policy and campaign of slander against Ukraine and the Ukrainian democratic movement, claiming that as “cult experts” they were in a position to prove that a Western conspiracy had infiltrated into Ukraine “cults” that had a crucial role in the first and the second Maidan. This demonization of Ukraine paved the way for the 2022 war and its atrocities. All this went on for almost two decades, during which the Russian affiliates were hailed by FECRIS for their activism and successes, and Dvorkin was promoted by FECRIS as one of its main leaders.

We hope that the “expulsion” or “suspension” of the FECRIS Russian affiliates will be followed by the expulsion and public denunciation of Dvorkin. But it will be, at any rate, too little too late. The problem is not only organizational. It is ideological. Expelling Dvorkin would be of little use without expelling from FECRIS Dvorkin’s ideology. This White Paper has raised the question whether Dvorkin’s ideology is not simply the ideology of FECRIS itself.

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