

# Report on our Fact-Finding Mission to Moldova

by Peter Zoehrer

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Vienna, 22.01.2016 - **On the 30th October 2015 Church Mihai Calestru and Oleg Savencov, two young men who are members of the Unification were arrested on false charges (human trafficking) in Chisinau, Moldova. Since then, their grieving wives and children live in uncertainty regarding their future and**

**when their husbands will return. Unless the court can be convinced that the charges are groundless, the men may face prison sentences from 7 - 12 years. The consequences for the victims, their families and the Moldavian Unification Church would be unthinkable...**



Only three weeks ago the human rights organizations FOREF Europe and Human and Human Rights Without Frontiers were asked to provide assistance to the Unification Movement of Moldavia in their struggle for religious freedom and justice. **Mr. Willy Fautre**, the director of HRWF, who has experience as a human rights advocate already since the 70s and **Dr. Aaron Rhodes**, former head of the prestigious International Helsinki Federation (now president of FOREF) followed

the call even at a short notice. Their good attitude and readiness to help has touched me deeply. They have already a great record in helping religious minority groups on a global scale. They helped our own movement already in Kazakhstan (to free Liza Drenicheva) and in Japan (Mr. Toru Goto & others). In fact I could not think of anyone better than them for this difficult task at hand.

Since it was difficult to communicate with members in Moldavia (all phone-calls and e-mails are monitored) we had almost no chance to prepare appointments in advance. On the evening of January 13th our team (Willy Fautre, Dr. Aaron Rhodes and I) landed safely in Chisinau. That evening we could meet **Olga Calestru**, the wife of Mihai for the first meeting to organize our project.

## **Groundwork: investigations, meetings, interviews**

Already the next day we started our program with investigative research and interviews: Dorina, wife of detained **Oleg Savencov** and Olga, wife of detained Mihai Calestru. We have also visited **Sabina Nadejdin** in her home. She is the current president of the Unification church of Moldova (four children). Sabina is listed as suspect but she has not been arrested yet. Her home and simultaneously



three other homes were raided by the police before the two brothers were arrested for pre-trial detentions.

The next to be interviewed: **Ilfat Akhunzyanov**, husband of the Church book-keeper who died just in December 2015 at the age of 38. They have three small children. Next we have met Mr. Ceachir, the lawyer for the accused. He answered questions about the case, and us advised on advocacy strategies. Aladin L., a **director in the Office of the Ombudsman** of the Republic of Moldova. He requested a file on the case and said it would be looked into. **Paul G., Political Officer, US Embassy** promised to raise the case in informal meetings with Moldovan officials. Another meeting we had with Ion M., **PROMO-LEX** (an NGO) and we also met a leading female



representative of the **Falun Gong**, who had severe problems with the Moldovan authorities. Their case has been brought to the International Court of Human Rights. Furthermore we have visited the **Mission of the OSCE** Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe.

Another meeting we had with Veaceslav B. from the office of the **United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights**. We have also met Stefan Uritu, former head of the **Moldovan Helsinki Committee**, an old time friend and colleague of Dr. Aaron Rhodes.

Sadly, the General Prosecutor of Moldova has not had the time to receive our delegation during our stay. He told us to meet on Tuesday (Jan 19) when we were already on our return trip.

Among the majority of the people and institutions we have met, there was a general consensus: Persecution of religious minority groups is nothing new in Moldova. The country has severe problems to uphold the rule of law. Even within it's own ranks there are numerous cases of corruption and misuses of power.

Some even suspect, that the authorities may have been let to label UC fundraising as a crime of human trafficking for the reason to show some action, since they have received over 3 Million US-Dollars from USA to fight this crime. Our visit has not been unnoticed and several sources confirmed, that the news of international human rights advocates investigating the UC case has spread fast among the

authorities. Our friends have confirmed our strategy and said that only international pressure could change the outcome of this case.



Recently one investigative journalist has highlighted another possible scenario as plausible reason for the arrest of the UC members: Elena Guzman and her followers (connected to SC) who accused our Church of human trafficking has an eye on our HQ property which is in close proximity of a building complex in which her construction company has high stakes. That would not be a surprise, since she has stated numerous times before that she wants the HQ building...

Whatever the reasons behind the current trials are, our human rights experts have understood very soon, that the accusations against UC Moldova have no legal basis and they are essentially trumped up charges. Even if mistakes may have been made, there was no justification for such severe charges (please read the press releases).

On Monday there will be an important hearing on the case and it will be decided, whether Mihai and Oleg have to go to jail again or if the prosecutor will drop the charges against them.

Thank you for all your your prayers and encouraging messages. It was so moving to see our brothers and sisters there and especially the wives and children of the prisoners. During this week in Chisinau I have felt the strong presence of our Heavenly Parents. Everything we did was carried by heavenly fortune. It was like surfing on the crest of a wave.

### **The Highlight: Press Conference**



On Tuesday morning (19.01.2016) we held a **press conference in the Codru Hotel**. 17 representatives of the media, Amnesty International, human rights

advocates, a few UC members, the wives of the victims and 3 representatives of the opposition group have attended the meeting.

