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“How should victim support evolve in the face of “Cults 2.0”?” Ppt 01

Ladies and Gentlemen,
Members of associations

It’s a real pleasure for me to talk to you on a subject close to my heart for many years and that has always been one of my main areas of concern throughout my career, namely the status of people who are victims of various abuses within cult groups.

Logically, I should be happy to see so many of you at this conference organised by FECRIS, but on the other hand, it is also a concern for me. Why, you may ask? Simply because your presence demonstrates that the problem of cult victims is still one of our major worries.

Today's presentation is an account of my experience of a problem that I followed for some twenty years as a police commissioner in the anti-terrorist unit of the federal judicial police in Brussels, where I was responsible for a team in charge of judicial investigations into cult groups and as the “cult” referent of the Belgian federal police.

I would like to specify that this presentation is not intended to be a value-judgement but rather a concrete observation, certainly not always a very pleasing one, based on the reality on the ground. This reality consists of meetings, interviews with several dozen victims, former members of cult groups, informal contacts with experts in the field and in judicial investigations.

During my presentation I will illustrate my remarks with some examples from my own experience.

It is worth asking whether the Belgian authorities have done enough about this problem.

Brief historical background: (PowerPoint), Ppt 02

Official awareness of the cult phenomenon in Belgium was given concrete form in 1996 when a parliamentary commission was established to launch, and I quote, a *“Parliamentary inquiry aimed at developing a policy to combat the illegal practices of sects and the danger they represent for society and for people, particularly minors”*.

In response to one of the recommendations made by this parliamentary commission, the Centre d’Information et d’Avis sur les Organisations Sectaires Nuisibles (Centre for Information and Advice on Harmful Cult Organisations) was created by the law of 02/06/1998 modified by the law of 12/04/2004.

MISSIONS OF THE CENTRE:

INFORMATION

To answer all questions concerning harmful cult organisations* in general, or concerning a particular movement.

*www.ciaosn.be

Legal information and guidance are also provided.

The Centre does **not** provide **psychological assistance**, but can guide people to associations specialising in this field.

The Centre may, at the request of a public authority or on its own initiative, formulate opinions or recommendations on the phenomenon of harmful cult organisations and, in particular, on the policy for combatting these organisations.

These opinions and recommendations are not binding.

STUDIES

It studies the phenomenon of harmful cult organisations in Belgium and their international links.

DOCUMENTATION CENTRE

The C.I.A.O.S.N. organises a specialised documentation centre including a library, accessible to the public, containing several thousands of works such as encyclopaedias, reference books, magazines, reports, documentation folders, videos, cd-rom, etc.

SUPPORT AND GUIDANCE

The Centre provides support and **guidance to institutions, organisations and legal aid providers.**

It should be pointed out that the Centre's tasks **concern harmful cult organisations only, not individuals exercising undue influence on a group of individuals.**

One complaint that could be made about the creation of the Centre is that you will not find an article relating **to the assistance and help of victims of cultish behaviour in its constitution.**

We are mainly concerned with the creation of a tool that is extremely effective despite a severe lack of staff and resources, but which is exclusively focused on informing the public and the authorities.

What about the police services?, Ppt 03

In the wake of this parliamentary commission, the Belgian Gendarmerie decided, after the conclusions of this parliamentary inquiry, to address this threat by creating a team within its Brigade de Surveillance et de Recherches de Bruxelles (Brussels Surveillance and Research Brigade) specialising in the search for information related to these cult groups.

Its mission: to draw up a computerised map of the various cults operating in Belgium that could pose a threat to public order and the judiciary, and to serve as a point of reference for all police services faced with this issue.

In 2001, following the police reform, this team was integrated into the Anti-Terrorist Unit of the Federal Judicial Police of BRUSSELS.

In close collaboration with the central services, it actively participated in setting up a network with a contact person in each judicial district.

Unfortunately, in March 2016, following the attacks in BRUSSELS, the team was completely reoriented towards terrorism-related investigations, with the result that the judicial authorities lost interest in this issue.

