

Intervention by Hanène Romdhane, Head of the MIVILUDES department at the
SG-CIPDR, (FR)

Madam President of FECRIS,

Mr President of Info Secte,

Mr Mayor,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

First of all, I would like to thank Mrs Danièle Muller, president of FECRIS, for her invitation. It is with a great deal of humility that I speak before you, even though it is only a few months since I took up my post at the head of the Interministerial Mission of Vigilance and Combat against cults with undue influence, MIVILUDES.

The objective of my nomination last April by the Minister Delegate to the Minister of the Interior, in charge of Citizenship, Marlène SCHIAPPA, was to provide new impetus to the fight against cults with undue influence. I assure you of my full determination as well as that of my interministerial team which, I must say, in addition to its expertise in this field, has displayed great availability as well as a true collaborative spirit to carry out this mission.

In this speech, I will try to describe the evolution of cults with undue influence in the era of COVID 19.

MIVILUDES was particularly called on during the health crisis. In 2019, the mission received 2804 referrals, as against 3008 in 2020, and yesterday, on September 24, 2021, we were at ...

The health crisis has significantly destabilised a large number of people who have lost their bearings in a complex, interconnected society where information is as extensive as it is contradictory.

In this context, people's doubts and fears have been a particularly fertile ground for organised movements, but also for simple individuals willing to exploit these vulnerabilities for their own interest.

In addition, the health crisis has isolated citizens by preventing them from socialising outside of their homes. The Internet was then thought of as an elsewhere, as a place to meet, to exchange and to share. Since then, the Internet has been able to serve as a sounding board for all the speeches coming from cultish movements or individuals. Eager to exploit this tool, cultish movements have reinforced their digital seduction strategy. They have become true marketing experts. They know perfectly how to communicate through blogs, videos, with their contents integrating expressions and words calibrated to optimise the effect of search engines.

Furthermore, faced with the de facto and de jure prohibition of meeting new individuals directly in the context of isolation, the cultish movements have adapted by dropping off mail at your home themselves. Through these letters, these movements present themselves as saviours, a link with the outside world in the face of isolated individuals.

Cults have therefore adapted to the health crisis to come directly to you. You don't have to go to them anymore, they invite themselves into your home, into your living room.

If the use of the internet has allowed the massive diffusion of their speeches, the methods of psychological subjection to gain control of an individual are not new. They are based on four phases, which you know: seduction, deconstruction, reconstruction and consolidation. In the final stage, the victim is subjected to the affirmation of absolute truths supported by fallacious rhetoric. Doubt and counterargument are less and less tolerated and can lead to sanctions. The autonomy of the individual is neutralised. Worship of an individual or group is developed, resulting in submission and unquestioning availability. The person is deprived of

his/her skills and autonomy in favour of a group or individual who dictates the rules, and punishes or rewards. It is this dependency that is then used.

Two major themes were particularly exploited by cultish movements during the health crisis: health and personal development.

First of all, in the field of health, MIVILUDES notes the proliferation of alternative therapeutic techniques of a cultish nature.

Indeed, conspiracy theories have multiplied and found an unprecedented echo during this crisis. Movements or personalities that oppose scientific medicine have used old rhetoric, involving a supposed conspiracy of the public authorities in connection with the pharmaceutical industry. The magnitude of the epidemic and the restrictions that it brought on the freedoms of each person have allowed these ideas to be developed further and to be updated by giving them a particularly dramatic twist.

Numerous cults have then taken up these theories. The Covid-19 vaccine is described as ineffective, even dangerous, or as a tool for controlling and tracing people. In addition, eager to obtain recognition and media coverage, some medical professionals have largely participated in the disinformation related to the health crisis, going so far as to deny the existence of the epidemic, and have made comments that are completely unfounded scientifically. In this respect, let us recall that the Code of Ethics of Physicians specifies that¹ “when the physician participates in a public information action of an educational, scientific or health nature, whatever the means of dissemination, he/she shall only report confirmed data, shall exercise caution and shall be concerned about the repercussions of his/her remarks on the public”. These precautions were lacking during the health crisis.

¹Article 4127-13 of the Public Health Code (Decree No. 2020-1662 of December 22 2020, amending the code of ethics of physicians and relating to their professional communication).

The final objective of these groups is to discredit conventional medicine in order to promote their own “miracle” remedies: non-conventional practices for therapeutic purposes.