Willy Fautre gave the introduction and moderated the conference. Dr. Aaron Rhodes spoke about the legal issues and gave a summary of our findings. Both of them were brilliant. Especially Dr. Rhodes made a strong statement. He said that there is clear evidence that the UC members were unjustly imprisoned. „**We demand the immediate release of the defendants...!**“ Dr. Rhodes said also „**we will not stop pursuing this case until both of them are free!**“ He also warned about the grave consequences this case would have to the families, the UC, to other Churches and even to the image of Moldova, if the prosecution will not drop the false charges.

## Press Conference, Chisinau, Moldova, 19.01.2016

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After concluding a six day long fact-finding mission the experts of **Human Rights Without Frontiers** and the **Forum for Religious Freedom - Europe**, two international human rights organizations hosted a press conference in the Codru Hotel, Chisinau.





<http://www.hrwf.net> - <http://foref.info> & blog in English: <http://foref-europe.org>

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## P R E S S   R E L E A S E - P R E S S   R E L E A S E

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### **Two Members of a Minority Religion Jailed in Moldova**

*Chisinau, Moldova, 19 January 2016.* **Oleg Savencov and Mihai Calestru, two members of the Unification Church who are in pre-trial detention in Moldova charged with trafficking in human beings, should be “immediately and unconditionally released,” according to *Human Rights Without Frontiers* and the *Forum for Religious Freedom- Europe*, two international human rights organizations that have investigated the charges.**

The two men were jailed on 30 October 2015, and remain in detention. If convicted of trafficking under Article 165, they face jail terms of 6 to 12 years.

**“Oleg Savencov and Mihai Calestru have not committed the crimes with which they are charged,”** according to Willy Fautre, Executive Director of *Human Rights Without Frontiers*. **“The charges against them are based solely on accusations by dissatisfied members of the Unification Church who denounced alleged illegal activities to the authorities. Moreover, we have found no evidence of an objective investigation in this case,”** he said.

The Prosecutor’s allegation against the two men is deeply flawed. It claims that they established the Unification Church in Moldova in 2008 as an “organized criminal group.” One of the defendants, Oleg Savencov, is a Ukrainian citizen who entered Moldova only in 2014. Mihai Calestru was never a Church leader.

**“Moldova’s anti-trafficking legislation was not meant to be instrumentalized against peaceful religious organizations,”** said Dr Aaron Rhodes, President of the *Forum for Religious Freedom-Europe*.

**“It will be a travesty of justice if the law is misused for private reasons, and it will threaten the freedom of religion in Moldova and in Europe,”** Rhodes said.

The two international human rights groups said they would bring the case to the attention of authorities in the United Nations, the Council of Europe, the European Union, and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe. (OSCE), as well as national governments and the civil society human rights community. They said a conviction would not only be harmful to the defendants and their families and the Unification Church, but to other religious movements and to the image of Moldova.

For more information, please contact Dr. Aaron Rhodes  
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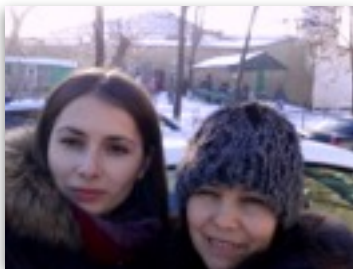
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## **Update: Press Release by Human Rights Without Frontiers**

on Thursday, 21.01.2016

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HRWF (21.01.2016) - **On 26th January, there will be a new court hearing about whether or not the pre-trial detention of Mihai Calestru and Oleg Savencov will be extended. The two men are members of the Unification Church who were arrested on false charges (human trafficking) on 30th October 2015.**



Yesterday, the wives of the prisoners went to the prison to bring them food. They told HRWF that, "their daily menu is porridge in the morning and in the evening. For lunch they just get clear soup (almost water) and it has a bad taste. That is why relatives of the prisoners have to feed them. We are only allowed to pass food once a week. People bring 25-30 kg per week in average. The procedure is burdensome. First we must

submit a request in three copies in which we must list the content of the bag. Then we have to wait for our turn until we are called. It means usually 3 to 6 hours waiting outside whatever the weather and for the moment it is -15°C. Once people submit their request, they cannot leave because they must also give their identity card." (See picture)



On Tuesday, representatives of Human Rights Without Frontiers Int'l (HRWF) and Forum on Religious Freedom/ Europe (FOREF) held a press conference in Chisinau and asked Oleg Savencov and Mihai Calestru to be "immediately and unconditionally released." A representative of the local branch of Amnesty

International, who was also a former prosecutor in Moldova, commented on the case during the press conference and confirmed that it was unfounded.

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**"Moldova's anti-trafficking legislation was not meant to be instrumentalized against peaceful religious organizations,"** said Dr Aaron Rhodes, President of the Forum for Religious Freedom-Europe.

If convicted of trafficking under Article 165, Oleg Savencov and Mihai Calestru face jail terms of 6 to 12 years.

Last year, the movement of Falun Gong was banned by a court on the basis of a law against extremism that is now reviewed by the Constitutional Court of Moldova.

**View this newsletter:**

<http://hrwf.eu/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/Moldova2016.pdf>

**Watch the Video of the Press Conference:**

PRESS CONFERENCE: Two Members of a Minority Religion Jailed in Moldova, by Willy Fautré "Human Rights Without Frontiers" & Dr. Aaron Rhodes "Forum for Religious Freedom Europe" (Complete Conference)

<http://principiuldivin.md/ro/blog/comunicat-de-presa-doi-membri-a-unei-religii-minoritare-privati-de-libertate-in-moldova-comunicat-complet-reactii>