

Testimony of Crina Calek ¹ in regard to the abuses of the French judicial authorities

The undersigned Crina Calek, I declare the following in regard to the abuses of the French judicial authorities of November 28th 2023 – December 1st 2023:

I have been practising yoga for 20 years, I am a MISA Yoga School sympathizer and on November 28th 2023 I was at the address 12 Av. Marechal Mortier, 94350, Villiers-sur-Marne, France. On the morning of that day, there was a brutal and abusive raid by the French Judicial Police, following which I was taken away by the police, held in custody for two days and then thrown out into the street at night in my pyjamas, without any money in my pocket, without a telephone and with a ban on returning to my home address, where all the goods I had owned during my visit to France remained. All these brutal and abusive actions have affected me psychologically and that is why I am choosing to file for a complaint in the hope that justice will be done.

I was in that house to practise yoga, a practice which I harmoniously combined with exploring French culture. I have always been fascinated by books, and I had chosen to come to France mainly because I had fallen in love with their culture and the antiquarian shops and flea markets full of valuable books that I could buy at reasonable prices. I had the possibility to live in a small hut in the courtyard of the house, which facilitated my long-term practice of various yogic procedures requiring solitude.

On the morning of November 28th, at about 6 a.m., I was in the hut I was living in, which was in the courtyard of the house at that address, when I heard some very violent noises. I got out of bed to see what was going on. I thought we had been attacked by burglars. I opened the door of the hut and that's when I heard the sound of wood being broken, smashed, thumping, screams, lights moving chaotically. I didn't have time to think, to figure out what was going on. Then I saw two masked men who simply broke through the gate separating the courtyard in front of the house from the inner courtyard where I was standing. They were shouting very loudly: „Police, Police”. Almost immediately, a woman armed with a pistol pounced on me, pushed me by the shoulders back into the cottage and tore the curtain off the door. I fell on the bed and immediately, at gunpoint, she turned me over with my hands behind my back, and handcuffed me. She squeezed the handcuffs very tightly and my wrists hurt very badly and, because I was hit when I was pushed, my left shoulder also hurt very badly. Later on, because I was handcuffed with my hands behind my back for hours on end, that pain increased and even now, almost a month after these traumatizing events, I still have a pain in my left shoulder.

In the same inner courtyard there was another cabin, where a friend of mine lived. He

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was asleep when the police arrived, and I heard several masked men burst in screaming. They immobilized him and I was scared out of my wits from all the screaming. No one explained anything to me, I could see a large number of masked men with machine guns, flashlights on their heads, even grenades and some of them even had dogs. Everyone was shouting, everyone was extremely agitated, they were all talking at the same time, shouting at me in French: „Don't move, don't move". Basically, I really had no reaction whatsoever, I didn't have time to have any reaction whatsoever. Everything was so violent that I thought I was in a horror movie. Then this policewoman who also handcuffed me came yelling at me over and over: „Tell me, tell me, are there minors in the house, are there minors in the house?" I said, „No, not that I know of." We had a puppy in the house, who I think got frightened by the noises and started barking. The policewoman turned around and started yelling, „You have dogs, how many dogs do you have?" I said, „Yes, we have a puppy, it's a very cute little puppy, not a danger to anyone." It was obvious to me from the noises that there were a lot of masked people and policemen, there were yelps and the sound of broken objects everywhere.

I was dressed in pajamas, a pair of long pants and a short-sleeved t-shirt, no socks on my feet. The cops opened both doors to the cabin and kept me for several hours in the cold. It was about 2-3 degrees Celsius outside. I was constantly being guarded by someone, it took quite a while before anything was explained to me, because the first time, as they put it, they „processed" my friend who lived in the same inner courtyard as me. I sought to pay attention to hear what they were talking to him. I could make out that it was related to MISA Yoga School, as I heard the name MISA several times.

I had to wait for an hour, an hour and a half until someone spoke to me, during which time I was under constant surveillance. Any questions I had I was told in a mocking manner that I was dangerous and that I was under arrest for extremely serious offenses, for human trafficking and rape, and that I would find out more soon.

While I was waiting for someone to talk to me, various policemen and masked men passed in front of me several times. I was in a terrible state of shock, I felt completely stuck, it was as if I couldn't think and sometimes there was the vain hope that maybe it was a nightmare. After they completed the formalities they had done with my friend, the policeman came to me with an interpreter. It was very cold outside, it was in the morning, it was somewhere between 2 and 3 degrees, I felt very cold. I was shivering and I asked the policeman who was taking my data to put the dressing gown that was on the hanger on my shoulders. Eventually, he relented and threw the robe over me, covering only one of my arms. I tried to grab the robe with my teeth to cover the remaining bare arm, but to no avail. To be able to cope with that situation, I held my bare legs under me because I couldn't do anything, I couldn't even pull a piece of blanket, a quilt over me. They read out the charges against me, it was mind-boggling, I couldn't even understand what they were referring to. They were saying something like „organized human trafficking, mental manipulation and complicity to rape". I couldn't understand anything they were saying, although they repeated it to me several times. I could not understand how I, a peaceful yoga practitioner, who had done nothing illegal, nothing immoral, could have been involved in so-called human trafficking or so-called rape.

They explained that I was remanded in custody for 24 hours. When they asked me if I wanted to let anyone know about this, I said yes, I wanted them to tell my boyfriend, who was in Romania. I told them that I also had a phone number, at one point I had to explain to them where to get it, because I had handcuffs on. They asked me for my ID and then again, the same thing, but in the case of the ID, because it was somewhat simpler, I went over, with my hands tied, and I snatched the purse from the shelf where I had my ID. I told them that I had a plane ticket the next morning to return to Romania and they said, well, that's that, I'm definitely not going to make it. They explained that they have the right to detain me for 96 hours and then the investigation will decide what happens next, whether I stay in custody, whether I am placed under judicial control or whether I am released. I asked to contact a lawyer in Romania, they laughed in my face and told me that this was out of the question and that I could have access to a public defender at most. In the questions that followed they also asked me if I wanted to notify my employer, if I wanted to notify the consulate, if I wanted to call someone, but they told me that this option was practically unreal, because no one would allow me to call from custody. I tried to have a minimal dialog with them and find out what was happening or what would happen to me. They didn't answer anything, on the contrary, they were walking to and fro in front of the place where they were holding me and telling me over and over again, in a high tone of voice, not to move, not to try any tricks. I said, „But what could I do, you've tied my hands!?” and then more of them came closer, they were looking at us as to a circus show, and commented. They said for sure I was a prostitute, that's why I had to live outside, to meet my clients there. The policewoman was telling her colleagues that she knew very well, she had heard that prostitution is practised that way in Romania, and that it is even legal, that in Romania brothels are legal, that she had read that, and that anyone can go to prostitutes there. They had a very mocking attitude and referred to us, yogis, in a very nasty way and while they were denigrating us, they were constantly commenting and saying how strange we were that we didn't react violently! And they kept saying to each other, as an aside – I heard this reference several times during the days of the investigation – that it was very strange that we were very quiet. When I asked what was going on with the personal belongings I had there, one of the policemen told me to say goodbye to everything that was there, that I would never see it again. That's what he told me.

Because of all the emotions, I felt the urge to go to the bathroom. I began to say to the man surveilling me, „Please, I need to go to the restroom.” He kept yelling: „Not now, not now, not now, not now”. I repeated this request many times. Although I repeated over and over again that I needed to go to the toilet, I was continually told that it was not possible then. After several hours, when I was on the verge of no longer being able to control these urges, at my increased insistence, I was taken to the toilet. My handcuffs were removed only in front of the toilet door, and the door remained ajar at all times, while gendarmes and policemen were constantly passing by. Then I was handcuffed. This was very humiliating.

Then they told me we had to get ready to leave. At that point, I told them again: „Please, please let me get dressed, because I am very cold. If I leave, I can't leave like this.” At one point, the policewoman even said to her colleague: „Whatever does this

creature want, she's dressed, isn't she?" and he said: „Yes, but you have to let her put a blouse on, or she'll say you have violated her human rights.” She was very annoyed that my clothes were inside the house and she wouldn't let me leave the place at all, probably to isolate me, so as not to have contact with any of my friends. It was only after several insistences and only when she realized that even the boots I had were also in the house that she let me go. The light beige carpets in the hallway were completely destroyed by mud and boot prints. There were pieces of broken doors everywhere, because they had smashed everything they could find that couldn't be opened at first hand. I opened the closet where I had my clothes and grabbed the first blouse I could find, grabbed my boots, a pair of socks and then put my jacket on. After I put my blouse and jacket on, I was handcuffed again and then I was taken to the car in which the police officers investigating me had come.

I and the friend I was with, the one who lived next to me, were taken to the police together. The policewoman was driving and in the seat next to her was the translator. The policeman sat between me and my friend in the back seat. I had handcuffs on behind my back. From that moment on, they turned on the sirens and we drove with the sirens screaming through traffic. The place where they took us, the police station in Nanterre, was very far from where we were, and although they overtook everyone in traffic, the journey took over an hour. It was about 9 o'clock in the morning, a very busy time. That journey was simply awful. In addition to the screaming of the siren and the wildly alternating lights, red, blue, red, blue, red, blue, they also honked continuously to make way. I was completely terrified.

Because of having been pushed and kicked on my left shoulder, then handcuffed and held with my hands behind my back for so many hours, even in the car, the pain in my shoulder got worse. After we went up to the police station building and were waiting to go into the cells, I politely asked the policemen repeatedly if it would be possible to move the handcuffs in front of me, because my shoulder was in a lot of pain. At first they didn't want to. I insisted. After more insisting, my friend said the same thing: „Please, you can see she's not violent, she's not doing anything”, and then this policewoman took off the handcuffs. The next minute, the door towards the cells opened. They announced the people in charge of access to the cell block, saying „We are here for the MISA case”.

I went inside, then there was a strip search. The policewoman searched me. I remember she asked me if I was wearing a bra and I said no, and after she had put her hands on my breasts, she made a snotty comment saying something like „Your tits are holding up good” or something of the kind. She checked me all over, made me spread my legs, checked to make sure I didn't have anything between my buttocks, made me take off my boots, to check that I didn't have anything in them, then took everything I had in my jacket pockets. In my jacket pocket I had a lip balm and two used subway tickets, that was all I had. I was just before my period, and I thought that because of the stress I would probably get my period. They told me I would be given everything I needed there. I somehow repeated to them again that I felt that I might get my period at that time. I received a package from them which had a tampon and a wet napkin.

