

RISING ANTI-SEMITISM IN EUROPE: HOW TO RESPOND

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Abstract

The author, spokesman on Foreign Affairs of the SPD Fraction in the German Bundestag, analyses the recent rise in anti-Semitism in Europe. After having given some examples of the recent trend, amplified by the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the financial-economic crisis, he looks for eventual solutions. He proposes three fields of action. Firstly, education - by teaching Jewish history and its important influence on European history, as well as by emphasizing civic education, in order to better internalize the principles of pluralistic democracy and tolerance. Secondly, in the field of law and legislation. A problem that has to be solved here is to find a common definition of anti-Semitism. Thirdly, victims of anti-Semitic acts and violence should be encouraged to report their cases to the authorities. A last point is the problem of hate speech on TV channels, such as Hezbollah's al-Manar, that can be received in Europe. The author plauds for a European-wide approach to curb hate speech.

Introduction

Let us start with the good news. Jewish life is thriving in Germany and in other parts of Europe. Jewish communities are getting larger. Synagogues are restored or built new from scratch. In fact, we see today a Jewish culture in Europe that is as vibrant as never before since 1945. But this pillar of our common European culture, which is reclaiming its rightful place in the heart of the continent, is under a severe threat. Anti-Semitism, the hatred of Jews, one of the most ancient forms of discrimination, is taking a new foothold in our society. What is most alarming is the fact that this hatred is no longer confined to movements of the radical right or radical left where it still found refuge after the breach of human civilization (*Zivilisationsbruch*) of the Shoa. Fuelled by Israel's recent military campaign in Gaza, as well as by the global financial crisis and the ensuing search for scapegoats, anti-Semitic stereotypes are re-entering the centre ground of political and social discourse with a vengeance.

In early March 2009, the Israeli Tennis team beat Sweden in Malmö to advance to the quarter finals of the Davis Cup. However, this was no time for celebration for the Israeli athletes. The sport took a backseat in Malmö. Any Ram, a member of the Israeli Tennis team, described the situation as a "war-like atmosphere". Left-wing radicals attacked the police and demolished police vehicles in front of the tennis stadium, where a demonstration of around 6.000 people against Israel's Gaza campaign turned violent. Also members of the local left-wing party took part in the demonstrations. In a much criticized move, the left-leaning city council had beforehand decided to allow no audience at the match, supposedly for security reasons. The social democratic mayor had even gone so far as to call for a boycott of the game. These events are all the more troublesome if one for a moment considers what would have happened if, say, Saudi-Arabia or Iran had played in Malmö. Would there have been calls for a boycott and civil unrest because of the atrocious violations of human rights that occur in these countries on a daily basis? Most likely not!

The scandalous events in Sweden are but one example of a most disturbing trend we can witness in Europe these days. Ever since Israeli military forces began their attacks on Hamas in the Gaza strip, a wave of anti-Israeli and anti-Semitic incidents has swept over the continent. People filled the streets all over Europe to demonstrate against Israel's policy and turned what could be considered a legal civil protest into anti-Semitic outrage culminating in chants like "death to Israel" and the burning of Israeli flags. In Germany, a local candidate of the leftist party (Die Linke) for a mayor's office called for a boycott of all products from Israel in what resembled the slogan "Kauft nicht bei Juden!" ("Don't buy from Jews") made notorious by the NSDAP in the 1930s. The federal party leadership was quick to denounce this statement, but many party members came to their colleague's aide, shedding light on the political left's dubious relationship towards Israel and Jews.

Apart from the events in Gaza the global economic crisis serves as yet another background against which anti-Semitic stereotypes prosper. A recent survey by the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) yielded the shocking result that 31 percent of Europeans blame the current economic crisis on Jewish influence in the financial sector. Centuries-old clichés that were thought to have been overcome are guiding the thoughts of a large number of people, offering a fertile ground for finger-pointing, discrimination and persecution.

Data recently published by the EU's Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA) in its report on anti-Semitism indicates a decrease in anti-Semitic activity in 2007 and 2008. However, this follows a trend of an increasing number of incidents in the years before on the one hand and will most likely be put into perspective by a sharp increase of anti-Semitic activity in 2009 on the other hand. Furthermore, it is troubling that the number of anti-Semitic incidents remains on a high level. In Germany, for example, on average one Jewish cemetery is being desecrated every week. Also every visible Jewish institution in Germany – be it a synagogue, a community centre, or a school – has to be protected by police forces on a permanent basis.

It is a shame that 64 years after the end of the Shoa, Jews are still being singled-out as a group of people that is inherently different from what we perceive as "us", a group that is

wielding too much influence, that is only thinking about its own interests, and ultimately a group without which the world would be a better place. We are morally obliged to fight this form of intolerance. We have to fight it in order to protect our fellow Jewish citizens, we have to fight it in order to preserve our cultural and social conscience, and we have to fight it if we don't want our fundamental principles of freedom, respect and tolerance to become hollow.

Yes, combating stereotypes often feels like fighting windmills. But this does not absolve us from our obligation. Doing nothing is simply not an option. There are things that can be done to support Jewish life in Europe and to avoid that prejudices take further root in our society. This endeavour is hard, tedious and laborious. It also is the only right thing to do.

As the Personal Representative of the OSCE Chairman-in-Office for Combating Anti-Semitism from 2005 to 2008 I have been at the forefront of this fight. During my time in office I worked closely with politicians, NGOs and especially the OSCE's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR). Together we worked on such fields as education, legislation, law enforcement, and political discourse in order to come up with a purposeful strategy to curtail the spread of anti-Semitism.