This resulted in a gradual abandonment of police surveillance of the threat of cults, at both judicial and public order levels.

The same is true for the State Security services which have not monitored the phenomenon since 2016, although they had acquired considerable expertise in this area.

Can we conclude from this that the Belgian authorities have little or no concern for the threat of cults and no longer devote adequate resources to it?

The answer is not so obvious as many parameters have to be considered that are far from being controllable.

The lack of resources both for the police services, close to bankruptcy as far as the judicial services are concerned, and for the public prosecutor's offices, which have had a serious lack of magistrates for a long time, no longer allows them to devote time and staff to the implementation of proactive measures in the face of this phenomenon, which is currently being neglected.

In recent years, the emergence of terrorism has occupied and continues to occupy, with the growth of radical right-wing groups, a considerable proportion of intelligence resources, which is quite logical in view of the 32 people killed and 340 injured in the BRUSSELS attacks in March 2016, but also in view of the risk of further attacks.

Based solely on the number of judgements handed down in Belgium to date, and not having the benefit of judicial statistics allowing a link to be established between criminal offences committed in a context of a cult, it is true that **statistically** cults have few victims and consequently few resources are devoted to monitoring them.

And that's squaring the circle: no more means allocated, no more surveillance, therefore no feedback and therefore no presumed danger!

It may therefore seem legitimate from the point of view of the authorities to think that we are dealing with a marginal phenomenon and that therefore, **officially**, cults do not constitute a real danger.

But to accept this line of reasoning is to ignore the extreme complexity of the cult phenomenon, the different processes of psychological control which it implies and above all the difficulty for a victim of cults to have this victim status recognised.

But in all this, are the victims taken care of?, Ppt 04

It is useful to know what legally determines victim status.

Any person who has suffered material, bodily and/or moral damage as a result of an act punishable by criminal law, such as crimes, misdemeanours, and infractions, is considered a victim.

An important concept is the notion of damage, which can be material and financial, moral damage resulting in psychological after-effects due to the offence and physical damage resulting in physical after-effects.

What help can I get from a victim support unit?

The authorities, aware of the fact that the criminal procedure and the victims' rights are complex fields, and that each situation is particular, have set up a system of help and support for the victims of criminal offences, including from legal assistants.

Legal assistants in victim support units have three tasks: (PowerPoint)

- **To inform**

They can provide general information about how a court case is conducted or about victims' rights.

They can also provide the necessary explanations to fully understand the ongoing proceedings, the evolution of the case and the decisions taken by the judicial authorities.

If necessary, they can act as an intermediary between the magistrate in charge of the investigation and the victim.

This is a special case in relation to victims from a cult environment who require more detailed information.

Indeed, it is important to inform them that when confronted with cult organisations, they generally have financial resources that are completely out of proportion to those of a private individual, because they call on the services of prominent lawyers who will use and abuse the entire legal arsenal available to them and will obviously play on the length of the procedure and exhaust all possible legal remedies.

All of this results in a drying up of financial resources, which are often very limited, but above all in the moral exhaustion of the plaintiff.

I would like to open a small parenthesis to inform you that in the various legal cases dealt with by our services, we almost systematically find a fairly substantial financial component leading the victims into a catastrophic economic situation, often putting them in a precarious position.

Another aspect concerned moral damage, the evidence of which was quite complicated to prove in court and, if it was established, the facts were often time-

barred, resulting in serious psychological after-effects, particularly for victims who had been sexually abused for long periods within certain cult communities.

I will close the parenthesis.

Another mission of the legal assistants:

- **To provide support**

At each step of the judicial procedure, the judicial assistant in charge of the case can answer questions and accompany him/her by providing emotional support if the victim wishes.

- **To refer**

Depending on the needs and difficulties, the legal assistants can refer the victims to specialised services they work with (for example, for legal aid or psychological support)

I would also mention, provided they are available, referring them to associations specialising in the field of cults, such as SAVECS (Service d'Aide au Victime d'Emprise de Comportement Sectaire) in Belgium, founded by psychologists who are familiar with cults, or AVISO in the French-speaking community or S.A.S. Studie- en Adviesgroep Sekten in the Dutch-speaking community.

