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Manipulative Groups and Victims in Croatia and the Balkan Countries

Years of experience of CISK and other members of FECRIS have revealed that the Republic of Croatia has devoted too little attention to the emergence and activities of potentially-harmful cults (or "sects") as defined by the Council of Europe (CoE) in its Recommendations of 1992, 1999 and 2001. Most citizens and officials in Croatian institutions are simply unaware of the existence and extent of cult-related problems in the country.

As a member the FECRIS Board, responsible for surveying cult abuses and as a participant in the Working Group on cults established by the Commission on Human Rights at the Council of Europe (CoE) International Non Gouvernement Organisations Conference, I have noted that the concerns and complaints of the citizens of the CoE countries typically refer to the very same groups that have been subject to parliamentary inquiries in France and Belgium in the 1990's. At the time, the number of such 'cult' groups was 180; today it is more than 700...The flow of money-laundering by and in these groups is often not scrutinized by justice or other institutions in most countries in South-eastern Europe Judging from the aggressive marketing, public support and political campaigns through the media, and even national television, the figures are far surpassed Europe, not only in Croatia but throughout the region..

In the 80's, so-called "New Age" small groups appeared in Croatia. They promoted personal advices and therapies based on (pseudo) religious beliefs, claiming means and methods that cure all illnesses holistically by crystals, touch, look, at a distance and over the phone, in cases where *"the official medicine has nothing more to say"*. Persons with no medical qualifications offered short, expensive courses in hotels and private centres in Croatia and abroad at a cost of up to several thousand euros a week. They were joined by some doctors, in order to come up easier and quicker profits, abusing medical label in favor of a false legitimacy to quackery, without any scrutiny from the Croatian authorities...

New age groups have a tendency to consolidate into larger centres. One such centre is "HUPED" - Croatian Federation for Natural, Energy and Spiritual Medicine - based in Zagreb. HUPED issues "healer certificates", freely and unabated. Mr Drago Plečko is one of the main promoter of such activities in Croatia. He is known as an *"expert in edge sciences"*. In 2004, HUPED received the support of the Minister of Justice, Ms Vesna Škare-Ožbolt, despite of doctors' disapprovals; then from other ministries, universities, from Zagreb's City Department of Public Health Zagreb, the City of Zagreb and the Croatian Medical Chamber...Ms Škare-Ožbolt also acts as legal representative of some controversial healers.

Leaders of several international cults appeared on the Croatian scene in the 90's promoting syncretisms of religion, pseudo-medicine, parapsychology and ufology, at a time when people had accepted the New age innovations on the market. In public, these leaders appear as peacemakers, humanitarians and rescuers; behind the scenes, they lead international financial firms based on pyramidal systems, totalitarian structures and very effective marketing/propaganda media – *"experts in edge sciences"*... When they grow to be powerful enough, these cult organizations behave as a state in the state.

New age and cult-related incidents periodically reported in the Croatian press should raise the attention of citizens: *Satanism* and youth suicide, the fatality in 2009 after a shamanic session in Saborsko, children brain-washing by *Anthroposophy* in private schools and kindergartens, the 'miraculous' treatment of *Mekki Torabi* who cures ill persons with the five planets energies, actions of spiritual groups such as *Jehovah's Witnesses*, *Kabbalah*, *Scientology*, *Hare Krishna* or *Sai Baba* (considered by some victims as a paedophile), *Transcendental Meditation* (convicted in the U.S. for fraud, psychological harm and violation of the constitutional principle of separation of church and state. In May 1989, the Supreme Court of Western Germany confirmed that the use of the manipulative techniques of Transcendental Meditation (TM) causes adverse effects on the mental and physical health of persons, especially children). In Croatia, TM members feel free to violate the privacy and the health of vulnerable people without sanctions.

Self-proclaimed Gurus promote yoga and special nutrition to reach harmony of body and mind. When used on children, such practices exceed the limits of physical training and become indoctrination. The outcome: adult guru followers obliged to work for free (which is illegal), encouraged to absolute obedience, cut out from school and normal work, tax evasion, even sexually exploited by their guru (e.g.: *Swami Kriyananda*, founder of 'Ananda Kriya Yoga'). Inexplicably, the Indian guru *Swamiđi Maheshwarananda*, founder of "Yoga in Daily Life", has received political support at the highest level on the Balkan scene, from Slovenia through Croatia to Macedonia. The Croatian President Stjepan Mesić awarded him the medal of Order of Danica in 2002.

The apologists are social scientists/theorists, typically consultants in human rights or religious issues, who have become pro-cult. Networked internationally, in public, apologists advocate the dialogue with cult groups and the freedom of minority religions. Behind the scenes, wealthy cult organizations pay their travels and 'buy' their (supposedly) scientific work. This is how cults secure 'professional' support in international congresses. Inexplicably, two Croatian social scientists, Ankica Bobinac and Dinka Jerolimov stated in their book on "Religious Communities in Croatia that *"the goal of Scientology is to help society in addressing human rights, drug abuse, crime, illiteracy and low morale..."*, which contradicts the investigations of the Ministry of Internal Affairs in Hamburg and of parliamentary bodies in Belgium, France and Australia, among others.¹

The potentially-dangerous presence and influence of cults in the Croatian society create a true social problem that should retain the attention of the citizens and the public authorities. The issues are wide and far reaching and cannot be tackled without the involvement of the entire community, of the responsible institutions and without financial support. Urgent steps are the setting up of a public information system on cults, installing suitable mechanisms for the police to handle cult-related incidents/cases and, ultimately, establishing legislative measures for protecting all citizens against cult abuses.

¹ **Ankica Bobinac Marinović** and **Dinka Jerolim Marinović** (Institute for Social Research, Zagreb) published in 2008, jointly with the "Association for religious Freedom", a book entitled: "Religious Communities in Croatia" independently reviewed as an "...objective book..." (Mr. Ivan Markešić) and as "...a basic guide to the European Union on religious communities in Croatia..." (Mr. Stanko Jambreč).