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Ladies and gentlemen,

It is on a double base that I welcome you to this Federal Parliament, first as the first vice-president of the Chamber, a building that welcomes us today to reflect together on a problem of general interest. Mr. Crusnière, Member of the European Parliament and my Head of Group, Laurette Onkelinx. But I also welcome you as President of AVISO, one of the associations helping victims of cult undue influence in Belgium.

I will try to paint the background of the Belgian landscape on the theme of the day, starting with cultic undue influence, a branch of reflection and its possible links, for the question remains open, with the phenomena of radicalism and of radicalisation.

Some stages I wish to recall:

In Belgium, as early as 1996, a report by a parliamentary commission of inquiry into "sectarian<sup>1</sup> aberrations " was launched. This commission was set up following the drama of the Order of the Solar Temple in the plains of the Vercors region in France where 3 minor children died.

This commission submitted a report and recommendations to the then Belgian Government, mainly for the creation of an Observatory of sectarian aberrations in Belgium: the CIAOSN. Other recommendations for implementing "terrorism and cult" cells within the federal police, have evolved mainly due to the present world situation into concerns almost exclusively centered on terrorism.

In 2006 in the Belgian Parliament, I was given the mission by the President of the Chamber at the time, to chair a working group on the development of the cultic phenomenon in Belgium. In-camera work lasted several months and a report was issued. On the number of motions or questions asked about sectarian aberrations, it is known that the commission of 1996 had heard 189 organisations and the CIAOSN had received about a thousand new requests (this does not mean that there were a thousand new cults in Belgium but questions about practices that provoked concern and undue influence by groups or individuals). It appeared that there was a diversification of the field of action of cultic groups: with humanitarian, personal development, training for professionals, institutes in the field of education but also in the field of public health, something which still challenges us daily because there is an "explosion" in the health sector on Belgian territory. But also with regard to the shape of organisations: it varies from large classical "apocalyptic" style organisations to more numerous smaller structures usually turning around a guru.

An important date was 2011, (541 days without a government but Parliament still sat) this is when the law on the abuse of weakness was passed. The abuse of weakness, "About-Picard law" in France, result of parliamentary work and from a collaboration with Catherine Picard, whom I met at conferences. Belgium included in its Penal Code the penalty for punishing someone who abuses the weakness of others. The French experience was taken into account to adapt the legislation to the

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<sup>1</sup> Note from translator: In English "sectarian" mainly concerns "inter-religious" strife. Cults are not only religious, they concern every walk of life. We prefer to use the word "cult" often refused by International organisations (i.e. ODHIR, COE...)

reality of the effect of this law (In France 5 to 6 convictions per year on the basis of sectarian aberrations but also 500 to 600 for abuse of weakness of the elderly for example.)

The law was also voted in Luxembourg and debated in the Italian Parliament where it did not lead to a result.

On March 13, 2012, we note with several friends working in the field of sectarian aberrations that there are few structures able receive requests and assist victims of cults. We therefore set up this voluntary structure which does not have the financial resources of the public sector.

On 22 March 2016, Belgium was hit in two places by terrorist attacks (Maelbeek and Zaventem) 34 dead and hundreds injured. Belgium is setting up a parliamentary commission of inquiry into these attacks with the task of measuring the extent of the events but above all of identifying legislative channels of action among others to try to avoid such a tragedy from repeating itself. I am a member of this committee with Mrs Onkelinx.

The work was divided into 4 subjects:

- Response of on-site rescue services
- Organisation of police and intelligence services
- Victims
- Radicalism component: We will try to see how an individual can come up with such an act. Are they victims of sectarian aberrations?

In my personal capacity I have always said that I do not want to use the terminology of "victim of cults" to justify unspeakable acts of terrorism. I agree that there is probably a small minority of people who are victims of a system set up with impressive technological means of communication in the techniques of recruitment.

In terms of sectarian aberrations related to terrorism, one terrorist act recognized for the moment is the "Sarin gas" affair.