Are these mechanisms sufficient in the field we are dealing with? Ppt 05

It is undeniable that the authorities have set up mechanisms to recognise the status of victims and to provide them with professional support, but what about victims who, for various reasons, which I will come back to later, do not want to start painful and interminable legal proceedings and whom I will call the “ silent victims ”?

Fortunately for these “silent victims”, there are associations for helping the victims of cults, made up of volunteers who can provide support and even help these people to reintegrate into society and start a new life in a society from which they have been excluded by an insidious and constant constraint imposed by the cult groups.

I would like to take this opportunity to express my admiration and respect for the work done by these volunteers over the last few years, who have worked

tirelessly to help these ex-followers who are victims of unscrupulous cults.
Thanks to you and keep up the good work!!! (You can applaud yourselves!)

Unfortunately, there is a small downside to these “silent victims”. It is important to know that they constitute the majority of cases of abuse and are much more numerous than those who take the step of filing a complaint with the criminal courts.

To put it briefly: no complaint, no victim, no problem, so “move along, there’s nothing to see”!

A harsh but realistic observation... and one that delights the cults, as they can happily oppress their followers with impunity.

All this leads us to ask ourselves this question: what makes these ex-followers so distinctive? Ppt 06

One of the striking elements that we have noted in the course of monitoring this issue is the non-victimisation of active followers within cult communities, but this is also true for members of radical religious communities.

During hearings of followers in the context of judicial investigations, we have noted that they **did not at all consider themselves to be victims**, although the facts easily demonstrated this. They were not aware of this state or of the mental hold they were under.

When this aspect was addressed, they claimed that their membership was a freely consented personal choice, without violence or coercion, that they were free, a small nuance : if they so wished, they were free to come and go as they pleased, and failure to respect their convictions was a flagrant violation of the Constitution regarding respect for freedom of thought and belief, and finally, they considered our intervention to be an anti-democratic action that infringed on their individual freedom.

These followers were in what is commonly known in psychology as the “Honeymoon” phase. In concrete terms, it was useless explaining to them that they were victims of manipulation and totally under the mental control of their guru, so intense was their love and commitment to him that it anaesthetised all objective reasoning.

Any attempt to point out the inconsistencies in some of their actions only reinforced their beliefs and made dialogue impossible. The guru's totally formatted speech was constantly being spouted at us.

I would like to illustrate this with a case study that we have been working on for more than ten years.

Some twenty searches were organised in our country and abroad in the context of the exploitation of followers by a guru for his personal profit in several of his commercial activities generating quite a substantial financial income.

Around fifty members of this community had been questioned in the wake of the searches to confirm the various offences reported by former followers.

The result of the hearings was: *all is well in the best of worlds, I'm very happy to live in this community even though I work 16 hours a day and receive almost no income for my work!*

If we had had to rely exclusively on these hearings, we could have closed the file without giving rise to legal proceedings but, fortunately, the material elements seized and analysed have largely justified the extent of the means used.

Several years after these hearings, we heard again from some of these same people who had in the meantime left this community and had become aware of the exploitation to which they had been subjected for many years.

They told us that long before the searches they had been briefed by their guru on the possibility of intervention by the judicial authorities, not in the context of offences that he said were imaginary, but because the community, by its teachings, its way of life and its irreproachable morals, constituted a danger for society. This society could become aware of the manipulation of which it was the object by the authorities, could commit acts of violence, disturb the established order and cause chaos.

They felt that they had been entrusted with a crucial mission: to save the world from the apocalypse!

Results: This police intervention had a unifying effect and the group's cohesion had never been so strong.

However, a small glimmer of hope in spite of everything **for just a few**, the seed of doubt was sown in their minds, a seed that took several years to germinate but which eventually led to an awareness of the exploitation to which they had been subjected and to a commitment to leave the community. A small light in their subconscious had continued to shine and they remembered the saying: *“there is no smoke without fire”!*

Another element noted was the situation of the ex-follower on leaving the group, or rather their escape from the group.