More broadly, this anxiety-provoking climate of distrust of conventional medicine, and by extension of the State, encourages individuals to seek care from entities that had long been excluded from the health field. Religious and spiritual doctrines have thus regained a certain popularity. In this context, certain beliefs have seized the opportunity to propose a range of allegedly miraculous methods: mistletoe injection, roqya, hijama or ayahwasca (ayawazka) and iboga infusion which are nothing other, but products classified as narcotics in the public health code.

If their practice is initially a matter of freedom of conscience, they can involve a process of mental control and go as far as a cultish drift. Their sacred and dogmatic nature offers a powerful lever to the so-called caregiver to establish their authority over their victim, to weaken them, and to exploit them.

Cults have also modified the social concept of health which aims to pathologise healthy people. Let me explain.

The charismatic leader will try to convince them that they are pathological because they may suffer, or even simply because they may die. In short, because they are human. True good health can only be achieved by following their precepts.

This is why it is important to constantly develop means of prevention against the intrusion of cultish movements into the intimate sphere that is our health. Information for the medical and paramedical profession, as well as for the general public, must be at the heart of the action of MIVILUDES in order to prevent this particularly invasive danger in this period of health crisis. Everyone must be able to make clear, independent and informed decisions about their own health based on verified and verifiable information.

The number of pseudo therapists promising personal development has also grown spectacularly during this period of doubt and questioning.

This is how pseudo coaches, who are experts in social network communication, put themselves on stage in their daily lives against the backdrop of luxury settings and display their supposed social success.

They start by giving a dismissive opinion about your way of life. They offer personal development training with catchy slogans such as “Awaken your inner genius!”, “Dare to live the life you deserve!”, “Become the entrepreneur that lives up to who you are!” or “Never alone again! ».

This type of training represents the hope of a better or at least different life and an opportunity for significant and immediate profits without any particular qualification. If you listen to them, in a few hours, in a few days, anyone can become a trader, a company manager and make profits amounting to several million euros.

So, the pseudo coach invents a method, protects it and teaches it to new followers in a training centre, especially online. They use terms borrowed from medicine (muscle, neuro-emotional, quantum medicine), spirituality (bio-energetic harmonisation) or economics (trading, investment, stock market indexes), all with a single purpose: to legitimise their alleged expertise in their field.

The peculiarity of this pseudo coach is that they sell a supposed enrichment for others which, in reality, only serves their own unique interest.

In addition, there is a system that allows the coach to create an infinitely deployable enrichment chain: this is the pyramid system which, as a reminder, is illegal in France.

Pyramid selling is a form of scam in which the profit does not really come from a sales activity as advertised, but mainly from the recruitment of new members. The term pyramid identifies the fact that only the initiators of the system (at the top) get rich by despoiling the members of the base.

But why is the pyramid system mentioned at MIVILUDES?

Simply because to develop this network, victims are constantly harassed on the Internet and social networks to ensure the active recruitment of new players. This tracking on the net is uninterrupted and repeated. The manipulative techniques used such as isolation, pressure to conform to the group, fatigue, demonisation of the outside world lead individuals to spend their savings, sell their possessions, leave the family home. Exhausted by work, lack of sleep and food, they are unable to react. Their relatives report a total disconnect with reality. These elements are likely to characterise a situation of mental control and therefore affect human dignity.

In short, the health crisis, criticised by many and feared by others, has been a particularly fruitful period for delinquents of all kinds, especially for those coming under the responsibility of MIVILUDES.

Ladies and Gentlemen, everyone has the right to doubt and question, especially in this period of health crisis coupled with a social crisis.

It is therefore our duty as an Interministerial Mission to ensure the protection of the most vulnerable by training, communicating and raising the awareness of as many people as possible to cults with undue influence. This is what I have been working on since my arrival by initiating or relaunching continuous and initial training courses for magistrates, prison officers, court clerks, staff of the Directorate of Judicial Youth Protection, without forgetting of course the police, and soon also the firefighters in their capacity as first responders in everyone's homes.

MIVILUDES is not an authority for the regulation of freedom of belief.

The mission of MIVILUDES is to prevent and ensure the protection of victims by coordinating the preventive and repressive action of public authorities against cults with undue influence.

Only together, in a spirit of mutual aid, sharing, support and with a single objective, that of the general interest, can we achieve this. MIVILUDES is a unique

interministerial organisation. Nevertheless, the fight must be led hand in hand with the institutional and associative partners who intervene in this field.