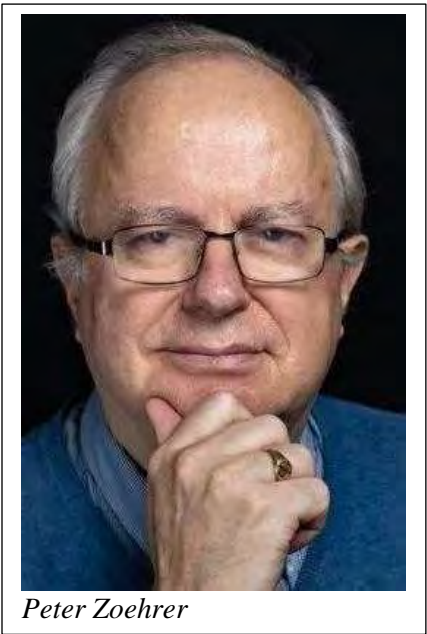


FFWPU Europe and the Middle East: Peter Zoehrer - Deadly Echoes of Bias on Air

Knut Holdhus
May 25, 2025



*Media as weapon: Angry Chinese man accusing woman after reading about cult in a newspaper.
Illustration*



Peter Zoehrer

From Myanmar to Japan: How media as weapon in narrative wars fuels global persecution through distorted stories, turning media from watchdog to attack dog

The Fragile Balance of Press Freedom and Religious Liberty

The Dangerous Power of a Distorted Press

Part 2 of an article by Peter Zoehrer, journalist and Executive Director of [FOREF Europe](#), [originally published](#) 7th May 2025 by [Forum for Religious Freedom](#) Europe (FOREF), [republished 9th May 2025](#) by [Human Rights Without Frontiers](#), and by [Bitter Winter](#) on [16th May 2025](#).

See [part 1](#)

Global consequences: Media as an accelerant

The consequences of distorted media narratives are felt worldwide - and are often deadly.

In Myanmar, anti-Muslim rhetoric helped lay the groundwork for the Rohingya genocide. In Pakistan, media-fueled accusations of heresy against Ahmadi Muslims often end in mob violence.

China: Media-driven cultural genocide

In China, state propaganda systematically [demonizes religious minorities](#) that are considered a threat to the ideology of the Communist Party. Falun Gong practitioners have been vilified as members of an "evil cult" since the 1999 ban, a label that justifies mass detention, torture, and organ harvesting. The China Tribunal, an independent panel, documented that Falun Gong adherents and other minorities such as Uyghurs are targeted victims of state-organized organ trafficking.

Since 2017, over a million Uyghurs in Xinjiang have been interned in so-called "re-education camps", where they are subjected to forced labor, cultural eradication, and political indoctrination. State media portray this as "vocational training", while reports of torture, forced sterilization, and the demolition of

mosques are ignored. Tibetans suffer a similar fate: monasteries are destroyed, the Tibetan language is suppressed, and the Dalai Lama is defamed as a "separatist". These narratives, spread by state-controlled media, legitimize cultural genocide.



Falun Gong protesters about to be arrested in Tiananmen Square in Beijing in the early phase of the persecution

Russia: State media as a tool of repression



A public warning against the Jehovah's Witnesses in the town of Torzhok in Tver Oblast, Russia in 2012. The headline says "Caution, sect!!!" The text goes on to say, "Brothers and sisters! As became known recently, near the walls of our holy monastery, followers of the sect Jehovah's Witnesses secretly preach their teachings. Be careful and vigilant! Don't let yourself be fooled! You can get answers to all questions about faith and the Church from the brotherhood of the monastery at any time and every Sunday within the framework of Boris-Glebsk conversations."

In Russia, Jehovah's Witnesses were banned as an "extremist organization" in 2017, a move that was prepared by years of state-orchestrated media campaigns. State media outlets such as Rossiya 24 and RT portrayed the group as a threat to national security, despite no evidence of criminal behavior. After the ban, over 180,000 members were forced underground, hundreds were detained, and many reported torture and house searches. State media played a central role in rallying public support for the persecution and suppressing dissent. This case shows how media can be used as a tool of state repression.

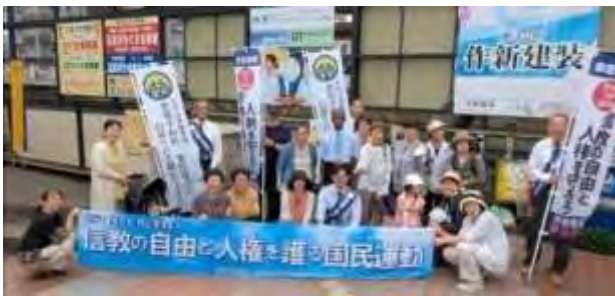
In India, nationalist outlets inflame religious tensions, targeting Christians and Muslims. The 2022 U.S. State Department Report warns that media bias plays a growing role in triggering violence.

Nigeria: The hidden tragedy of Christians

In Nigeria, the persecution of Christians remains one of the least reported human rights crises. Between 2020 and 2024, according to Open Doors, over 14,000 Christians were killed by extremist groups such as Boko Haram, ISWAP, and radicalized Fulani militias. In 2023 alone, over 5,000 Christians were murdered, thousands of churches destroyed, and hundreds of thousands displaced. Yet global media coverage remains patchy, and the religious motive is often omitted. This silence promotes impunity and signals to persecutors that the world will look away. In regions with weak state protection, the media's failure to report the truth allows suffering to continue unabated.

Silence is complicity. When the media remain silent about the persecution of Christians in Nigeria, they are not only failing as journalists - they are complicit. Over 14,000 dead in four years, thousands of churches destroyed - and hardly any reporting. Democracy dies in darkness. When journalists conceal "crimes against humanity", they violate their ethical duty to truthfulness. Silence does not protect the victims but encourages the perpetrators.