I was then taken to the cell where I was kept for two days. It was quite a big, square

room, it had concrete on the floor. I couldn't help noticing that they made us take our shoes off at the entrance to the cell, even though they had walked in with dirty boots on the carpets of the house where I was found. There were two tables in that cell, two L-shaped tables against the wall. Those tables were about 90 centimeters narrow, I don't think more, maybe less. On those tables there were very thin – no more than 5 centimeters – sponge mattresses covered in muslin. There were four girls in the cell, three of us slept on the tables, one on the floor. It was very cold there. I got a blanket, which was also very thin and smelled very strongly of sweat, probably from whoever had used it before me. It was explained to me that the cell was continuously being monitored by a video camera and that the video camera was placed somewhere above the door and that from then on, whatever I needed, if I needed anything, or if I needed to go to the toilet, I had to stand up and signal to the camera. The cell door had a big window from top to bottom. There was always artificial light in there, you didn't even know if it was day or night.

I don't know how long it was before they came to take me for the first interrogation. The policewoman who had arrested me came to take me, she was still very aggressive and acted towards me as towards a dangerous criminal, she told me she was being nice to me and would carry me around the building without handcuffs, but were I to make any sudden movement, or were I to do anything, she would immediately put the handcuffs back on. Basically, she took me out of the cellblock, we went all around the building where there were a lot of offices, we went into an elevator full of people and then arrived – from what I understood – to the very office where she and the man who had arrested me were working.

That's where the interrogation began. It was videotaped with a video camera, they told me that it was the provision of the law there, that the interrogation be videotaped. She typed everything I said into a file, there were some standard questions that she was asking me. In the first phase, they asked me to legitimize myself with my personal information, information from my identity card, where I lived, information about my income. And then they started asking the questions in the investigation. The way they were looking at me, the way they were asking the questions, honestly it was straight out of a horror movie, I mean it had nothing to do with any kind of reality that I had ever experienced. Everything they were saying was so biased and malicious, I was so scared and didn't understand what I was supposed to do at that point. They started in full force with some questions like who the coordinator there is, how it is decided who the coordinator is, who the drivers were, because they were telling me that from the investigation they had done, they had realized that what was going on in the house I was living in was absolutely awful, that those were beings who were being manipulated and forced to do things against their will. They had very offensive questions, like whether I had had sex for money, whether I had been made to have sex with other men, whether I was made to do humiliating and demeaning things, whether something had happened to me that I was ashamed of. Basically, I told them the whole truth about myself, that I have been practising yoga for 20 years, that I am a journalist by profession, that I was a spokesperson for the MISA yoga school for many years, that I have now retired from public life because I have chosen to practice yoga in a more systematic way to make some inner progress.

They were simply almost mocking me while I was saying these things, like „Oh,

come on, whom are you kidding!“. While the female cop sat at her desk reading my questions, the other cop who teamed up with her stood in my line of sight most of the time and continually made faces at everything I said. However, after they questioned me and found out that I was college educated, they changed their tone a bit. They had very standard questions, which they asked in all sorts of other ways. It was clear to me that they wanted to justify the very brutal actions they had undertaken, I can even say by making up a story to justify the brutal way they had acted. There was nothing dubious going on in that house, neither I nor any of my friends who were there had ever been trafficked, raped, prostituted. I don't know, I had never heard of any of the horrors they accused me of, that is, everything they said was taken from a horror movie, it had nothing to do with reality. This was the first interrogation, it lasted several hours, there was a translator present to translate what they were asking me and what I was saying. And that translator looked at me in a manner I could see was biased. For some reason, all the people coming in and out of that office were giving me quite contemptuous looks, I can say.

Then they took me back to my cell, again the same route, we took the elevator and passed through the building. When I got back to the cell, I think they asked me if I wanted to eat. They also asked me in the morning if I wanted orange juice, but the emotional state I was in was very troubled, and I said no. The problem was that it was never explained to me that in that detention regime there were three meals a day and if you were asked whether you wanted to eat and you said no, you would get no other food. Basically, they took me from where I was living, at 6 o'clock in the morning, I hadn't slept, I hadn't eaten anything, I hadn't brushed my teeth, there I hadn't had access to any kind of intimate hygiene products. Very often, in order to go to the toilet, we had to take turns, the people in the cell, in front of the respective camera, because nobody was coming. If they happened to pass by in front of the cell – the cell had a door with a window from top to bottom, and many times I would see people being brought in from interrogation and brought back – I would signal to them through the door and say „Please, we urgently need to go to the toilet“ and they would often get angry and even swear in French and say „We have a lot of work, not now, it's very busy“ and I would say „Yes, but I have been waiting for a long time“. In the cell in which there were four of us, when someone would come, everybody would want to go to the toilet, because we hadn't gone to the toilet for a very long time, and I would say to them: „There are four of us, we want to take turns to go“. They would get annoyed, many times... not all of them, some of them were nicer, but there were many times when they would say, „No can do, no can do, not now.“ When we were taken to the toilet, the policeman who was guarding us stood quite close to the toilet door. There, none of the doors closed. Once, I stayed a little longer because I was washing my face, and the policeman came in after me to see what was taking so long.

A very delicate situation was with the drinking water, because we didn't have enough water. Every time I told them „We don't have any water“, they said „We don't have time to get you water“. They brought us water in a very small glass of water, about 150 ml. That water was completely insufficient. I endured thirst, cold and hunger, on top of all the stress that was there.

After several hours in that cell, I began to realize that it was not a nightmare, that it

was really happening, that it was real. I was lucky that they allowed me to keep my jacket on, the other girls who had been brought there were not allowed to have their jackets on, and they were cold. When I closed my eyes, all I could see were policemen and gendarmes smashing everything. I can confess that although I have seen many movies and read many books, I don't think I ever understood what this experience of being imprisoned is like. I felt there that I simply represented nothing, that my will was annihilated, that it had no possibility to manifest itself, I could not go to the toilet, I could not drink water, I did not know what was going to happen to me, I did not understand why I was there. My life before those raids seemed like a distant dream. I was extremely tired, the raids practically caught me before I had fallen asleep and by the evening on the day of the raids I had been awake for about 40 hours. I couldn't fall asleep and then every time I did manage to fall asleep there would be a lot of noises in there, doors were being slammed and someone would raise their voice or talk loudly. From the cell in which I was locked up I saw several of my friends through the window, who lived with me in the house, being taken away for interrogation. A state of great uncertainty prevailed, and only a few hours were a little quieter and I then finally managed to fall asleep. Towards morning, all the slamming of doors, the keys being used and all the loud banging started anew. Then I realized that it was real, that I was in prison, that just as in 2004 in Romania there were abuses by the authorities, the same thing was happening there, that for that reason it might take me a while to get out of there – because someone who abuses can do so endlessly. Somehow, I was already telling myself that that was it, I was going to stay there, so I had to bear it out, I had to be strong, not go down the emotional slope, because it wouldn't help, and many times when I felt like crying I would be thinking: „Don't start crying, I don't know how you will ever be able to stop, don't cry now!”

The food they gave us was terrible. They knew we were vegetarians, so they asked us straight out what we wanted – rice or couscous. The first night we chose rice. It was a very bad choice, it was basically a little casserole that they microwaved. I guess they didn't keep it in long enough, because the rice was raw, and hot and cold at the same time. I almost wanted to throw up from all the emotions of the day, but I did my best to eat at least half the portion, so the next morning, I don't know what time it was, maybe around nine o'clock, or maybe a little bit earlier, when a guard came in and asked if we wanted breakfast, I got up and got breakfast for all the girls who were still sleeping, who were in the same cell with me. I basically got an orange juice of about 150-200 ml and two biscuits. It was an orange juice that was not very good, but when I drank it, I cried and thanked God for even this small joy.

After that, they started walking around again, the traffic there restarted. Interrogations followed for all those who were in the cells. There were many of my friends on the same landing, who, I realised, were being taken for interrogations. Some of the girls in the cell where I was imprisoned were interrogated for up to 10 hours. They took them in the morning, some came back early, some only in the evening. And on the first day, when I was interrogated, but also on the second day, I told them that it was inhuman that they kept me in those unhygienic conditions, that is, I hadn't brushed my teeth for several days, it was very difficult, I felt the need to clean my mouth somehow. The very first day, I asked

the policewoman „Please, I need a toothbrush and toothpaste” and she said „Give us the number of a person who lives here in Paris and we will call and tell them to buy you toothpaste and a toothbrush, and bring them down to the police station”. And I said, how can I give you anything, anything at all, since I don’t have anything here? I mean, where could I take the number from? You took my cell phone, and all the things that I had with me were left in the hut where I lived.

So, I asked that policewoman, I said, please, be so kind as to at least give me some salt, and she said ‚But what would you do with that salt?’ I said, ‚I put it on my finger and rub it on my teeth.’ And then, at the last moment, she had mercy upon me and gave me a small sachet of one gram of salt, but then she panicked and said ‚Wait a minute, don’t do anything crazy, don’t make any trouble, you’re not allergic to salt are you? Who knows what’s going to happen now’ and I said, ‚No, and anyway, it’s very little, the salt you gave me.’

On the morning of the second day, before the interrogation, I was taken to have my DNA and fingerprints processed and to have the famous photos taken in police custody. When I entered the room where all this was being done, there were two policemen there. One of them said to the other, ‚Listen man, be careful, she’s a journalist, be careful what you say to her, cause you never know what she’s going to say after’. But anyway, the way they talked was very biased. My fingerprints were taken, my picture was taken, a DNA sample was taken from my mouth.

On the second day, the interrogation lasted several hours again. They told me more things, the tone of talking to me had already changed a bit, the policewoman was a bit more humane, she was trying to be nice. She asked me at first if I had anything to complain about regarding the conditions of my arrest. This was a standard question on their form. I told them about the need to brush my teeth. One of the girls in the cell had told us that they had allowed her to take a packet from home, and that in that packet she had toothpaste and a toothbrush, and I said, ‚Please be so kind as to allow us access to this toothpaste, to put it on the finger and clean our mouth’, and she said, ‚Yes, yes, yes, we’ll see, we’ll see, we’ll seek to...’. I told her that no one came when we needed to go to the toilet, we didn’t get enough water. I told her that the food was insufficient. The reply was something like ‚you are not in a hotel’, somehow that those were the conditions. I repeated the whole hygiene situation again.

