

**Anti-Cult Wars in Europe: FECRIS, Alexander Dvorkin and Others.  
The Case of the Applied Sciences Association in Odessa**

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**ABSTRACT:** For 25 years, the European Federation of Centers of Research and Information on Sectarianism (FECRIS) has been fueling social hostility against spiritual minorities and new religious movements in Europe. FECRIS, which is almost fully funded by the French state, is represented in over 25 European countries. Through its Russian affiliate association, headed by its vice-president Alexander Dvorkin, FECRIS contributes to the persecution of Christian Evangelicals and Pentecostals, Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons, Falun Gong practitioners, Hare Krishna devotees, and others throughout the entire former Soviet space. Although the French state is secular, Alexander Dvorkin, the vice-president of a publicly-funded French organization, is an employee of the Russian Orthodox Church. This paper points at this unhealthy alliance and its dramatic consequences. Detailing the case of the Applied Sciences Association in Odessa, this piece summarizes interviews with victims of Dvorkin's anti-cult organization and analyses the strategies used by Dvorkin to create an imaginary cult and spread artificial panic.

**KEYWORDS:** FECRIS, Alexander Dvorkin, Anti-Cult Movement in Russia, Leopold Szondi, Applied Sciences Association, Oleg Maltsev, Religion in Ukraine.

*The European Federation of Centers of Research and Information on Sectarianism (FECRIS)*

In 2016, my organization Human Rights Without Frontiers investigated a group in Odessa, Ukraine, the Applied Sciences Association, which had worked to defend its philosophy and its beliefs against a Moscow-based anti-cult organization close to the Russian Orthodox Church headed by Alexander Dvorkin, vice-president of FECRIS.

FECRIS, a non-profit association under French law, founded in Paris on 30 June 1994, serves as an umbrella organization for associations that defend alleged victims of “cults” in more than 25 European countries (Fautré 2017).

While FECRIS claims to be politically, philosophically and religiously neutral, in reality it is a melting pot of associations with various, and sometimes even contradictory, interests, which seek to fight against religious minorities. FECRIS experiences internal tensions and dissensions, which is understandable as it has lumped together players backed by various traditional religions, such as the Roman Catholic Church and Orthodox Churches, as well as anti-religious atheistic movements.

Over 92% of FECRIS’ budget comes from public funding, the majority of which is financed by France, a secular state, in the framework of its anti-cult policy. FECRIS member associations in France are financed for over 90% of their budget by state institutions (Duval 2012; Duval and Fautré 2017).

The president of FECRIS was then a former British conservative MP, Thomas Sackville, and the vice-president was Alexander Dvorkin, an employee of the Russian Orthodox Church. In Russia, Dvorkin was previously tasked to protect the Orthodox Church against “cults.” In 1993, with the blessing of the Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia Alexy II (1929–2008), he created the Saint Irenaeus of Lyons Centre for Religious Studies. The centre also hosts the missionary faculty department of St Tikhon’s Orthodox University in Moscow one of the objectives of which is to defend the Orthodox Church against “totalitarian and destructive cults.”

The Saint Irenaeus of Lyons Centre is the head centre of the Russian Association of Centres for Religious and Sectarian Studies (RATsIRS). Unsurprisingly, Alexander Dvorkin also serves as the president of RATsIRS; the vice-presidents are Archpriest Alexander Novopashin and Archpriest Alexander Shabanov; the executive secretary is priest Lev Semenov, Ph.D., associate professor.

There is a global network of so-called “parents’ initiatives” and other similar organisations in Russia (including missionary departments of Orthodox dioceses), the majority of which have become members of RATsIRS. There are also a number of so-called “rehabilitation centres,” which aim at reconverting followers of “non-traditional religions” to Orthodoxy (HRWF Correspondent in Russia 2012).

The FECRIS' member association in Russia and its regional affiliates are all financed by the Russian Orthodox Church and engage in the fight against Evangelicals, Pentecostals, Mormons, Baha'is, Jehovah's Witnesses, Falun Gong practitioners, Scientologists, and so on.

Alexander Dvorkin is well-known for popularizing the term "totalitarian cults," which, since 2000, has been used by defenders of the concept of "spiritual security" in Russia to designate peaceful religious denominations as potential threats to the hegemony of the Orthodox Church and the identity of the Russian people.

### *Russian Spiritual Security & French Laïcité*

In the Russian *National Security Concept* (Presidential Decree No 24 of 10 January 2000), the Putin administration states that,

Ensuring the national security of the Russian Federation also includes protection of the cultural, spiritual and moral legacy, historical traditions and the norms of social life, the preservation of the cultural wealth of all the peoples of Russia (...), along with counteraction against the negative influence of foreign religious organizations and missionaries (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation 2000).