Japan: Media witch hunt with global consequences



Victims of state persecution: [Family Federation](#) believers protesting in the Japanese city of Chiba May 18, 2025

In Japan, media smear campaigns have reached unprecedented levels. Following the assassination of former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in 2022, the [Unification Church](#) was branded a "cult" in over 4,000 articles, even though there was no connection to the crime. The assassin, Tetsuya Yamagami, acted out of personal motives, but the media used the tragedy to unleash a witch hunt.

Under this pressure, the government took legal action, which led to the [dissolution](#) of the [church](#) by the Tokyo District Court on 25th

March 2025. The [appeal](#) is pending, but the social damage is immense: children are being bullied, companies are [terminating contracts](#), and banks are refusing to provide services. If the appeal fails, all [assets will be seized](#), and churches will be closed - an unprecedented destruction of a legal religious community without any criminal basis.



Warning that Japan's dehumanizing treatment of [Family Federation](#) members could have global repercussions: Dr. Massimo Introvigne, April 2023

This process is a wake-up call for democracies worldwide. Japan, the third-largest economy and a supposedly stable democracy, is trampling on fundamental principles such as religious freedom and the rule of law. Dictatorial and autocratic regimes are rubbing their hands with glee as they watch a democratic nation set such precedents. The "copycat effect" is inevitable: authoritarian states could use Japan's actions as a blueprint to suppress religious minorities under the guise of media and political unpopularity.

International voices, including former US Ambassador [Sam Brownback](#), former Speaker [Newt Gingrich](#), and USCIRF Co-Chair [Katrina Lantos-Swett](#), condemn this as a direct attack on democracy. European experts such as [Massimo Introvigne](#), [Willy Fautré](#), and [Aaron Rhodes](#) also warn that Japan is [opening a Pandora's box](#) that could have global repercussions.

To be continued. Part 3 coming soon.

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Peter Zoehrer.
Photo: [FOREF](#)

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On *World Press Freedom Day*, on 3rd May, we celebrate journalism’s role in holding power to account and amplifying the voices of the vulnerable. Article 19 of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (UDHR) enshrines freedom of expression as a pillar of democracy. But this freedom is not without consequence. When media outlets stigmatize religious minorities, they don’t just shape narratives – they shape realities.

The right to freedom of religion or belief (FoRB), protected under Article 18 of the UDHR, is not in tension with press freedom – it is bound to it. When one is compromised, both suffer.

Across democratic societies, peaceful faith communities are increasingly targeted not by the state alone, but by a **media culture that recycles old prejudices in new packaging**. Labels like “Sekte” (in German, and similar expressions in languages other than English) or “cult” – lacking legal or academic definition – are used to delegitimize entire belief systems. These terms carry historical weight and modern danger: they incite fear, provoke hostility, and open the door to discrimination, violence, and even legal erasure.

Austria: When a Broadcaster Crosses the Line

One recent example in Austria reveals how **public broadcasting can blur the line between journalism and defamation**. In a 2-minute-13-second report, ORF Mittagsjournal – Austria’s national broadcaster – **used the word “Sekte” (cult) twelve times** to describe the **Unification Church**, a legally recognized faith community under Austrian law with no record of misconduct. Its members contribute to society through peacebuilding, education, and interfaith dialogue.



The logo of Österreichischer Rundfunk (ORF) – Austrian national public broadcaster. [Public domain image](#)

ORF justified its language by citing a Japanese court ruling dissolving a related group over alleged civil violations. But it omitted critical facts: that the **Church** is protected under Austrian law; that no wrongdoing has been reported locally; and that the Japanese decision has been condemned by leading international human rights advocates. Among them are participants of the [IRF Roundtable](#), [Human Rights Without Frontiers](#), and speakers at the [IRF Summit 2025](#), all of whom see the ruling as a violation of international FoRB standards.

Austria’s 1998 *Recognition Act* guarantees equal protection to recognized religious communities. By ignoring this and **repeating stigmatizing language**, ORF helped **legitimize prejudice**. A **Church** spokesperson formally requested a correction – none was issued. **Such reporting doesn’t just misinform; it emboldens hate**. In neighboring Germany, neo-Nazi extremists recently attacked *Hare Krishna* devotees – violence fueled by decades of media framing minority faiths as dangerous “cults”.

A European pattern

Austria is not alone. In Germany, state and media actors have long labeled groups like *Scientology* and others as “anti-democratic” without judicial basis. These designations have **led to surveillance, job loss, and social ostracism**.

In France, the discredited 1995 *Parliamentary Report on Sects* listed 172 groups – from *Christian Scientists* to *Antoinists* – as threats to public order, despite no criminal evidence.

Today, **MIVILUDES, the state’s anti-cult task force, continues to issue alerts that the media repeat without question, shaping both public sentiment and policy**.



In France, considered a threat to public order: Christian Science. Here, one of their reading rooms, this one located downtown in Brattleboro, Vermont, USA. Photo: [Artaxerxes / Wikimedia Commons](#). License:

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Mission interministérielle de vigilance
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Source of state-sponsored

disinformation about new religious
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of the French government agency.

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they carry devastating
weight. **Despite multiple
rulings by the European
Court of Human Rights
affirming the rights of
minority religions,
stigmatizing labels
remain embedded in
public discourse.**

Continued in [part 2](#)

See part 2: [Media as](#)

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Featured image above: Facsimile of alarmist article (1982) using the
word “Sekten” (cults) in an Austrian weekly. Photo: [Bitter Winter](#)

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