At the time, I didn’t know that they had written it down, but later I saw on the sheet that I signed when I left the prison that on the first day I had refused two meals. It was just that when I was asked I was not told that that was the question for the meal and that there would be no other question, I felt outraged at the time and I said, yes, but wait a minute, I should have been told: ‚In here, there are three meals, if we ask if you want it and you refuse, then you don’t get any other food.’

The interrogation had many questions, and this time more questions about my private life. They told me that they had searched the place where I was and asked me more questions about my personal belongings there. They told me, in different ways, that I should admit that I was a very important person and that the proof was the very expensive high-tech electronics that was found where I was living. They asked me more questions

like, 'If I was practising yoga and seeking solitude, why did I have a computer?' And honestly I had an old laptop that had a bad battery, which is why the battery was out and if the power went out, it would shut down, you'd lose everything you were working on; a monitor, a keyboard and a mouse and a couple hard drives, a pair of headphones, an epilator. That was all the very expensive high-tech electronics that I had, almost all of which was either received as gifts from friends or bought at a decent price, and I can't really say that I had anything expensive in there. And they kept saying, 'Yeah, but if you're practising yoga and you want to retire in solitude, why do you have a computer there?' And I said, 'Guys, but we're not in the Middle Ages anymore, it's only natural, I mean think about it, I do a lot of research on a lot of topics that are health related, I'm up to date with the news, what's going on in the world, I write books, how do you think I could do all this considering that we don't use typewriters anymore?' From the discussions I had with them, they made it clear to me that I was a suspect, that I was a person of importance, that they believed from their investigation that those who were outside the house were the traffickers, those who were inside the house were the ones trafficked. They even told me to admit that I was living in luxury, while the girls in the house were living in squalor, which is absurd and a lie, because first of all that house was very nicely decorated and I was living in a modest little shack, which is 2 meters by 1.40 meters. That little cottage was very well furnished, it had a single bed that went up against the wall and when you lifted the bed up, you had a folding table that you could lift up and put down. Basically, if you put the bed up and put the table down, you had enough space to do asana-s and stand up, and if you put the bed down, basically the whole room was a bed. And they kept saying, 'Admit that you, compared to the conditions in the house, you were living in luxury and the house was living in miserable conditions and you were living in luxury' and 'admit how many advantages you had, and why you had these advantages' And I said, 'Wait a minute, but that's absurd. All the rooms in the house were much bigger than the cottage we were in at the time, and I said, 'What's the luxury? In order to get to the toilet, I had to walk in the cold, just think that every time I need to go to the toilet at night I have to get dressed and go outside to get into the house. Plus, if you want to take a shower, you have to go from the shower all the way outside. It was just that it was my choice to live there, because my spiritual practice involves a lot of solitude, and from that point of view it was an excellent place for the longer hours of laya yoga that I practiced, for the 24-hour prayer that I practiced frequently.'" Anyway, I think they asked the question in six different ways in which they were telling me to admit that I was an important person in MISA.

When they arrested me on the morning of the 28th, they asked me if I wanted to tell anyone that I was being taken into custody, and I told them to tell my boyfriend. The next day during the interrogation, one of the questions was how did I explain the fact that my boyfriend, when contacted by them, said that he did not know me. You realize that in the circumstances I was in, I honestly tell you, I was very naive and I didn't think that they were lying to me. I didn't think about that possibility, I thought that it was a misunderstanding, that maybe he got scared. Anyway, that fact was strong enough to destabilize me emotionally, I felt lonely, helpless, cut off from all communication with the world and seemingly abandoned in hardship. Luckily, I was on the ball and I said to

those policemen, ‘Right now, right now bring me a phone, put it on this table, put me on speaker and let’s sort this out. I think it was a misunderstanding.’ I asked more questions about the way the conversation with him had went and they said ‘No, no, someone spoke in Romanian, there was a translator, and he said he didn’t know you.’ And I said, ‘I still want to talk to him. If I talk to him, it will clear this up’ and they said, ‘No, you have no right. You are being detained, you have no right to talk to him now’. When I spoke to my boyfriend after I got out of custody, he told me that he had been called from a hidden number by someone who didn’t introduce themselves and who told him in Romanian that I was being held by the police in France. He said he didn’t understand how that was an official phonecall, how could he know it wasn’t a hoax, that the officer talking to him should identify himself, and when he asked whom he was talking to, they hung up the phone on him. And for him, the days when he had no contact with me and imagined the worst were terribly hard and long.

They asked me several questions about Gregorian Bivolaru. I think the first of them, which I started with, was whether I knew that he had been convicted of statutory rape. And I told them that he had not been convicted of statutory rape, I knew the legal situation of his case in Romania very well, he was wrongfully convicted of sexual intercourse with a minor, a minor who was almost 18 years old when the accusation was made, and who gave a forced statement which she withdrew the next day and then for years she had been saying that what she had signed under pressure was not true. So it was all a fabrication from one end to the other. When they heard these things, they didn’t even want to listen, they were saying „Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes, yes, yes, yes”.

The point is that I kept repeating over and over again, and I told them: ‚You should know that I am aware of all the abuses that have taken place. I know the legal situation in Romania very well, I know that none of the accusations similar to the ones you are making now have been proven in court. They were marching very much on this prostitution, human trafficking, pornography aspects. I told them: „I heard these things in Romania in 2004, they were publicized in all the media scandals in which the name of MISA was dragged. None of it could ever be proved, it could never be proved because it is not true. You won’t be able to prove any of it now either, because none of it is real.”

It was obvious to me that they had a pattern to this questioning. At one point, they put pictures of 24 people in front of me, and asked me if I knew those people and where I knew them from. Some of them I knew, they were my friends, some of them were arrested at the same time as me. Some I had never seen, and I didn’t know who they were.

The public defender that I asked for did not come to any of my interrogations, because, as they explained, there were far too many of us, and there weren’t as many public defenders. According to the law, they had the right to wait for two hours, if the public defender did not come, they continued the interrogation without a lawyer, so basically in two days I had no lawyer with me.

They told me clearly, after the second interrogation, that the third extension of the arrest would be for 48 hours, that the law allows them to directly make an extension of 48 hours. When I finished, they said „See you tomorrow”. That was the reply.

In the arrest, I got my period, I was in a lot of pain, that was an additional stress. The

first day, we asked for medicine, and we were given medicine. There was another person with me in the cell who was in pain from menstruation, and they gave us both a pill, some kind of aspirin. The next day, when I told them that I was feeling very bad from my period, they told me that they couldn't give me any kind of medicine unless a doctor saw me, so I asked for a doctor, but I didn't get any doctor, so after two days of detention I didn't get any doctor, although I asked for one, I didn't get anything to brush my teeth with, although the policewoman promised me that she would give us access to the toothpaste of the girl who was with us in the cell.

Towards the evening of the second day, the policewoman came again, in fact, both the policewoman and the policeman who had arrested me, including the translator, they came and took me away. I was terrified, I thought another interrogation was coming. I was very tired, I was very emotional, there were tears just ready to burst out. When I got there, they told me that, in fact, I could leave, that they were letting me go. They explained what was written on the sheet that I had to sign to get out of prison. Then the common sense questions started, and I said, „Alright, alright, but wait a minute. All the things that I came here to France with, all my things, all my clothes, all my money, everything that I have was left behind where you picked me up from.” They said, „No, that whole house is under seal, you are not allowed to go back there, it's illegal, I mean if somebody violates that seal they are liable for jail on the spot, we don't care, we don't care.” And I said, „Alright, but basically the only things you allowed me to take were my cell phone and my ID.” They gave me back my ID, but the phone, they told me it would be seized. So I was dressed in pajama pants, a sweatshirt and jacket, boots on my feet and just my ID in my pocket. I got back the two used subway tickets and a lip balm, which were in my jacket pocket, and the jewelry I had on when I was arrested. And I found myself in a terrible situation, where I said, „But it's nighttime, it's cold outside, I basically have nothing, what do I do now?” And she said: „We don't care, it's none of our business, we don't care.” And I said, „Yes, but it's inhuman to behave like this, I mean you took me from somewhere, you didn't let me take anything, you didn't let me take any money, you didn't let me take any luggage. You brought me under these conditions in custody. What do I do now?” „We're not interested.”

After I arrived in Romania, I found out from the girls who were in the house with me that they had taken down all the luggage that we were storing in the attic (to optimize space) and there was my bag there including some presents I had bought for Christmas. They took all those bags to the police station where I had also been detained. The girls in the house had this possibility to look for their bag among all those bags, but they put me out in the street without this „privilege”, and my bag stayed there with them.

Before I left there, God inspired me to at least ask them to open my cell phone and write down some phone numbers. They gave me permission to do this, they wrote down four phone numbers from my phone on a piece of paper, then put my phone in a sealed bag and actually led me out of the building. It was night, it was very cold. The moment I got out of there, that was basically the emotional moment for me, because I found myself in the street, alone, scared, in the cold, with nothing. There I broke down, I started crying, I didn't know what I should do. I stayed there for a while, I walked a few steps, I just walked in front of that building, I thought that maybe if I stayed there I would meet someone,

maybe one of my friends would think that we were there. I didn't know the condition they were in, I didn't know what had happened to anyone. I asked several people passing on the street to allow me to make a phone call or send a message on Telegram or WhatsApp. Basically, due to the fact that I was right in the area with the police station, I think several people thought I was probably a criminal. Several people turned me down, in the end I thought that if I stop someone who actually has a phone in their hand and is talking it's going to be more difficult for them to turn me down, because they can't say no. Basically, there was a guy talking on the phone and when he ended the conversation I stopped him and told him that I would ask him very much if he would let me send a message on Telegram or WhatsApp, because they don't cost, I don't want to use up his credit. He was very reluctant, but in the end let me do this. Basically, I wrote to my boyfriend and said „I've been released from prison, I'm in front of the police station in Nanterre. I'm staying here, please if you can get in touch with anyone, if anyone can come and get me. I can't write to you anymore, I have nothing, no money, no phone, nothing.”