The ex-follower feels a strong guilt linked to the realisation that they voluntarily fell into a trap, that they let themselves be manipulated, exploited, and robbed without any reaction on their part.

They are angry that they have often dragged in their wake family members, close friends or other people who are still followers and who will consider them an enemy to their cause and will portray them as the aggressor while denying the existence of the undue influence set up by the cult against them or the expression of the slightest remorse regarding their situation.

There is a risk of over-victimisation of the ex-follower by the failure to recognise their suffering and their position as a victim both by the group they have just left and by the representatives of health, justice or society in general, who may have a preconception or doubt about this state of being a victim, because some of you may never have heard this deadly little sentence: *“what are they complaining about? They knew they were joining a cult, they just have to take responsibility now!”*

In this case, the role of the police can be essential, especially in the initial reception of the victim.

In order to establish a relationship of trust between the former victim and the investigators, the latter must first take the time to listen to them, understand their distress, hear their needs, and show empathy.

Unfortunately, the reality on the ground is quite different.

The front-line police officer, not at all concerned by the cult problem, will probably tend to treat the complainant as a “regular” victim and, as in any classic investigation, will be concerned with quickly determining what offences have been committed, in what circumstances, and identifying the perpetrator in order

to move on quickly to the next victim who will come to file a complaint for the theft of their wallet, or for a hit-and-run car accident or other minor offences

We cannot blame the behaviour of this police officer too much because, given their workload but especially the lack of training in relation to this problem, they will be less attentive to the psychological context in which the victim was confronted.

In this regard, it is imperative to direct these people to police services that are aware of the cult problem, which unfortunately is becoming particularly difficult in Belgium today, but which exists in France; I am thinking here of the services of CAMAIDES.

As regards the willingness of a victim to file a complaint, I would like to address here an aspect that I consider to be **of the utmost importance**, which is that of explaining to the complainant in a clear and detailed way all the difficulties that they will certainly be confronted with as well as the consequences that this could generate both on the moral and financial level in order to avoid a risk of “over-victimisation”.

It is useful to determine the degree of motivation of the complainant by explaining what the initiation of legal proceedings against their former guru entail, namely: the testimony of former “friend-followers” who may present a very negative image of the victim, confrontations with the guru with the risk of a total loss of confidence in the presence of their “ aggressor ”, the discovery of facts against the victim that were not reported to the investigators, the length of the procedure that may take years, the risk of the resurgence of psychologically painful moments, the financial investment that the legal procedure will generate, etc.

This last point is essential because very often the financial means available to the gurus are, and I repeat, nothing like what an individual can commit.

It is necessary to show intellectual honesty by clearly explaining to them that this is a long-term investigation that may lead to results that do not necessarily meet their expectations and that could awaken painful memories and sow doubt in their mind. However, it is important to reassure the victim, and even to provide psychological support throughout the procedure until the trial, if there is one.

During the procedure, the investigator can advise the victim to seek the help of a health professional to help them find their bearings, to rebuild their life, and to regain their place as a citizen in society so that they can feel stronger and more supported. It is therefore important to create a synergy between the investigators

and the victim support services, while each one remains within their own field of competence.

However, I would like to share a little positive feedback with you: Several victims reported that being heard by the police had a beneficial effect on them, even though in the end there were no criminal proceedings, and the cases were closed.

They told us that they were relieved to have been listened to and above all believed in their experience and that this had contributed to their psychological reconstruction.

A dismissal of a judicial file can be frustrating for both the complainants and the investigators, and I can assure you that this is indeed the case, but what really counts more than anything else is that these victims can restart a new life and rebuild themselves, because it is important to know that they experience enormous difficulties in this process, due to the repeated and prolonged trauma they have suffered, the de-socialisation of which they have been a victim, sometimes pushing them into a protective silence that prevents them from seeking psychological help or filing a complaint.

