

From Misrepresentation to Understanding: Religion and FoRB in the Czech Republic

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Although the Czech Republic is a democratic country, with policies and legal instruments that should protect freedom of religion and belief, the recent **abolition of the government department responsible for human rights and the protection of minorities** is certainly not an encouraging sign.

The Czech Republic is also obliged to respect international and European human-rights standards, including Article 18 of the ICCPR and other relevant human-rights provisions. And yet, based on the experiences of members and leaders of religious groups and minorities, the situation sometimes resembles something of a “Wild West.”

Why does misrepresentation happen in the Czech context then?

- **First: there is an almost total lack of knowledge and understanding, a historically unfavourable environment towards FoRB, as well as widespread ignorance among the general public.**

Czech context is particularly shaped by its **communist history and exceptionally secular environment**. Religion is unfamiliar to much of the Czech public. Deep spiritual practices, strong religious commitment or having a spiritual teacher can easily be viewed with suspicion. During my psychology studies and practice, I became aware of how differently spirituality is approached in other European countries — often as a natural part of human life and the psyche in contrary to Czech experts in the field.

- **Second: fear of the unknown.**

What people do not understand is easily interpreted through fear. This can quickly become **moral panic**, especially when politicians or social media contribute to it.

Recently, for example, a politician publicly and very casually attacked a well-known religious community Shincheonji without apparently recognising that he was entering the territory of religious tolerance and freedom of belief.

He wrote as if he was speaking on behalf of the whole city district:

“I would like to warn you about members of a sect...Their aim is to get young women into the sect, cut them off from their surroundings, fill their lives with work for the sect and collect money from them. If you share this text, more people will read this warning. Thank you very much!” (that is insane)

- **Third: the media environment.**

Negative and dramatic stories attract attention. Investigating a religious community carefully takes time — searching on the internet, **translating texts** from other languages, finding people who actually care enough to look into the facts. But often they just do not. Sensationalism is what sells best, and repeating an accusation is easy.

In our previous presentation, we reported on **IBR research mapping hate speech in Czech media targeting new religious movements**. The number of identified hateful articles on religious groups increased from 27 in 2016 to 524 in 2025 — almost a **twenty-fold increase!!**

- **Fourth: Anti-cult activism** reinforces this process, with narratives and allegations quickly circulating between networks and countries, often without sufficient verification. Czech scholars are highly biased. And there is little accountability when such narratives are presented as facts.

- **Fifth: Registration is another vulnerability.** Registration should protect you, but the Czech registration system is complex, and some communities, as we have found out, even avoid registration altogether because they fear state scrutiny or harassment, thus creating a vicious circle.

All of this mentioned above escalated in the case of Associate Professor of Palacky University, Pavel Hlavinka, which we reported about at the last forum. **He was immediately fired, as well as another teacher in Liberec, Martina, after a brutal media campaign by a nonsensical undercover reporter of Prima TV, after his spotless career and service to the university for 30 years without ANY wrongdoing. It has been a year and a half, and Pavel** so far has not found a job, is depressed and is looking after his ill mother with no income whatsoever.

These are not simply theoretical observations. They are experiences of people who have lived through them in the Czech environment. People have been imprisoned, lost work, faced media harassment, personal attacks or institutional pressure — while there are very few places to turn. There is not enough fact-checking, not enough fair right of reply, and not enough effective mechanisms to prevent or address hate speech and other FoRB violations—to protect people of faith.

So where can people turn then?

...we know that blaming, pointing fingers or criticising is not helping much. **And this is precisely where we want to be part of the solution.**

Together with international advisers, we have established **InterBelief Relief — IBR**, a grassroots initiative bringing together people from different faiths — and also people without religious affiliation — to protect freedom of thought, conscience, religion and belief, here in the Czech Republic and possibly beyond.

Our starting point is simple:

People should be treated fairly. Their rights should be protected. And facts should matter.

What do we do to gradually move the conversation from misunderstanding to understanding?

- **We raise awareness:** make the problems visible and point out problematic narratives, language and practices.
- **We gather stories and carry out research:** document people's real experiences — not only individual cases, but patterns.
- **We provide accessible information:** bring relevant international research and neutral information to Czech audiences and translate work by recognised scholars and organisations from around the world, e.g. HRWF, Bitter Winter, FOREF, Soteria International.
- **We communicate with the media:** offer journalists better sources, information and more balanced perspectives.
- **We provide education and workshops:** teach about religious freedom, religious communities, rhetoric and how language can create prejudice and ruin lives.
- **We build expertise and accountability:** develop expertise, work with unbiased scholars, including in the Czech Republic, challenge anti-cult narratives, and point out terminology and rhetorical techniques that have been rejected by relevant scholars but continue to influence public judgement.

We primarily also want people to know that **someone is paying attention** — not to police opinions, but to make sure that inaccurate information, harmful rhetoric and violations of rights **do not simply go unnoticed**. There is a lot to do. **The field is largely unexplored in the Czech environment.**

- One of our current areas of focus is **religious registration and state recognition, as we have reported about in the last forums**. We are therefore inviting you, again, to participate in the survey conducted by IBR with **Dr Brandon Taylorian**, looking at the experiences of religious communities in relation to state recognition and registration. We currently have it available in four languages on the CEForB website. Thank you for your cooperation.