Basically, the message was sent. My boyfriend later told me that he was extremely emotional and tried to call the number several times, and the man said at one point „I'm sorry I helped that girl.” After my boyfriend heard about me, two days later, he tried to call that number again, so we could talk, but the man had left, I stayed for several hours in front of the police station there in Nanterre. After several hours, someone who was in contact with someone else that he had called appeared to tell me that it was necessary to wait, because some of my friends had organized themselves and had rented a house and I would be able to go there, and a friend with a car would come after me, it would just take longer. When I saw the first familiar face, I burst into tears. At some point, another friend of mine was released who was in his slippers, and I still remember that moment when we met in front of the police station and hugged each other, and we both cried. He was very hungry, and there was a pizza place right next to that building, and he said „You know what, I'm just gonna go to this Arab, I'm gonna go to this Arab, cause Arabs are good people, and I'm just gonna ask him nicely to please give me a slice of pizza.” But then another friend of ours showed up, she had been released a day before and she had some money, so she went and ordered food. I couldn't eat anything because of the stress, neither then nor many days afterwards. I lost ten pounds in four days. In the meantime, other people started being released. There was another woman waiting in front of the police station, I talked to her, she was a Romanian, a translator, and she told me that she was waiting for her colleague who is also a translator, and that she was doing the formalities for someone who was going out. I thought that if someone else was coming out, it would be better to stay there, because maybe they would be in the same situation as me, so from that moment I stayed for another two hours until the friend of that translator came out and shortly after that a girl who was my friend, who had been detained from the same address, came out. She had gone out with a policeman who wouldn't let us stay together, he said that she had a different regime, she would have to be deported to Romania through an association. We told him that we had waited for her and that someone would come for us. They wouldn't let her come with us. Then I had this request and I said: „Please, at least give her a phone number where we can keep in touch”, they said „We don't have a pen,

we don't have paper" and I said to the policeman „Yes, but you should have a phone, don't you have a phone?" and he said „Yes." „Please kindly write this phone number in your phone and put it on a piece of paper when you get there." I asked the girl „Do you have money, do you have anything?" She had no phone, no money, no nothing. Basically, she was in a similar situation.

After several hours, because someone stayed with us who had a phone, our friend found us by car. We arrived at the house that some friends had rented at 6am, it took about 8 hours from when they released me until we managed to find each other, during which time we stayed outside. At the house where I arrived, I met several friends who had similar stories, we told each other what we had been through. I took a shower and cried with gratitude for the simple fact that I could wash myself. Then one of the boys gave me a pair of pajama pants and a girl gave me a t-shirt. I washed the clothes I was wearing and put them on the radiator to dry. Dressed in my pajamas, I went back to Romania. I arrived in Romania on December 1st, with nothing. I basically only had my identity card. My boyfriend bought my plane ticket and sent it to a friend's cell phone. I printed the plane ticket at an internet cafe.

Now, although it has been several days since then, I can't get any rest, I mean my sleep is very troubled and I can't fall asleep deeply, every time I fall asleep I wake up at any noise or my sleep is very fractional. Most of the time, I dream of prison moments, I become hyper-sensitive emotionally. At the same time, I feel very outraged that this can still happen today. The French policemen kept asking me all the time in the hope that they could build their case on something I might say: „Do you have anything to say? Do you have anything additional to say? Anything you want to pass on to the examining magistrate who's going to review your case?" And I'd say, „Yes, I do, I do have something to say. I'm an honest person, I'm a person of integrity, I'm a person of moral principles, I'm non-violent, I've been practising yoga for 20 years, I haven't done anything illegal, I haven't done anything immoral, why am I in this situation, why am I here, why have you accused me? How can you accuse me of human trafficking, of being an accomplice to rape, how can I be an accomplice to rape!?"

And they said: „No, no, we know better, we know better, yes we do, we know that the serious conditions in which we found the girls in the house, that they were without identity papers and without means of payment" and I said „I don't know what you mean, I don't understand what you mean. All my friends who were there, just like me, they had their ID, they had their money, nothing was taken from them", and I said „But how can you say that, you just found my phone, you found my ID, my money was left in the hut" and she said „No, no, you are a special case, you are a special case because you are from the organizational structure, you are important. Poor girls, they were not in the same situation." And I said, „I've never heard of such a thing, I don't know of such a thing."

When I signed the paper when they released me from prison, the condition of my release was that I am obliged to come back if they deem it necessary for the investigation. Basically, my contact details were my phone number, which they kept, and an e-mail address. I tell you honestly I would never want to go back there again. Yesterday I got an email on my phone (on the new phone my boyfriend bought me, because basically the old

phone stayed there with them) and my heart was pounding, because I thought maybe now will be the moment when they will say „Come back, we want to hear from you again”.

There are several friends of mine who are in the same situation as me. I can even say a serious emotional imbalance, which is why I started seeing a psychologist. I think it is difficult for someone who has not been in this situation to understand what I am going through and what we are going through. I don't know if I am able to convey or tell anyone how I felt and still feel. I am very fortunate to have access to all the esoteric knowledge in this yoga school, and I realize that without it I think I would have collapsed, but this way I can call on all that I have learned in all these years of yoga practice. However, the process is slow, I cry a lot out of nowhere, I don't sleep, I have no appetite, I still find it difficult to walk down the street because if I see a policeman or hear a siren, I freeze. Honestly, even Christmas decorations stress me out a lot, because they are red and blue and the lights are moving. I flinch very easily at any noise, I can freak out very easily if someone touches me and is out of my line of sight. I find it difficult to open up and talk about all these things. I'm trying to do the best I know how and balance myself, but I still feel that all this has affected me badly.

In conclusion, what I can say is that I clearly feel that there was a great abuse that happened to me there and to all human beings who were put in a similar situation. I have never done anything illegal, anything immoral. In this yoga school we are people who strive to be the best people we can be. I personally have done nothing wrong, I have nothing to feel guilty about, I don't feel that it was right and just to be kept those two days in custody and to be treated the way I was treated. After two days in custody, they put me out in the street in my pajamas with nothing in my pocket but my ID. Thank God that I managed, and that my friends found me. There are people who have had more dramatic stories than me. Now, since coming back to Romania, I have found out that one of the girls was so desperate and didn't know what to do that she looked for a hospital and locked herself in a hospital toilet, where she slept until morning and in the morning she came back again to the place from where she was released, hoping that maybe someone would think to come and look for her. This is how she was found five days after the time of the search by some friends of hers.

I would very much like the perpetrators of these violations and abuses to get what they deserve and for the truth to come out about what was really there and for everything that was wrongfully taken from me to be returned. To whom can I address the questions I have? Why have I been treated in this abusive and humiliating way? Why were we not allowed our personal belongings? How can they be useful to the ongoing investigation? Will the money or electronics I had in France ever be returned to me? How can I prove what I had there when I was taken out of the cottage in handcuffs, without being allowed to take anything, anything at all, and without being present during the search? They basically had a free hand to steal anything and I can do absolutely nothing about it. How many more injustices will I have to suffer? Time will prove that we have done nothing wrong, that we have done nothing immoral or illegal, and that everything there was a set-up.

Susan J. Palmer, The Police Raids Against MISA in France, November 28, 2023. 1. Conflicting Narratives²

On November 28, 2023, there was a militarized police raid on a yoga school in France known as “MISA” in Romania and “Atman” in Europe. “MISA” stands for “Movement for Spiritual Integration into the Absolute”.

Just after 6 a.m., a SWAT team of around 175 police, wearing black masks, Kevlar helmets, and bullet proof vests, descended on eight separate houses, five in Paris and three located in the same yard in Nice, brandishing semi-automatic rifles. They smashed in the doors and ran up and down the stairs, shouting orders. Their targets were neither terrorists nor drug dealers. What the police were searching for were members of a “secte” (“cult” in English). They found some 95 vegetarian, non-smoking, alcohol-abstaining yoga practitioners.

On that fateful morning, most of these yogis were still in bed. A few were in the kitchen boiling water for tisane. The masked police handcuffed them, made them stand outside the house without coats or shoes in the freezing courtyard, then bussed them to the police station of Nanterre, in the Paris suburbs, and other police stations, where they were held for questioning (“garde à vue”) for up to 48 hours (there is no habeas corpus in France).

As co-author with Stuart Wright of a book called “Storming Zion: Government Raids on Religious Communities” (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), I was curious about this raid. So, I contacted MISA’s administrators and arranged to visit their yoga school in Bucharest, where several of those released with no charges had returned (others went to their respective countries, other than Romania, and some remained in France). Among the six who are being detained in different prisons of the Paris area on charges related to “abuse of weakness,” rape, kidnapping, and human trafficking, is Gregorian Bivolaru (b.1952), MISA’s co-founder and spiritual teacher.

I flew to Bucharest on January 7, 2024, and interviewed twenty-five Romanian yogis, all students of MISA, 14 of whom were caught in the French raids, over nine days. The interviews were conducted in English and occasionally in French, with the help of an interpreter for those who spoke only Romanian. Their ages ranged from 27 to 72, and their professions and occupations were quite varied.

There are two aspects of the raid on MISA that I found significant. First, the masked police team belonged to a special unit called CAIMADES. They are specially trained to deal with crimes and misdemeanors perpetrated by the “gourous” of “les sectes” (“cult leaders”) and to “rescue the victims.” Second, Gregorian Bivolaru teaches a form of sacred eroticism and he has been incorporating ancient Tantric erotic philosophy and techniques into MISA’s yogic practice for decades. From the perspective of the “cult

² Published in *Bitter Winter*, 03/01/2024.

watchers” in France’s state-sponsored anti-cult movement, these would be considered as “*dérives sectaires*” (cultic deviances), which must inevitably result in the “abus de faiblesse” (abuse of weakness) of Bivolaru’s “victims.” Moreover, for France’s anti-cult activists, Tantra yoga and ancient Hindu erotic practices in a “cult setting” could hardly be considered consensual. “Brainwashing,” rape, kidnapping, and human trafficking must somehow be involved.