I would like to address a topic which, to my knowledge, has never been discussed at any symposium, which is the notion **of victim-perpetrator**, a notion that would require a day of study on its own and that we have been confronted with during our various investigations.

I agree that this is a purely legal concept, which is certainly important, but which can be complex for the uninitiated, so I will be brief ... well, I hope!

From the analysis of several testimonies of ex-followers, it appears that they were put in a state of psychological subjection by their guru and were able to commit crimes or offences of extreme gravity, acts that they would certainly not have committed in other circumstances.

This particular situation was also recognised by the French justice system in the so-called "Lisieux cult" case, where six former followers were indicted at the same time as the leader of the cult for *"gang rape, sexual assault and violence on particularly vulnerable persons and aggravated exploitation of weakness"* but the six former followers were not prosecuted, the investigating magistrate having judged that they had acted under the influence of force or coercion, which they had been unable to resist.

The processes of control and submission to “authority” seem to be generally accepted as a reality; I refer you to the results of the experiment of the American social psychologist Stanley MILGRAM. This experiment, carried out in the 1960s but still relevant today, evaluates the degree of obedience of an ordinary individual in the face of an authority **that they consider legitimate** and makes it possible to analyse the process of submission to this authority, in particular when it induces actions posing problems of consciousness to the subject.

In summary, the Stanley Milgram experiment demonstrated that it was possible to force a person to obey commands that made no sense as soon as you managed to obtain their agreement to submit.

Within the framework of cults, we are in the same process of submission to the authority of the guru and a state of subjection.

It is therefore possible to envisage that people who have been placed in a state of psychological dependence are recognised as **VICTIMS of a cult**.

This is where it gets complicated and my comments and questions may offend some people, but they are the result of a reflection based on factual and moral elements and I have no intention of creating a controversy!

Let's assume that the cult phenomenon is not recognised as **an offence as such, that a crime or misdemeanour has been committed by an ex-follower who, in the eyes of the law, is the PERPETRATOR of the acts** but who did not have the intention **to break the law SCIENTIFICALLY and FREELY** if only as a result of moral pressure and knowing that he or she did not obtain **any personal benefit**, should this person be prosecuted to the same degree as the follower who is still active **who, as a reminder, is an unknowing victim?**

The question that may be debated is how the justice system should react when a former follower becomes aware of having committed criminal acts against other followers or third parties.

Should this realisation, which is only possible after the break-up of the hold process, lead to impunity or should it be sanctioned with the same severity as a follower who is still active?

Can we decently and morally avoid a conviction for an ex-follower under the pretext that they were placed under mental control?

Does this manipulation exempt the follower from responsibility?

Is this responsibility total? By challenging it, do we not risk denying their human identity?

Should justice be lenient towards these victim-perpetrators and if so in what form?

As you can see, this is a subject that can be argued at length, even though in the end it will be the judges who will determine the outcome of this debate.

As far as victims are concerned, I will end with another category, and I thank SAVECS for having kindly reminded me of the existence of this category, this concerns the victims that we could call the **collateral victims** and that are certainly the most numerous and the least followed.

It is important to know that for every person succumbing to the songs of the cult sirens, we will have, to varying degrees, several collateral victims.

Please note that the majority of calls to our services, field associations or CIAOSN come from spouses, family members, close friends or colleagues who are concerned about a change in a person's behaviour and are completely helpless in the face of this situation.

These people are also victims in their own right because they are suffering, and believe me there is suffering, and often feel guilty for not having seen the transformation coming and not having taken adequate measures to help these loved ones.

For these collateral victims, there is no help from the authorities since they are not, legally speaking, victims of criminal offences and therefore cannot benefit from official support.

Fortunately, they can count on associations in the field that can, to a certain extent, provide them with psychological support and give them information that will help them cope with this ordeal and avoid feeling unnecessarily guilty.

For those leaving cults, these collateral victims can prove to be precious allies in the psychological reconstruction of these ex-followers.

I will end here with the different types of victims encountered in cults.