Since then, the spiritual security concept has been used as a political tool, based on a paranoid attitude towards "foreign" enemies and "foreign" religious groups to restrict the right to religious freedom of Russian citizens who have decided to follow a non-traditional spiritual path (Payne 2010, 713–16). Members of FECRIS in Russia play prominent roles in encouraging the state's repressive policy towards religious movements of foreign origin, even when the group has been established for a long time in Russia, as it is the case of Jehovah's Witnesses, which was banned as "extremist" in April 2017 (HRWF 2017, 2018; Bulgarian Presidency of the European Union 2018).

Whilst the Constitution and laws in France provide for a total separation of state and religions and the respect of all creeds, the Russian State in practice privileges the Russian Orthodox Church as a key actor in the implementation of President Putin's spiritual security policy.

The spiritual security policy goes hand-in-hand with a religious cleansing policy targeting movements who are perceived as a threat to the identity of the

Russian people. The most recent example in line with the spiritual security concept, Dvorkin's mission, and the Russian Orthodox Church objectives, is the ban of Jehovah's Witnesses and its dramatic consequences: the impossibility of 170,000 Jehovah's Witnesses to enjoy their right to religious freedom, the confiscation of all the property of their 395 legal entities by the state, the opening of twenty criminal cases against them, and the imprisonment of seven of their members (as of 25 May 2018) (HRWF 2018).

Other examples of religious cleansing are the jailing of several members of the Church of Scientology, and the ban of two peaceful Muslim movements: Tablighi Jamaat and the followers of Said Nursi (1877–1960).

The question is: *How can France, a secular country, finance an organization like FECRIS whose vice-president, Alexander Dvorkin, is an agent of the Russian Orthodox Church, fuels social hostility towards non-Orthodox movements, and encourages repressive policies in Russia?*

### *Dvorkin, a "Cult Expert"?*

Alexander Dvorkin is not only a controversial figure on the international scene but also in Russia. In 2009, he was appointed by Russia's Justice Minister to head the Ministry's Expert Council for Conducting State Religious-Studies Expert Analysis. The mandate of this council is to investigate the activity, doctrines, leadership decisions, literature, and worship of any registered religious organization, and to recommend action to the relevant governmental authorities.

Robert C. Blitt, professor of law at the University of Tennessee and former international law specialist for the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), said the following about Russia's anti-cult policy and FECRIS' vice-president:

Russia has long relied on so-called expert studies for the purpose of categorizing and prosecuting certain religious groups. For example, in February 2009, the Russian Ministry of Justice established an Expert Religious Studies Council. This body had power to investigate religious organizations and reach conclusions regarding, among other things, whether the organization espoused extremist views. At the time, it was chaired by Alexander Dvorkin, an individual who lacked appropriate academic credentials as a religion specialist and was already known as 'Russia's most prominent "anti-cult" activist.' Often, individuals appointed to such councils, or even those tapped as prosecution experts in judicial proceedings, lack necessary and even basic qualifications (quoted in JW.org 2016).

Dr. Roman Lunkin, head of the Center for Religion and Society Studies at the Institute of Europe, Russian Academy of Sciences in Moscow; president of the Union of Experts on Religion and Law in Russia:

In defiance of all good sense, Russia's law-enforcement system generates completely ridiculous expert studies (and, it appears, they encourage loyal supporters to open expert centers). Regarding the Center for Sociocultural Expert Studies commissioned to analyze the Witnesses' Bible, not one of the experts has a degree in religious studies and they are not even familiar with the writings of Jehovah's Witnesses. Their analysis included quotes that were taken from information provided by the Irenaeus of Lyon Centre, a radical Orthodox anti-cult organization known for opposing Jehovah's Witnesses, as well as many other religions and denominations (quoted in JW.org 2016).

Alexander Dvorkin approved the banning of Jehovah's Witnesses and was also behind the campaign for the banning of the Hindu *Bhagavad Gita*. Fortunately, in 2011, a Russian court in Tomsk dismissed the case against the latter ban. Over the years, Russian Hindus have accused Dvorkin of hate speech against their community and religion, which has led to physical assaults against the leader of the national Hindu community and his family. Anti-Dvorkin demonstrations have taken place in India, during one of which his picture was burnt in effigy.

### *Non-Orthodox Communities Under Threat of the Anti-Cult Movements in Russia*

All non-Orthodox religious denominations and their members have been defamed and stigmatized by Alexander Dvorkin and the Saint Irenaeus of Lyons Centre for Religious Studies. However, FECRIS in France has never disavowed its vice-president when he used hate speech against Jehovah's Witnesses, Protestants (Evangelicals, Pentecostals, Baptists, Seventh-Day Adventists and others), Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, Falun Gong practitioners, the Salvation Army, Hare Krishna devotees, Mormons, the Church of Scientology, or Orthodox Churches that are not affiliated to the Moscow Patriarchate.