The story of how Bivolaru, a Romanian spiritual leader and erotic mystic, came to be captured and put on trial by France’s government-sponsored anti-cult movement is complicated but fascinating. One finds three fiercely conflicting perspectives in the case.

From a feminist #MeToo perspective, one sees a powerful male leader imposing Hindu patriarchal dogma on Western female disciples to facilitate sexual exploitation and maintain a rigid gender-based hierarchy.

From the French anti-cult perspective, one sees a “guru” relying on techniques of mental manipulation to enslave his female followers in a vast, international human trafficking ring that funds his “secte.” In France a “secte” is not a “religion.” Rather, it is regarded as a kind of “bande organisée” (criminal gang).

Finally, there is the third perspective on the case shared by MISA’s 30,000-odd yoga students who view “Grieg” (Gregorian Bivolaru) as an enlightened spiritual master who has devised the spiritual path of “mystical eroticism” based on his studies of Tantra yoga in ancient Indian sources, filtered through the writings of his correspondent and source of inspiration, Mircea Eliade, one of the great scholars in the Chicago school of comparative religion.

From MISA students’ perspective, Bivolaru’s 2010 book “The Secret Tantric Path of Love to Happiness and Fulfillment in a Couple Relationship” is a practical guide for a harmonious and long-term heterosexual couple relationship. For Bivolaru’s women disciples, since his Tantric teachings are centered on the Mother Goddess, every woman on this path can become the incarnation of the goddess Shakti. MISA women explained in our interviews how through “mystical eroticism” their minds became liberated from patriarchy and their bodies exalted as feminine symbols of the Divine.

There is no time or space in this series to discuss these conflicting views on Bivolaru’s case. For those interested in this “cult controversy” and for MISA members awaiting trial, the “denouement” to this story is impossible to predict. Therefore, I will limit my efforts to exploring this complex situation within the context of France’s government-sponsored anti-cult movement and “anti-sect wars.” To this end, I will follow three steps:

1. I will present an anatomy of the raid and its aftermath. Based on the data gleaned from interviews with MISA students, I will argue that the Judicial Police violated France’s legal regime for the “garde à vue” (the detention and interrogation of suspects in police custody).

2. I will examine the role of MIVILUDES (Mission interministérielle de vigilance et de lutte contre les dérives sectaires, Inter-ministerial Mission for Monitoring and Combating Cultic Deviances) in Bivolaru’s arrest and will discuss MIVILUDES’ concept of “*dérives sectaires*” and its mission to control France’s “sectes.”

3. I will explain the charges of “abus de faiblesse” against Bivolaru and five MISA

members within the context of France’s 2001 About-Picard law. The modus operandi of “abus de faiblesse” allegations as a “weapon” for controlling “gourous” will be explored and its implications for Bivolaru’s legal situation will be discussed.

The accounts I will present in this series of the 2023 raids on MISA and the Romanian detainees’ experiences with the French police are gleaned from the interviews that I conducted in Bucharest in January 2024 at MISA’s Yoga School. My research participants described blatantly illegal treatment by the police and a general disregard for their rights and well-being while they were being held in police custody for questioning.

Law professor Jaqueline Hodgson describes the proper procedures of “garde à vue”: “Under art 63 of the CPP (Code de procédure pénale) a police officer may place a person in ‘garde à vue’ where there is reasonable suspicion that she has committed or attempted to commit an offence and the officer considers detention necessary to the investigation. The public prosecutor (the procureur) must be informed at the start of the ‘garde à vue,’ which lasts initially for 24 hours, and her authority is required to extend the period of detention for a further 24 hours. This is the primary guarantee for the proper treatment of the suspect (...). Under art 63-1 CPP, the detainee must be informed, in a language that she understands, of the nature of the offence for which she is being held and of her rights to inform someone of her detention (under art 63-2 CPP), to be examined by a doctor (art 63-3 CPP) and to see a lawyer (art 63-4 CPP). The right to custodial legal advice was first introduced in 1993; the suspect was allowed a 30- minute meeting with her lawyer, 20 hours after the start of the ‘garde à vue.’ In 2000, this was amended to allow access to legal advice from the start of detention, but still only for 30 minutes.”

Susan J. Palmer, The Police Raids Against MISA in France, November 28, 2023. 2. MISA Students Tell Their Stories³

The Paris raids of November 28, 2023, against students of MISA, the Movement for the Spiritual Integration into the Absolute, and its leader Gregorian Bivolaru were carried out simultaneously and targeted five locations. One location raided was a yoga studio administered by Sorin Turc, a violinist who played with the Monaco orchestra. Three large houses that were used as yoga-meditation retreats where around 90 Romanian yogis were staying on vacation were raided, as well as small 2-room apartment where Gregorian Bivolaru was temporarily residing.

The Nice raids were conducted that same morning. There, the police targeted three buildings in the same yard in Nice’s suburbs, where twelve Romanian yogis who were working on a construction contract were staying.

When I interviewed in Bucharest in January 2024 those who had been there, my informants’ accounts of the Paris raids were all very similar. One woman spoke of how her family owned a large house with twenty-two rooms in a beautiful rural area 100 kms

³ Published in *Bitter Winter*, 03/02/2024.

from Paris, and she had invited her yogi friends from Romania and other countries to visit for a spiritual retreat: “I woke up with police in my room, with masks, heavily armed. I got scared and hid under my blanket and started to pray. They threw the blanket off and cast it aside. I asked the policeman to let me get dressed, in English. He put himself between me and my clothes and pointed the gun at me. He finally let me get dressed and put handcuffs on behind my back. I was just in pajama pants, bare feet, and a light blouse and I started to get cold. The door to the outside courtyard was open.”

A man who was staying at another spiritual retreat house also described being subjected to hypothermia: “I stood outside for an hour and a half, and it was almost zero and I was in pajamas and t-shirt with bare feet. Then they took us downstairs to the kitchen, but they left all the doors open so it was cold. They were warm [the police] enough in boots and jackets and bullet proof vests, but we were mostly barefoot in our PJs.”

One man who was staying in a wooden cabin on the grounds of the main house described a similar experience: “I heard dogs barking, then a masked policeman came into the cabin, dragged me to the ground and put handcuffs on me. Then took me to the courtyard of the house. The police were running up and down the stairs shouting, ‘Ouvrez la porte!’ [Open the door!] and smashing in the doors. I shouted, ‘I have the keys!’ But it was too late, they had already broken all the doors and mirrors. We were twenty–twenty-five people, the police were maybe fifty.”

My informants identified four different kinds of police involved in the raid: “the masked ones with guns, the police without masks, the drug squad, and the human trafficking police—the ones who were taking videos and photos of us and communicating with their boss on the phone.”

Several Romanians were surprised by the attitude of the masked police: “They acted like they came to rescue us. They said, ‘We are here to help you.’ (I thought, but you are the ones abusing us now!).” Several of my informants noticed that the police seemed to be puzzled, as they were trying to categorize each Romanian as a “suspect,” as a “victim,” or as a “witness.” They noticed a pattern where the police were trying to discern whether their captives were suspects (of rape, trafficking, etc.), victims, or whether they might be useful as witnesses. One woman said, “It was very confusing. Some of us were treated like traffickers, others like victims— but how did they decide who was what? The Judiciary Police who took over the case told us, ‘We are part of a very big investigation that involves human trafficking, rape, mental abuse—and you are the victims—but you don’t recognize that you are victims. We are here to help you.’ I tried to talk to my friends, but [the police] said ‘Shush!’ We were not allowed to speak at all. Very weird.”

Those detainees who understood French reported overhearing the police express their uncertainty and surprise. One woman said: “I signed everything. I tried to be very open and honest, but it was difficult to understand what they wanted. It seems it was not clear to them either. I understand a bit of French and they were speaking between themselves saying, ‘Who are these people? It is not like what we were told it would be.’”

As mentioned earlier, three houses in the same yard in the suburbs of Nice were raided, where twelve Romanian construction workers were staying. One man from the Nice raids told me his story. He was around 6’6” tall and very strong. He explained how

he often traveled to France to work on contracts with his team of construction workers, all members of the MISA yoga school in Bucharest: “Me and my friends we prefer to work together. We find it difficult to work with people who are drinking and smoking [something MISA students do not do]—it leads to problems.”

These workers were guests of Sorin Turc, the already mentioned musician who was a yoga teacher at one of the schools affiliated with Atman. The violinist owned the three contiguous houses in Nice and had offered them free accommodation, with four men staying in each house.

On the morning of November 28, one of my informants told me he was in bed with the flu when he heard a crash and loud bellowing: “Police were coming up the stairs pointing big guns at me, and they told me to kneel with my hands up. Why so much force? There were around 150 police with three dogs, and they were screaming and pushing me as they put on the handcuffs. They kept us outside in the garden for three hours, squatting against the wall in handcuffs, I was freezing, shivering. I told them I was sick and needed to dress, but they would not allow me even to get my coat in the hallway. We asked if they had an arrest warrant and they said they did not need one. At first, we thought they suspected us of working in France with no papers, but we were all legal employees of a construction company. They kept asking me, ‘Where are the girls? There are supposed to be women staying in the house.’ ‘No women,’ I said, ‘only men working on construction.’ They asked, ‘Where is the room in the house for the sex video chats?’ We told them there was no internet in the whole house. So, it seems they thought we were part of a human trafficking ring. Then at the police station they told us we were ‘suspects’ and took our ID and made us fill out forms. We were held for 48 hours. ‘The FBI’ came to my cell... at least they were wearing FBI badges and spoke in English. They asked for my passwords so they could access my laptops. I refused. They later told me all my belongings had been sent to Nanterre to the prosecutor in charge of the case.”

“Suddenly, they released us all, around 10 or 11 p.m. They had taken our cellphones and our money and would not give them back to us. We were downtown in the city of Nice, 30 kilometers from our house. It was dark, cold, and raining heavily. They allowed us socks and shoes and I had my windbreaker with a hood, so I walked very fast, almost running and after five hours I arrived home. The house was not sealed, the gate was smashed in, and the front door was open, but I found my wallet with my cards still in my room, and the key to the car. So, I took the car and collected my friends who were walking home. Some of them did not take the main route, so I could not find them, and they had to walk all the way back alone in the cold rain.”

