

## Slovakia: Religious Freedom only for the Big and Mighty?

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**Bratislava, 05.11.2016 (FOREF) - The Slovak National Party tries to amend the current legislation regarding religion. Denominations are now required to have 50,000 (!) adult members if they wish to be recognized by the Slovak State. Meanwhile, a strange cooperation is developing between the media and the Department for Churches of the Slovak Ministry of Culture leading to the slandering of smaller churches and new religious movements.**

Whereas in 2014 and 2015 several conferences took place in Slovakia discussing possible dangers for religious freedom, now flames of intolerance are flaring up again. In September, the **Slovak National Party** (SNS) which is part of the ruling coalition government, suggested that religious groups should be allowed to register as a church only when they can prove a membership of 50,000 adult persons who must have their permanent residence in Slovakia. The proposal was announced by the SNS politician **Andrej Danko** who is currently President of the National Assembly of the Slovak Republic. The current legislation is already extremely restrictive as it requires a membership of 20,000 - a number far too big for most religious minorities. Raising the number to 50,000 might provide the state the means to strangle small churches and to deter new religions from taking roots. The decision has not been made yet, but the Slovak National Party wants to have the amendment implemented by January 2017.

Unfortunately, the **Department for Churches of the Slovak Ministry of Culture** is putting oil into the fire instead of defending religious freedom. During the last months the press published defaming articles about religious minorities after years of relative calm. The main source of information seems to come from the department's employee **Mgr. Lucia Grešková**. This fact was confirmed by a journalist when asked by FOREF Europe. Mrs. Grešková who has studied theology and political sciences, supports the media's crusade against religious minorities. In 2017 she will hold a course on "Religious Extremism" at the Department of Political Sciences at the Comenius University in Bratislava. Apparently, Mrs. Grešková does not act without the consent of the head of the Department for Churches, **Dr. Ján Juran**. She does not feed the media with biased information out of innocent ignorance as she graduated in Communication and Mass Media at the Catholic university of Lublin. Additionally, she is well aware that the term "sect" is generally rejected by scholars of Religious Studies.

The popular political magazine **PLUS 7 DNÍ** is running a series about "sinister practices" in various religious groups, including a Catholic nunnery. The editor **Monika Mikulcová** puts the "sect label" also on officially registered faiths like the Apostolic Church, i.e. in her newest article "Newborn Christians – are charismatic movements sects?" In this article, Mikulcová again quotes the Department for Churches as the main source. The subtitle is revealing - "They destroyed my daughter, says unhappy mother about the Apostolic Church."

Instead of "conversion" she writes "manipulation" and instead of "donations" she writes "extraction" and other abusive wordings. As a graduate of the philosophical faculty of the Comenius University she knows how negative words create negative images. There is a good chance that the reports of PLUS 7 DNÍ play into the hands of the Slovak National Party's ambition to restrict religious groups by raising legislative

barriers.

As in most places, dubious "cult experts" in Slovakia thrive on biased media reports like **Ivana Škodová** who needs "clients" for her counselling business – the "Integra-Centre for the Prevention of Sects". Whenever an issue arises this psychologist is at the front line to warn the public. In her interview for the magazine PLUS 7 DNÍ (October 6) she said that any group "may develop sectarian practices" and that nowadays, "they are a permanent threat though they maintain a low profile". Is she stimulating collective paranoia? Škodová is not a believer herself, but considers typical religious practices like fasting as dangerous and irresponsible behaviour. Since 1995 she has been campaigning against "strange cults" and has visited countless schools and youth organizations for reconnaissance. FOREF Europe was told by several persons that Škodová refuses to speak with representatives of the attacked groups but former members or unhappy parents are always welcome. Even innocent institutions such as **Waldorf Schools** count as a "sect" by her definition. There was a vicious attack on this alternative school model in the magazine **Rodinka** (April 16, 2016) warning the public about the hidden dangers of Rudolf Steiner's philosophy. The article was typically based on the complaints of one (!) frustrated mother while disregarding the majority of satisfied parents.

There seems to be a direct cooperation between Ivana Škodová and the Department for Churches for providing "witness stories" to the media. For this purpose they suggested the same former member of the Unification Movement, a new religious movement originating from South Korea, to be interviewed by the daily **Denník N** with whom Mikulcová already made a 10-pages coverage (editions October 6, and October 13). There was no mention that their "witness" Ján F., a former member of the Unification Movement, has been suffering bipolar disorders since young age, that he blackmailed a business man, upset a well-known politician by his unlawful actions, etc. In short, this "witness" can by no standards be regarded a reliable source. Although editor **Dušan Mikušovič** had spent several hours interviewing the official spokesman of the Unification Movement, the allegations of Ján F. were given full credibility and received most space in the two-pages report. In the same article, Lucia Grešková of the Department for Churches alleged that although the members of the Unification Movement do not violate laws and do not behave offensively, they would only do so for the purpose of hiding their real ambitions (edition May 11, 2016, page 5).

At present, anybody can easily receive attention in the Slovak media if they present themselves as "victim of sects", no matter how questionable and obscure their accusations may be. But true tolerance of religion can only exist on the basis of sensitive and objective reporting, regardless of how big or small the group in question is. It seems that in the long run, the Slovakian government intends to reserve the fundamental right of religious freedom only for the big and mighty churches.

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