FECRIS in France did not repudiate Dvorkin even when he sided with China's advocacy for repression of Falun Gong during an anti-sect conference in Beijing on 12-13 May 2008. The Chinese campaign against this peaceful group has been repeatedly denounced by the UN Commission of Human Rights, the European Parliament, the US State Department, the US Commission on International Religious Freedom, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and others.

Despite this disrespect for religious freedom, France, a secular state, has continued to heavily finance FECRIS for years, while its vice-president Alexander Dvorkin and its clerical Russian member organization have been defaming, demonizing and persecuting non-Orthodox groups in Russia.

### *The Campaign Against the Applied Sciences Association in Odessa*

In Western Europe, anti-cult groups are confronted with decreasing interest of the media and diminishing financial support from governments, as Islamist terrorism has been increasingly making the headlines since the beginning of the century.

In Russia, anti-cultist Alexander Dvorkin and his associates can rely on the moral and financial support of the Russian Orthodox Church and the political support of President Putin. However, this iconic cult-hunter is also criticized at home by scholars, religious leaders of non-Orthodox communities and religions, and even some hierarchs of the Russian Orthodox Church. Therefore, to consolidate his image of tireless and successful cult-hunter, not only in Russia but also in the former Soviet space, he needs to continuously find new “dangerous totalitarian cults”—especially of foreign origin.

This is precisely how the Applied Sciences Association in Odessa, Ukraine became a target of Dvorkin in 2014-2016, even though it is not a religious movement. The Applied Sciences Association is an umbrella organization for three research institutes founded by Oleg Maltsev: The International Schicksalsanalyse (Fate Analysis) Community Research Institute, the Scientific Research Memory Institute and The Scientific Research Institute of World Martial Arts Traditions Study and Criminalistic Research on Weapon Handling.

Most of Maltsev’s activities are in the field of psychology and martial arts. He earned a first Ph.D. degree in psychology and is a candidate for a second one in religious studies. He used this academic training to investigate certain historical phenomena. His conclusion was that significant parts of the history that is being taught in schools and universities have been fabricated, and other relevant portions of history have been lost (see Maltsev 2018; Introvigne 2018; and Introvigne’s article in this issue of *The Journal of CESNUR*). His search for hidden secrets in history does not make him popular with everybody, particularly

because he often exposes the wrongdoings of certain organized religions, including the support offered by some in the Orthodox Church (such as monks at Mount Athos) to Nazism and anti-Semitism.

In 2012, cult-hunter Dvorkin and his henchmen had the opportunity to take advantage of the discontent of a lady in Odessa called Maria Kapar about the content of Maltsev's classes that she attended in the Applied Sciences Association. As the conflict escalated, she contacted Alexander Neveev, a psychologist in Russia, and presumably Dvorkin, who, without investigating the group, concluded together that she had been the victim of a "cult."

Happy to have discovered a new "cult," Dvorkin and Neveev posted a paper on the Internet accusing the group of connections with the medieval Order of Knights Templar, paramilitary activities, brainwashing, fraud, sexual abuse, as typical anti-cultists usually do for movements they do not like. Neveev and Dvorkin then suggested to Maria Kapar to organize a media campaign against Maltsev's association, his law firm, and his colleagues.

#### *An Account of Dvorkin's Fight Against an Imaginary "Cult" in Odessa*

In 2015, Alexander Dvorkin and Alexander Neveev masterminded from Russia an anti-cult operation in Odessa that destroyed the harmonious life of a family. On 2 October 2016, an investigative film entitled *Protect Your Dignity*, which denounces the abuse of weakness and financial exploitation of parents by anti-sect activists in Ukraine and Russia, was launched on YouTube (Нераскрытые 2016)

This docudrama is a joint production of the public organization Kavalyer with Brussels-based NGO Human Rights Without Frontiers (HRWF) and the Ukrainian *Unsolved Crimes* newspaper. The documentary-style film is based on a true story.

The film follows the story of a twenty-year old girl named Yulia Yalovaya and her family. Throughout the film, Russian-Ukrainian anti-cultists' group do not hesitate to manipulate her parents and to irremediably damage the harmonious relations existing in this family in order to destroy an imaginary cult and the reputation of Oleg Maltsev.

This movie realistically reveals the models and algorithms used by some anti-cultists to artificially create fear and social panic. As the film depicts, the anti-cult activists masterminding the campaign against the Applied Sciences Association and Oleg Maltsev were Alexander Dvorkin and Alexander Neveev in Moscow with the help of Maria Kapar in Odessa. To achieve their objective, these anti-cult activists recruited media representatives in Ukraine who were easily manipulated: Dmitry Bakaev (journalist of *Dumskaya TV*, and friend and fan of Alexander Neveev); Maria Kovalyova, Vyacheslav Kasim, Eugene Lysyi (*Channel 7* journalists in Odessa); Oksana Podnesbesnaya (journalist of *OODTRK TV*, and friend and fan of Alexander Neveev); and Dmitry Mikhailenko (journalist of the *Third Digital Channel*). All these people had supported Dvorkin and Neveev for various reasons, and became vivid representatives of what the Applied Sciences Association called, in its criticism of its critics, “religious extremism.”