Let's now turn to the system put in place to help victims of offences within cult groups. **Ppt 07**

For the authority, it is important to put in place systems whose main objective is to protect ALL victims of crime, taking into account the evolution of our society and its particularities.

For this reason, some changes are made to the criminal code and new offences are created.

In the context of the cult problem, a new offence had been proposed at the time by Mr André FREDERIC, current president of FECRIS, namely the offence of abuse of a situation of weakness (article 442quater of the Criminal Code) created by the law of 26/11/2011.

This new offence, inspired by the ABOU-PICARD law, had the effect of filling a legal gap in the Belgian criminal code and was a demonstration that it is often useful to see what is happening in our neighbours' countries and to benefit from their experience.

Indeed, the courts were encountering legal difficulties in putting a stop to the abuses of cult movements or gurus, which are essentially, but often covertly, driven by economic and power objectives.

Who is affected by this law?

This law is important because of its desire to fight not only against cult organisations but also to protect all “vulnerable” persons.

The following are considered vulnerable: minors, the physically or mentally disabled, the elderly, the sick, and any person in a temporarily vulnerable situation such as women experiencing pregnancy.

Instead of the notion of mental manipulation, the legislator preferred the notion of abuse of a situation of weakness, which consists of exerting on a person “*serious and repeated pressure in order to create or exploit a state of dependence and to*

lead them, against their will or not, to an act or abstention that is seriously prejudicial to them”.

What is the abuse of weakness in Belgian law?,

Art. 442quater §1 reads as follows: **Ppt 08**

“Anyone who, while knowing the situation of physical or psychological weakness of a person, seriously altering the capacity of discernment of this person, fraudulently abused this weakness to lead this person to an act or abstention seriously affecting his/her physical or mental integrity or his/her assets, will be punished by a sentence of one month to two years imprisonment and a fine of one hundred Euros to one thousand Euros or one of these penalties only. »

- **Regarding fraudulent abuse:**
- For the application of this **article the simple abuse is not enough**, it is necessary to demonstrate that the author “was aware of the situation of weakness”.
- The latter must seriously impair the capacity of discernment and may be physical or psychological.

It is therefore particularly interesting to apply this article in a cult context, as there is nothing to indicate that the state of weakness must have existed prior to the meeting between the victim and the suspect, nor that it may result from the implementation of psychological manipulation with the consequence of placing a person in a state of weakness.

To sum up:

- either the person is in a weakened state before joining a cult, which in no way prevents this state from being aggravated later by joining the group.

- or the person, in order to follow up on some interest, will join a cult that will gradually and subtly cause them to be in a situation of weakness

On the other hand, this state of weakness must be **known at the time of the act** or of the failure to act that will seriously harm the physical or mental integrity or the property of the victim.

The authors of the law did not want to define the “situation of weakness” too strictly, leaving a certain latitude to the magistrates of the public prosecutor's office and of the court to appreciate the situation of weakness of a person whether it is permanent, temporary, passing or continuous.

In order to do this, the magistrates may call upon experts (doctors, psychiatrists, psychologists)

Abuse of weakness within the meaning of 442quater is not a complaint offence, which implies that:

- any complaint can be recorded when it comes from people other than the victim (e.g.: family, spouse,)
- the public prosecutor's office is competent to open an investigation without a complaint being filed, and the police are competent to draw up an initial report on their own initiative

Cults are specifically targeted because the law also gives the judge the possibility of prosecuting an association or legal person, which is the legal form of the majority of cults.

Finally, it should be noted that this law authorises any association which has had legal personality for at least five years on the date of the acts and which proposes by statute to protect the victims of cult practices or violence, but also of abuse of any vulnerable person, to lodge a complaint on behalf of the victims, with their agreement or that of their representatives, but to my knowledge this has not yet been implemented in Belgium.

What is the evolution of the cult problem in the 21st century? Ppt 09

We have noted that in recent years, the large cult organisations, which for the most part had an international dimension in the 1980s and 1990s, have been in clear decline due to the disappearance of their guru and the lack of new followers. We can only welcome this loss of momentum even if some of these groups still present a danger.