The police interrogators exerted heavy pressure on the Romanian detainees to sign documents written in French. With few exceptions, none of the Romanians read or spoke French. One detainee who had just been dragged out of bed and was handcuffed in the freezing cold kitchen was told she had to sign now: that it was mandatory, that she would be able to see a lawyer later on that afternoon at the police station—after she had already signed.

Even when interpreters were supplied who could translate the documents, the allegations listed were baffling to these Romanians and seemed irrelevant to their lives.

One woman described her treatment at the Nanterre police station: “A translator and a policeman came with papers and wanted my declaration. I filled in my ID page and then there were five accusations they wanted me to sign. I didn’t understand what they had to do with me. I said, ‘What are these accusations? Why should I sign?’ They said it was mandatory, that it was ‘just a procedure.’ But I did not sign, and so I sat in handcuffs for three to four hours.”

Some of the Romanians described how they were deliberately deceived about the nature of the documents they were asked to sign. They were told it was a simple “declaration” affirming that they had been arrested, or that “it’s just a procedure.” Some of these Romanians complied, not realizing they were signing a confession to charges of human trafficking, rape, kidnapping, and abuse of weakness. One Romanian detainee even found her translator unhelpful and deceptive: “My translator said, ‘I am not going to read you these ten pages again. I am not going to translate these questions again.’ I begged her, ‘But it’s my life, my freedom! I want you to translate, I cannot sign otherwise.’ Then, on the last page of the document, I saw a note in a smaller font that read, ‘She refused to have a lawyer.’ Then I felt sick. I knew I could not trust these people.”

Susan J. Palmer, The Police Raids Against MISA in France, November 28, 2023. 3. The Yogis’ Complaints About the Police⁴

In the previous article of this series, I described how the French police raids of November 28, 2023, against students of MISA, the Movement for the Spiritual Integration into the Absolute, were perceived by the MISA yoga students who were there and had returned to Romania, where I interviewed some of them in January 2024. They complained that their rights were repeatedly violated.

Many of my informants described how their demands for a lawyer were ignored or brushed aside: “They said I could have one call, but it had to be in France. I said I would not sign anything without my Romanian lawyer, but they said there was a lawyer at the police station who was free. I said I need my own lawyer. They said, ‘No, no, no! You are jeopardizing the investigation!’ They were not pleased.”

Another woman asked if she had a designated lawyer. “They said, ok they would call a lawyer later when we went to the police station. But I said I would not sign anything except in the presence of a lawyer.”

A few of the detainees were given an “in-house” lawyer, who advised them to “tell the truth or you will be jeopardizing the investigation.” In the two instances where a Romanian detainee was able to contact a French lawyer unaffiliated with the police, the lawyer strongly advised, “Don’t say anything, don’t sign anything. Wait until you are in the presence of the magistrate.”

But even the external French lawyers did not always prove helpful, according to

⁴ Published in *Bitter Winter*, 03/04/2014.

one detainee: “On the second day my lawyer arrives. He has the same attitude as the prosecuting attorney. He said, ‘Listen, you are celebrities in the mass media, you are a Tantric cult, so it would be good to speak up. I am sure you will remain in custody for more than 48 hours.’ ‘Why are you so sure?’ I asked. He replied, ‘Honestly, with what you are accused of, I am sure it will be long.’”

Several informants complained they were “insulted” by the police. One Romanian reports he was asked by the police if he would agree to take a psychological test that would prove he was mentally manipulated. “I said no. Do I look like a person who can’t make my own decisions?”

Some complained of being “treated like criminals”: “We had to give our fingerprints DNA samples, our saliva samples, they took photos with ID.” Others were asked insulting questions by their interlocutors. One man said he was asked, “Do you have sex with men?” Another man was asked, “Do you rape your girlfriend?” He replied, “You should be kidding! Why don’t you ask her?”

One woman was asked leading questions: “The police officer who was interrogating me was talking on the phone with his boss and getting more stressed, and he got aggressive with me just to impress his boss. He asked loaded questions like, ‘When you were drugged... When you were raped... When you had sex with your brother-in-law...’ It sounded like a comedy in a stupid movie.”

All the detainees I interviewed described unpleasant and harsh prison conditions: “My cell was 2×3 meters and very cold with a concrete floor and a Turkish toilet—very filthy and smelly. I had sore muscles and did a lot of yoga. I could not sleep. There was no night and no day. I had two cell colleagues who were very hostile. A policeman took... brought us to a cell that was very cold. I asked many times if I could have a second blanket, or toilet paper, there wasn’t even a glass where we washed, or plastic cups. There was a thin mattress on the cement floor, one blanket, no pillow. Lights were on all night and there were drugs addicts with withdrawal symptoms screaming their heads off, and all night there were prisoners brought in and out.”

My informants complained of being very uncomfortable in police custody. They were interrogated for up to five hours at a time, often handcuffed to a chair, and had to beg to be escorted to the toilet. Many were deprived of food and water during the interrogations: “When we arrived at the police station the translators were waiting. They gave us some food—but then we realized it was from our own storage unit in the house, like they gave us these very familiar Romanian biscuits.”

In most cases, after being held for 48 hours, the detainees were suddenly told they had to leave. This usually occurred between 10:30 p.m. and midnight, when they were promptly escorted to the exit of the police compound and locked out. They found themselves on the street late at night with their ID, but no money or cellphone. One helpful policewoman at the Nanterre police station had advised two of my informants to walk to the nearest metro station and told them there would be no conductors on duty this late, so they could sneak in under the turn style and return to Paris.

But one man told her he needed to catch a train to the country house, and he had no money to buy a ticket. This policewoman then gave him the most extraordinary advice:

“You don’t need money,” she told him. “Just watch the black people and do what they do.” “She told me to go to the part of the platform where the ‘black people’ were standing,” the man reported, “because they know how to sneak on trains without paying. So I did, and it worked!”

Several detainees who had been just released had to ask passersby if they could borrow their cellphones, so they could contact friends for help. Most of them contacted their lovers in Romania who bought their airline tickets so they could return home.

For one man, being released was almost as shocking as being raided: “Then, suddenly, I was released. I found it very disturbing that they never explained why we were suspects. One minute we are under judicial control, and the next: ‘You are free. Grab your things and go!’ As soon as I got out, I was running down the street, away from the police station, afraid they might change their mind.”

These interviews tell us that the police refused to inform most these Romanians in their own language about the allegations for which they were being held. They denied them their right to inform someone of their detention, which under article 63-2 CPP is the legally required treatment of a suspect held in “garde à vue”. Moreover, the police denied most of them the right to legal advice during the 48 hours of their “garde à vue.” which under art 63-4 CPP is “the primary guarantee for the proper treatment of the suspect.”

It appears likely that the police figured that, since the detainees were the “brainwashed,” powerless members of a “secte,” and non-French to boot, they could get away with cutting corners in trying to extort confessions and incriminating signatures.

Susan J. Palmer, The Police Raids Against MISA in France, November 28, 2023. 4. The MIVILUDES Behind the Raids⁵

To understand what happened to MISA it is crucial to reflect on the anti-cult role of the controversial governmental agency.

The investigation on MISA and Bivolaru that culminated in the November 2023 multipronged raid arose from a report of July 2023 from the MIVILUDES that cited twelve testimonies from former members of MISA. The Paris Prosecutor’s Office then opened a judicial investigation.

The MIVILUDES was created on 28 November 2002 under President Jacques Chirac, as the successor of the MILS (Mission interministérielle de lutte contre les sectes, Inter-ministerial Mission for Combating Cults). The French government acknowledged the criticism that the MILS had received from outside France for certain activities that could be considered in violation of religious freedom. The 2002 decree thus repealed the decree of 7 October 1998 establishing the MILS.

When the MILS (whose purpose was literally to “fight cults”) was replaced by the MIVILUDES in 2002, the latter found it expedient to revise its mission. Most of France’s

⁵ Published in *Bitter Winter*, 03/05/2024.

smaller persecuted spiritual movements were no longer visible on the French landscape due to the vigorous intense anti-cult persecution and had either relocated to other countries or disbanded as legal “associations” to operate under the radar or had transformed into cultural centers. For this reason, MIVILUDES could no longer rely on picturesque sectes like the Mandarom, or on violent groups like the Solar Temple to regularly commit spectacular crimes, to justify its ongoing government funding. Therefore, instead of rooting out and cracking down on “sectes,” MIVILUDES’ new mission was to focus on “*dérives sectaires*” (cultic deviances, “going off the rails,” “cultic harm,” etc.)

“*Dérives sectaires*” is a concept that is conveniently vague and nebulous. It purports to mean “the harm resulting or emanating from “les sectes.” It has been translated variously and ineptly as “cultic harm,” “sectarian drift” or “sectarian deviance.” This new concept was in essence based on the assumption: “Cults are bad. Ergo, bad things come out of cults.”

A MIVILUDES spokesperson admitted in a March 2003 interview that the current French law lacked a definition for a “secte” therefore the law cannot define “*dérives sectaires*.” However, he predicted that the MIVILUDES would contribute “to defining what could simply be an administrative jurisprudence.”

The MIVILUDES’ social construction of a new social problem that they have dubbed “*dérives sectaires*,” and how this applies to MISA, should be analyzed, as well as the strategies of this anti-cult “Mission” to root out, expose, and prosecute the “gurus” held responsible for the “cultic deviances.” In recent years, the MIVILUDES has conducted annual training workshops on the “phenomenon of cults” to sensitize the judges of France to the dangers of “les sectes.” This was already stated in the 2004 MIVILUDES report to the Prime Minister, reporting that for seven years, the National School for Magistrates (ENM) had organized a one-week workshop on “cults,” conducted by the head of the “*cult section*” of the Department of criminal affairs. This workshop was aimed at magistrates and the personnel of various legal administrations. The MIVILUDES also noted it was in regular contact with magistrates designated as its correspondents within each Court of Appeals. If France’s magistrates are indoctrinated into anti-cult attitudes and biased perspectives to prepare them for cases involving “cult leaders,” it appears reasonable to assume that many of the latter are unlikely to receive a fair and impartial hearing in court.