### *The Story of Yulia Yalovaya*

Yulia Yalovaya, a twenty-year old Odessa native was an engineering student at the Odessa Maritime University. Until September 2015, Yalovaya was a journalist for *Unsolved Crimes*, and had a very close relationship with her parents; however, vice-president of FECRIS, Alexander Dvorkin, would soon put an end to this.

Her mother was first alerted to the situation by some negative information found on the Internet about Oleg Maltsev, who is also the co-founder of the Redut Law Company. This company had established the *Unsolved Crimes* newspaper, where Yulia was working as a journalist. After a long, vivid conversation with her daughter, Yulia’s mother said “You have to choose: your job or your parents.” Yulia decided she would try to keep both her job and her good relationship with her parents.

However, without her knowledge, her mother went to the police and reported that her daughter was involved in the activities of a criminal group. On 2 September 2015, police officers went to her parents’ house and asked her to follow them to the police station for a hearing. While in the car, she sent a SMS to Olga Panchenko, attorney at law and director of the Redut Law Company, asking for urgent assistance. At that time, Yulia was still unaware that her mother was behind this police investigation. Her parents joined her at the police station. Yulia’s mother was very upset and started pushing Yulia into the wall, shouting,



“She is my daughter and nobody will touch her. I don’t want that cult to send her to a prostitution ring.”

The whole atmosphere was very emotional. Yulia then realized that her mother, whom she had always fully trusted, was behind the whole family mess. The conversation with the police officers was very strange. They were not asking questions, but were trying to convince Yulia that her boss was a criminal, and announced that they wanted to know more about his activities. Attorneys at law Olga Panchenko and Evgenia Tarasenko arrived with a journalist to help Yulia. In all, Yulia was illegally kept for eight hours by the police officers and they only stopped interrogating her after other attorneys and journalists arrived (HRWF 2016).

### *Dvorkin’s Destructive Propaganda on the Internet*

The origin of Yulia’s problems with her family was the website of the Saint Irenaeus of Lyons Center for Religious Studies that her mother had accessed. The Center had been alerted about Maltsev’s group by the already mentioned Maria Kapar, who had also been accused by Maltsev of using his and the Applied Sciences Association’s name to support several illegal activities, and wanted to take revenge against him. “The accusations of the Saint Irenaeus Center were not supported by any evidence; it was simply a lie and this lie destroyed my family,” Yulia told Human Rights Without Frontiers. “My mother is a gullible person who was manipulated by Dvorkin and his henchmen. She was extorted 12,000 dollars for a media campaign for my ‘rescue.’ I was allegedly the ‘victim’ of a cult,” Yulia said. The fake story about the imaginary dangerous cult was broadcast on all Odessa TV channels. “These people, in particular Dmitriy Bakaev, slung mud at me—people from the whole city, where I live, saw it—and they did it for profit under the guise of Dvorkin’s extremist teachings,” Yulia concluded.

After that dramatic incident, the relations between Yulia and her mother were irretrievably damaged despite her efforts and she considered leaving the country (HRWF 2016).

### *Some Conclusions*

In this case, the actions of the anti-cultists led to the disruption of Yulia Yalovaya's family. On the other hand, the Applied Sciences Association reacted vigorously, and did not allow the anti-cultists to destroy the activities and the reputation of their organization, although some critics are still quoting materials posted on the Internet during the "Odessa cult wars." Actually, some of those who participated in the campaign orchestrated by Dvorkin and Neveev in Ukraine eventually lost their jobs, including Dmitry Mikhailenko, Dmitry Bakaev, and Vyacheslav Kasim.

An ordinary family in Odessa was destroyed because of the slanderous propaganda of anti-cult activists on the Internet. This is unfortunately not an isolated incident but a typical case highlighting the DNA of anti-cult organizations.

The same pattern of "collateral damage" has been identified in more than twenty countries where FECRIS is active: slander; victimization in the neighborhood, at the workplace and at school; damage to individuals' reputation; loss of jobs or promotions; dismissals; loss of visitation rights or child custody in divorce settlements; inability to rent facilities for religious ceremonies or for meetings; unilateral and unfounded closure of bank accounts of "cults" or of individuals affiliated with them; humanitarian agencies' refusal to accept donations from "cults," denial of access to public display boards, and police surveillance.

A number of these issues have been successfully challenged by some religious groups and their members at the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg (Fautré 2018), but only after years of expensive judicial procedures.

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