The days of active proselytising in the streets of big cities that some of us have known are over, but some of these organisations are trying to adapt to new technologies to attract young people into their nets.

It should be noted that the advantage of these organisations is their visibility, and it is therefore quite easy to know what is going on.

On the other hand, what constitutes a real problem and danger are what I would call the micro-cults present essentially on the digital platforms and whose access is strictly controlled by the 2.0 gurus who successfully control the social networks.

They are very good at getting large numbers of people addicted to social networks and use this tool to spread their credo.

These micro-cults are in fact small groups of a few dozen people who are recruited by word of mouth, or rather from computer screen to computer screen!

Benefits of using these digital platforms and social networks: **24-hour availability of information**, no territorial limits, instantaneous transmission of information and, above all, permanent control of followers, whether at home behind their computer screen, on their way to work or in the office via their smartphone.

Although the activities are mainly virtual, face-to-face contacts are organised during training courses, against a consequent financial participation ranging from several hundred to several thousand Euros for a weekend course.

These 2.0 adepts are confined to a totally virtual world not easily accessible to the uninitiated and therefore totally out of control.

The fields targeted by these new gurus are mainly the health field for which the COVID crisis **has been an exceptional opportunity to recruit new followers for them**, the field of personal development and conspiracy, etc.

Are we seeing an increase in the number of cult victims?

It is difficult to say, because we don't know if we are facing a migration of followers who used to join the so-called "traditional" cults to the 2.0 cults.

HOW CAN WE HELP THESE VICTIMS? Ppt 10

I can't resist making the following truism: the best way to help victims of cults is to prevent them from becoming victims in the first place.

We must be aware that the repression of gurus or cult groups is far from being a panacea and has only a very limited effect over time. Let's not kid ourselves, if the followers of a cult do not have their own trigger that makes them aware of their state of being a victim of manipulation, there is very little chance that external actions, whatever they may be, will modify their level of commitment.

I am firmly convinced that the best method is to focus resources on prevention and proactivity and to give the individuals who would be approached by these groups the tools that would allow them to unmask their hidden intentions and above all to help them develop their critical thinking skills, an essential tool but unfortunately one that is sorely lacking in our ultra-digitised society, which is content with formatted information without taking care to carry out the slightest amount of cross-checking.

These tools for applying critical thinking should be integrated into school curricula to allow our youth to be better equipped to deal with the various manipulations they will face throughout their lives.

In conclusion:

In the light of this presentation, you will realise that the path to recognition of the status of cult victims by the judicial authorities is far from being completed.

Officially, the recognition of this status is only validated by filing a complaint with the judicial authorities, which few ex-followers are willing to do for their own reasons and will therefore forever remain “silent victims”.

Everything is far from perfect in the fight against the harmful effects of cult groups, at least as far as Belgium is concerned.

The authorities, who have been confronted in recent years with major crises such as terrorist attacks, religious radicalism, the COVID crisis and currently the war in Ukraine, do not feel they have sufficient resources to commit adequate means to ensure rigorous monitoring of this phenomenon, which they consider to be marginal but which, despite appearances, constitutes a danger to our society and to community life

However, there is a glimmer of hope at the level of the police services, namely that several local police services are beginning to take an interest in this phenomenon, and recently the State Security has appointed a contact person on this particular subject. That's a good start

Should we be pessimistic and feel sorry for these victims?

I would say no, and in my introduction, I said that I was somewhat worried because your presence was the demonstration that the problem relating to the victims of cults remains a major concern for all of us.

In fact, ... I am delighted to see so many of you today because I am pleased to see the presence of young, curious, and motivated recruits and who I hope will continue this long struggle.

Thanks to the awareness of the danger of these cult movements, thanks to the actions carried out by the many volunteers within the associations in the field, the victims of these movements can count on your long experience and your support in their journey towards a new life for which we wish them the very best. **Ppt 11**

Thank you for your attention.