The MIVILUDES is bound to write an annual report in which it justifies its government funding, demonstrates its usefulness to the Republic, and attempts to expand its jurisdiction. A review of the MIVILUDES’ annual activity reports reveals its dedication to rooting out the latest spawning grounds for “*dérives sectaires*,” which might lurk in seemingly respectable and benign secular institutions like public schools or sales motivational workshops. In 2021, the MIVILUDES began to target yoga schools as potential “domaines d’infiltration” for the “gourous” and their “*dérives sectaires*.”

In 2020, MIVILUDES had recorded 160 complaints about yoga and its “component,” meditation. In the MIVILUDES 2021 report, “Alerte sur le yoga et ses dérives,” they warned the public: “Yoga, perceived in the West as a healthy and moderate practice, is however not free from cultic abuses....[since] yoga and meditation are often associated with unconventional healing practices, personal development techniques or belief

systems... this generates an increase in the risk of cultic aberrations.”

Based on the data provided in the bulletins of the anti-cult organization UNADFI (Union nationale des associations de défense des familles et de l'individu, National Union of Associations for the Defense of the Families and the Individual) and media reports, it appears that in 2021–2022 yoga became a new focus for France's anti-cult movement. One French yoga practitioner described it as a “chasse aux sorcières” (witch hunt). On July 13, 2022, the UNADFI bulletin featured the report, “The Declining Reputation of Yoga” (La réputation du yoga en baisse). In 2021, MIVILUDES warned of a “growing increase in cultic risks in... movements focused on health, well-being, and pure food.” MIVILUDES is also concerned about the gurus who offer “sacred feminine” workshops, or “discussion and meditation groups reserved for women,” where the risks of “psychological influence exerted on vulnerable female members” is higher.

Before the November 2023 arrest of Gregorian Bivolaru, three other yoga teachers had been arrested in France on charge of “abus de faiblesse.” In 2011, Gabriel Loison (b. 1940), described in the media as a “Tantra sex guru,” was captured in a raid by CAIMADES. A self-styled psychologist and alchemist, Loison is the founder of L'Université de la nature et de l'écologie de la relation. In 2022, he was found guilty of “abus de faiblesse,” “escroquerie” (fraud), and the rape of a “vulnerable person” (a 14-year-old girl who enrolled in one of his Tantra workshops in Morocco). Loison was condemned to 15 years in prison. His female companion was initially prosecuted as his accomplice in “abus de faiblesse” and other crimes but while she was held in “garde à vue” the charges against her were dismissed since she was considered as a victim of Loison. CAIMADES took full credit for liberating her from his “emprise.”

In 2016, Christian Ruhaut, a yoga teacher was arrested and charged with “abus de faiblesse” and forcing his yoga students to participate in sexual rituals “outside the norm.” The investigators determined that Ruhaut and his wife had allegedly subjected a dozen people to “cultic” psychological subjection with physical violence and forced sexual practices. These “forced sexual practices” appear to have been nothing more than private sexual fantasies Ruhaut's students shared in a therapeutic setting. He didn't literally force them to have sex with eels and deer, as the media claimed. Ruhaut was sentenced to four years in prison for abuse of weakness and money laundering, and his wife was sentenced to two years in prison—both sentences were suspended.

On October 19, 2023, just one month before Bivolaru was arrested, Jean-Louis Astoul, the director of Amrit Nam Sarovar, a kundalini yoga school in Michel-les-Portes, was taken into “garde à vue.” He had been accused of sexual aggression, forcing disciples to work without salary, and “abus de faiblesse” within a context of “dérives sectaires.” Astoul is a Sikh and teaches techniques of kundalini yoga. He was accused by four women of inappropriate touching during private yoga sessions. The “travail dissimulé” in this case concerned the tasks performed by volunteers as part of the yoga student's “seva”- a “selfless service” tradition that is common among Sikhs, and at this ashram took the form of unpaid household services. The case is still pending.

These cases indicate that the MIVILUDES has been monitoring yoga teachers since 2011 but has recently moved yoga to the top of its list of “domaines d'infiltration.” Also,

it identified those yoga teachers who “mix” different yogic systems, such as kundalini or Tantra, with the regular and harmless “sport” of yoga asanas as being suspects of particular interest.

On July 13, 2022, France’s main anticult group UNADFI published an article that described the “brainwashed” state of a yoga instructor in training: “She decided, a few months ago, to follow professional yoga training (...) She seems anesthetized, robotic sometimes. And she has memory loss, she searches for words as she goes along. And she seems elsewhere, disconnected from everything, except her approach to becoming a yoga teacher.”

This passage echoes one in the 1960 book by Edward Hunter, a CIA agent whose cover job was that of a reporter and who coined the word “brainwashing,” “Brainwashing, from Pavlov to Powers.” Hunter describes how Mao Zedong’s Red Army allegedly used terrifying ancient techniques to turn the Chinese people into mindless, Communist automatons: “The intent is to change a mind radically so that its owner becomes a living puppet—a human robot—without the atrocity being visible from the outside. The aim is to create a mechanism in flesh and blood, with new beliefs and new thought processes inserted into a captive body. What that amounts to is the search for a slave race that, unlike the slaves of olden times, can be trusted never to revolt, always to be amenable to orders, like an insect to its instincts” (p. 309).

Susan J. Palmer, The Police Raids Against MISA in France, November 28, 2023. 5. The Anti-Cult Ideology in France⁶

France is unique among democratic countries in promoting a state-sponsored anti-cult ideology, based on discredited theories of “brainwashing” and “mind control.”

To understand the charges against Bivolaru and MISA members in France, one must deconstruct the notion of “abus de faiblesse” within the socio-political context of the 2001 About-Picard law (often referred to as “France’s brainwashing law”). This law was passed by the National Assembly in May 2001. Its co-sponsors were centrist Senator Nicholas About and Catherine Picard, a socialist deputy in the National Assembly.

This law of 2001 was a strategical move by France’s government-sponsored anti-cult movement to control the “problem of cults.” The purpose of the 2001 law was to enable the state to prosecute “cult leaders” (labelled as “gourous” in France) who (putatively) harm their followers through the power of mental manipulation. This law created the new crime called “abus de faiblesse” that pointed to the exploitation of vulnerable followers by ruthless charismatic leaders of “cults,” whose influence was predicted to lead inexorably to various forms of social deviance: fraud, physical and psychological abuse, mass suicide, mental illness, pedophilia, money laundering, and the illegal practice of medicine. Any “cult” leader found guilty of “abus frauduleux de l’état d’ignorance ou de faiblesse”

⁶ Published in *Bitter Winter*, 03/06/2024.

(fraudulent abuse of a state of ignorance or weakness) can be liable to a five-year prison sentence and fines of up to 750,000 euros.

The first application of the 2001 law was in October 2004, when Arnaud Mussy stood on trial before the Tribunal Correctionnel of Nantes, charged with “abus de faiblesse.” As the prophet/leader of the tiny Theosophical group Néo-Phare, he was accused of “mentally manipulating” a vulnerable follower to commit suicide. Mussy was found guilty and sentenced to three years in prison (suspended) and fined 115,000 Euros.

This trial received much publicity in France, for it possessed both a legal and pedagogical value. It was a warning to all “cult leaders” to stop “brainwashing,” and to all French citizens to stop joining “les sectes.”

“Cults” are also accused of “human trafficking” as they allegedly “abuse the weakness” of their followers to make them work for free. It is well-known that voluntary labor (washing dishes and laundry, chopping carrots, or sweeping floors) is commonly practiced in Catholic monasteries (where domestic work is a kind of “worship”) and in Hindu ashrams and Buddhist sanghas (where unpaid domestic labor is understood to be “karma yoga” and is imbued with a meditative quality). It appears extraordinary that in the past decade we have witnessed a series of police raids on spiritual communes simply (or mostly) because an ex-member has complained of being forced to wash too many dishes (as in the military-style raids on Ananda Assisi in Italy, and on MISA itself in Romania in 2004, and on various spiritual communities in France and Belgium accused of “travail dissimulé”).

There are several characteristics of the legal process in “abus de faiblesse” cases that appear to undermine the principles of presumption of innocence and the impartiality of the court. First, there is the question of the authenticity and reliability of the alleged victims. It only takes one client or ex-member to file a complaint against a therapist or spiritual master at their local ADFI. This is enough to stimulate investigations and/or arrests, as an article in “Le Monde” pointed out. Questions have been raised concerning the personal motives of some of the self-styled “victims” and often it turns out they are overprotective parents, or jealous spouses, spurned ex-lovers, or competitive co-workers (a factor in the MISA case as well).

One serious problem for those charged with “abus de faiblesse” is that the lawyers working for the UNADFI or the MIVILUDES, have the power to file complaints on behalf of the alleged victims - without the latter’s assent, or even without their knowledge. When the so-called “victims” protest they are not victims, the court’s response is often to interpret their denial as *proof* of “brainwashing,” since “brainwashed” people don’t realize they are “brainwashed.” If their statements are not accepted by the court, it is the job of the Prosecutor to scrounge up additional “victims.”

In the case of the alleged “guru” Neelam Makhija’s girlfriend, she pointed out that since the police had conducted surveillance on her phone calls for over a year, the names of people who had called a wrong number to her cell and immediately hung up were included among the prospective clients who were her putative “victims” - and of course these were complete strangers she had never met or spoken to.

Finally, the “abus de faiblesse” concept relies on the highly-contested theory of

“brainwashing,” called “manipulation mentale” or “emprise” in France. The concept of “brainwashing” dates back to the 1950s and its origins and plausibility as a theory has been amply documented and debated by sociologists and psychologists.

The scientific validity of the “brainwashing” theory has been questioned since it fails to pass the test of Karl Popper’s principle of falsifiability. “Brainwashing” is even one of the entries in the “Encyclopedia of Pseudoscience: From Alien Abductions to Zone Therapy” (New York: Facts on File, 2013, 217–18).

Although the public in various countries still embrace “brainwashing” as if it were a scientific fact that offers a straightforward psychological explanation for an individual’s sudden conversion to a radical religious or political movement, since the 1980s the scientific community and the courts have discarded “brainwashing” theory as lacking in scientific rigor. The vagueness of the “brainwashing” theory, and the inherent difficulty in proving or disproving its claims puts the alleged perpetrator of “abus de faiblesse” into what one of my informants described as a “Kafkaesque” situation.

The law of 2001 is based on three “anticult” stereotypical assumptions:

1. That all “sectes” are like organized gangs or cartels: intrinsically evil and ineluctably prone to harmful and criminal activities.