The Role of Education

A free and open society is brought to life by its citizens. Civic values, however, have to be nurtured and trained. This makes our children's education the significant issue when we think about combating anti-Semitism. Only when people internalize fundamental values like mutual respect, tolerance and societal compassion will they be truly immune against the temptation of the easy answers that discriminatory world views offer to the world's problems. When we think about combating anti-Semitism and strengthening education it is a common reflex to point to the importance of Holocaust education. Remembrance of the Holocaust is an important pillar of the education of our youth. But the encounter of students with Jewish history in Europe needs a much broader approach. Jewish history in Europe reaches back many centuries and has had a significant influence on European culture, science and thought. Curricula have to focus on this rich Jewish heritage in order for our youth to fully recognize the centrality of Jewish life for today's Europe.

Furthermore, this education must be closely linked to teaching our children the fundamental principles of our pluralistic and democratic society. They must learn and internalise the elements of democracy and their vital importance for fundamental freedom, self-determination, and the freedom of opinion and expression. Thus, we will be able to pass down to our children a democratic consciousness that makes them immune from being guided by hostile attitudes based upon prejudices.

Political and Societal Discourse

Vernichtungskrieg (war of extermination), *Holocaust*, *Pogromstimmung* (pogrom-like atmosphere) – these are but a few of the words that are repeatedly used in German to describe current political events. Sometimes they are used to compare Israel's military actions and policies towards Palestinians to what the Nazis did during the period 1933-1945,

which is, of course, outright anti-Semitic since equating somebody's actions with those of the Nazis - a denominator for ultimate evil - does nothing else than deny that somebody has a right to exist.

Also troubling is a repeated use of terminology describing Nazi-era crimes in discussing current events. Words like *Holocaust* and *pogrom* are often used to attract attention to a given issue. In the process these words are taken out of their historical context. For the sake of attention-grabbing, the remembrance of the victims is spurned. Undue comparisons and the light use of clichés must not become commonplace in political discourse.

It is the moral duty of politicians and other public persons not to turn a blind eye to such incidents and to speak out whenever our pluralistic and open discourse is smeared by stereotypes and inaccurate comparisons.

Legislation and Law Enforcement: The Need for a Common Definition

Without doubt it is in our interest to prevent anti-Semitic ideas from taking hold of people's minds – however unwinnable this fight might seem at times. But we must also make sure that our states have sufficient and efficient means to combat existing anti-Semitism. In terms of legislation, useful instruments are at hand. Fifteen European states have explicit laws against anti-Semitism, Holocaust denial, or the use of Nazi symbols. Even more states have laws prohibiting hate speech and incitement to discrimination, which can be applied by courts when anti-Semitic incidents are on trial. While efforts in appropriate legislation have been undertaken, there is still a lot of work ahead in terms of law enforcement. The wide discrepancy between the number of reported anti-Semitic incidents and the number of people responsible for these acts being indicted is striking. We must ensure an effective trans-border prosecution of the perpetrators. In order to achieve that, our law enforcers need a *common definition* of what constitutes anti-Semitism. This definition already exists in the form of the working definition of anti-Semitism by the OSCE and the then-EUMC (today the EU's Fundamental Rights Agency, FRA). It is a political issue to have this definition commonly accepted and applied in all European states. Integrated contingency plans to fight anti-Semitism and other forms of hate crimes can then follow.

Another crucial endeavour is training law enforcers how to identify and detect anti-Semitic incidents. All reports of anti-Semitism suggest that there is a large number of unreported cases that simply fall through the cracks. A common definition of what constitutes an anti-Semitic crime and trained personnel that can identify these crimes can make the fight against anti-Semitism more successful.

A Special Case: Dissemination of Anti-Semitic Programmes via TV-Satellites

As a last point I want to emphasize a very problematic issue. In times of satellite television it has become very easy to receive programmes from the Middle East in Europe. Among them are stations like the Hezbollah channel *al-Manar* that features outright anti-Semitic hate speech even in children's programmes. Since this constitutes an offence under Art. 9, Para. 2 of the German Federal Constitution (which prohibits any association to act against Germany's constitutional order and the notion of international understanding), the Ministry of the Interior of Germany banned *al-Manar* in Germany in November 2008. However, since Germany has no jurisdiction over the satellite carrying the programme, the ban has no direct effect on the channel's reception in Germany.

What needs to be done is to find a way – preferably in the form of an integrated EU policy effort – to cooperate closely with the states whose satellites carry programmes like *al-Manar*, to make clear that their content violates our constitutional order, that such hate speech and sedition is not protected by freedom of speech, and to find a technical solution to prevent these channels to be heard and watched by the people who have chosen to live in Europe and accept our fundamental rights and principles.

Censoring media content is a very delicate issue for sure. We all agree that freedom of speech and the freedom of the press are pillars of our political order that must not be curbed. However, one shall not misconstrue freedom of speech with a principle of "anything goes". A right without any boundaries is no right at all. Incitement of people, hate speech, and the glorification of murder are punishable acts. We must do everything we can to fight such agitation, lest we surrender to a political climate of hate, discrimination, and scapegoating.

Combating anti-Semitism wherever it occurs, whichever form it takes, is of utmost importance. Nothing less than our great accomplishment of a pluralistic and free society, based on tolerance, diversity, and mutual respect, is at stake!

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