2. That “gourous” tend to be manipulators who have mastered a mysterious, ineluctable technology of mind control/ coercive persuasion/ “brainwashing”—which they rely on to convert, control, and exploit their followers.

3. All “cult members,” due to their “brainwashed” state, are “vulnerable,” weak, and psychologically helpless, and therefore cannot be held accountable for their regrettable decisions—hence they must be protected by the state.

It is important to be aware of the social and political context of the law of 2001. It emerged out of the anti-cult activism of France’s state-sponsored “antisectes” movement, which established a series of interministerial missions at the highest level of government, whose stated mandate was “la lutte contre les sectes,” “fighting cults.” Hence, one finds a strong bias against new alternative religions written into the About-Picard law. The amendments the government introduced in 2023, creating yet another new crime of “psychological subjection” in addition to the “abuse of weakness,” the difference being that one can become a victim of “psychological subjection” without being in a situation of “weakness,” signal the willingness to make the “fight against cults” even tougher.

However, the new provisions will not be applicable retroactively to Bivolaru. His case is yet another application of the About-Picard law in France’s “war against the ‘sectes’” and it points to a growing tendency to frame, psychologize, and criminalize the guru-chela (master-disciple) relationship, a venerable Hindu tradition, as an “abuse of weakness.”

The complex legal history of Bivolaru that spans forty years and extends across seven countries has been documented in book-length studies of MISA by Gabriel Andreescu and Massimo Introvigne and has not been recounted in this series. However, these studies make it clear that allegations of rape, prostitution, human trafficking, so eagerly broadcast in the media, have not been supported by the Supreme Court of Sweden in 2005, the European Court of Human Rights in 2014, 2016, 2017, and the Romanian courts themselves. Moreover, the charges against Bivolaru in Finland are based on theories of

“brainwashing” that have been rejected as pseudoscientific in other jurisdictions.

It appears that France has taken up these old allegations based on the complaints of female apostates and crafted a new, “only in France” case against MISA’s “gourou” in which nebulous notions of “abus de faiblesse” and “dérives sectaires” clash with esoteric concepts of sacred eroticism.

Why is MISA so controversial? Introvigne suggests that there is one “red line” that, in most societies, should not be crossed; that “religion and eroticism should not be offered together.”

Willy Fautré, Yoga: Disproportionate wide-scale police raids with abuses starting from a personal settlement of scores⁷

On 28 November 2023, just after 6 am, a SWAT team of around 175 policemen wearing black masks, helmets, and bullet proof vests, simultaneously descended on eight separate houses and apartments in and around Paris but also in Nice. They were brandishing semi-automatic rifles, shouting, making very loud noises, crashing doors and putting everything upside down.

For comparison, in late August 2024, the French anti-terrorism prosecutor’s office engaged about 200 police officers to hunt a suspect who had tried to set a synagogue ablaze in the southern French city of la Grande-Motte and caused an explosion wounding a police officer and destroying several cars nearby.

The November 2023 raids were not an operation against a terrorist or armed group or a drug cartel. It was a raid targeting eight private places mainly used by peaceful Romanian yoga practitioners.

Most of them had chosen to combine the pleasant with the useful in France: to practice yoga and meditation in villas or apartments kindly and freely put at their disposal by their owners or tenants who were mainly yoga practitioners of Romanian origin and at the same time to enjoy picturesque natural or other environments.

The first objective of the operation was to arrest people involved in “trafficking in human beings”, “forcible confinement” and “abuse of vulnerability” in organized gang. The second objective was to save victims of these illegal activities but there were no such victims.

About 50 of them happened to be at the wrong place at the wrong time and had nothing to do with the search warrant justifying the operation. At any rate, they were victims of the police intervention as they were kept in custody in inhuman and humiliating conditions for two days and two nights, or more in some cases, for interrogations *Human Rights Without Frontiers* interviewed about 20 victims of the police raids and abuses, in particular in Villiers-sur-Marne, Buthiers and Vitry-sur-Seine. None of them and others was interviewed by the French media.

⁷ Published in *The European Times*, 16.09.2024.

The Romanian yoga practitioners were not treated with the same respect and humanity as Pavel Durov, the big boss of the famous social media Telegram, when he was arrested at the end of August 2024, getting off his private jet in Paris. After four days of police custody and interrogation, he was released on bail despite 12 serious charges - child pornography, complicity in all sorts of arms and drug trafficking for willfully failing to regulate Telegram according to the French law. The authorities put him under judicial control at the risk of letting him escape as the Lebanese businessman Carlos Ghosn managed to do by concealing himself inside a large box shipped as freight on a private jet while he was under house arrest in Japan awaiting trial in 2019. Double standards. “Depending on whether you are powerful or miserable, the court judgments will make you white or black...,” wrote the famous French writer La Fontaine in one of his numerous fables.

The testimonies collected by *Human Rights Without Frontiers* about the inhuman and humiliating conditions of the custody of the Romanian yoga practitioners detained and interrogated by the French police after the November 2023 raids were confirmed by a Canadian researcher: Susan J. Palmer, an Affiliate Professor in the Religions and Cultures Department at Concordia University in Montreal who is also directing the *Children on Sectarian Religions and State Control* project at McGill University. She published her own findings after interviewing in Romania the yoga practitioners who had been arrested and kept in custody in France: *The Police Raids Against MISA in France: Conflicting Narratives – MISA Students Tell Their Stories – The Yogis’ Complaints About The Police – The MIVILUDES Behind The Raids*.

The question raised by this paper is “What is the origin of such a disproportionate police operation targeting yoga practitioners?”

At the origin, a university researcher sentenced for harassment against a female colleague

According to the French media, the story of the widescale police raids targeting yoga practitioners started with a University of Angers medical researcher called Hugues Gascan.

His peer-reviewed publications in scholarly journal shows that he is an esteemed scientist, said Massimo Introvigne in *Bitter Winter*. Some of his earlier articles were co-authored with a female colleague, P.J., and others.

At one stage, a dissent emerged between Gascan and P.J. about alternative therapies for cancer and perhaps other matters as well. Gascan accused P.J. of being influenced by her participation in a “cult” led by a Canadian teacher of tantric yoga.

The conflict in the laboratory became so acute that the University of Angers in 2012 decided to close the research center where both Gascan and P.J. had worked. Gascan now presents himself as a victim of a “cultic infiltration” into his laboratory but court records tell a different story.

His female colleague P.J. filed criminal charges against him for “moral harassment” and had him sentenced in first instance, and on appeal, and finally by the Court of Cassation

on May 14, 2013, which confirmed the suspended sentence of four months in prison. The term “harassment” was used 11 times in the final judgment.

According to the court decisions, he also harassed other employees of his laboratory. Several people in the university testified that they had personally been subjected to a similar pattern of denigration of their work, and to various forms of bullying which led to their isolation from the group and their removal from the department.

The judges noted as well that a forensic psychological examination of P.J. had confirmed she was in a good mental health, and that even the governmental anti-cult agency MIVILUDES, reported that no cultic deviances had been identified” in her behavior.

This experience seems to have developed a deep hatred of Tantric yoga groups in Gascan.

Gascan and MIVILUDES behind the massive police raids

After this failure, Gascan declared war on cults. In 2022 he created a small confidential anti-cult group of two persons called GéPS (Groupe d'étude du phénomène sectaire/ Study Group of the Cult Phenomenon). This ‘group’ was almost unknown until November 2023, has no website and no public report of activities but surfing on the anti-cult wave in France easily attracts the attention of the media in a positive way. It was a way for Gascan to bury in the sands of oblivion his judicial troubles and his suspended sentence of four months in prison, and to restore his personal public image

He boasted in some French media, as *Le Point* and *Nice-Matin*, that for 10 years he had investigated the activities in France of the Romanian Tantric yoga group MISA founded by Gregorian Bivolaru who had been accused of using it for sexual abuse. Moreover, he claimed that he had provided testimonies and his research documents to the governmental anti-cult agency MIVILUDES (Interministerial Mission of Vigilance and Combat against Cultic Drifts) but they never emerged in any trial. His thunderous declarations earned him the pinnacle of certain media outlets in search of sensationalism as “The man who brought down MISA.”

According to him, the then president of MIVILUDES, Hanène Romdhane, transferred his reports to Claire Lebas of the *Cellule d'assistance et d'intervention en matière de dérives sectaires/ Assistance and intervention unit with regard to cultic deviances* (Caimades) and from there to Major Franck Dannerolle, head of the *Office central pour la répression des violences aux personnes/ Head office for the repression of violence against persons* (OCRVP). The result was the police raids of 28 November 2023 on eight separate houses and apartments in and around Paris but also in Nice, Gascan said.

While readers of French media are led to believe that this operation was the result of a Sherlock-Holmes-like work by GéPS, the sensational stories and accusations that he shared with some journalists had been known for years by the French authorities. At this stage, the accusations of trafficking in human beings and sexual abuse of foreign women have never been confirmed by any court decision in Europe.

Moreover, two scholars have investigated the testimonies of so-called victims of sexual

abuse and have highlighted their unreliability: the Italian scholar Massimo Introvigne in his book *Sacred Eroticism: Tantra and Eros in the Movement for Spiritual Integration into the Absolute (MISA)* (Milan and Udine: Mimesis International, 2022) and the late Swedish scholar Liselotte Frisk in her research the case of Finnish women claiming to have been victims

In Gascan's public narrative, there was nothing new, except the claim that in November 2023 several women were allegedly held captive in eight houses and apartments in France to be sexually abused by Bivolaru.

Surprisingly for the 175 policemen wearing bullet-proof vests and armed with semi-automatic rifles, none of the women reportedly 'liberated' and interrogated by the police confirmed Gascan's story but numerous women were victims of abusive police custody in humiliating and traumatizing conditions during which there were serious breaches of the law as *Human Rights Without Frontiers* brought to light throughout interviews of about 20 female yoga practitioners.

Whether Gascan's fake story about the alleged trafficking and detention of several foreign women for sexual abuse in France really influenced the MIVILUDES and the French judicial authorities in the decision that was taken to launch such a huge operation finding no victim will only be verifiable if access to key administrative documents of the MIVILUDES is granted to researchers.