

Statement to the 2nd OSCE Conference on Anti-Semitism ENGLISH only
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It is a great honor to address this second OSCE conference on anti-Semitism. Today, I would like to address three related issues:

1. anti-Semitism in Latvia since last year's conference;
2. recent action by the government of Latvia to combat and prevent anti-Semitism and related intolerance; and
3. the future prospects for anti-Semitism in Latvia and the Central and East European region as a whole.

On 13 September 2003, Latvia witnessed one of the most serious attacks on the Jewish community in over 5 years – the desecration of the main Jewish cemetery in Riga. More than 20 tombstones were knocked over and about 35 were covered with anti-Semitic graffiti in four languages - Latvian, Russian, English and German. When I rushed to the scene of the crime, I was shocked at the scale of the damage, the ferocity of the hate involved in such an act. This was not only an attack on the Jewish community, but on the very fabric of our diverse democracy.

Previous experience suggested that finding the culprits of such acts was very difficult, and some critics even suggested that perhaps there was a lack of ability or will to track down the criminals. Latvian law enforcement proved the critics wrong. Police first looked for the culprits among our handful of known Latvian or Russian right-wing extremist groups, who occasionally distribute anti-Semitic propaganda in underground newsletters and on the internet. But all of the known extremists had convincing alibis. After a week of intensive investigation in which hundreds of people were questioned, the police caught the culprits – five young men of which only one was over 18. The ringleader was an ethnic Latvian who considered himself a skinhead - his accomplices were 2 ethnic Latvians and 2 Russians. All had been drunk. All are now facing trial and expected to receive severe penalties. None had been on the roster of known extremists. Capturing and punishing them was essential to deterring future such crimes and restoring trust in law enforcement.

In preparing for this conference, I had a meeting with Jewish community leaders to learn whether trust had been restored and whether there were other anti-Semitic events of which I should be aware. They passed on to me a brief report on anti-Semitism in 2003 prepared by one of their experts. Let me share with you the conclusions of the report. "Law enforcement agencies reacted quickly to the acts of vandalism that took place. The vast majority of the population is not receptive to anti-Semitic moods. Anti-Semitic propaganda is present in veiled form, and is a characteristic feature of xenophobic political movements. Attempts to review history currently underway are not in essence anti-Semitic." This assessment was gratifying: it suggested that the situation is relatively good, though of course we must remain vigilant.

What has the government done in the past year to strengthen law enforcement, push along the ongoing process of coming to terms with our past, and combat and prevent intolerance? I would like to touch briefly on the efforts of my office and work conducted under the auspices of the President's Historical Commission over the last year.

My office is charged with developing minority policy, and combating racial, ethnic and religious intolerance. To bring Latvia's legislation into line with the EU Racial Equality directive, my office prepared a new umbrella anti-discrimination law that has already been approved by the Cabinet and undergone the first of two readings in parliament. At the same time, we have proposed amendments to the Criminal Code and Code of Administrative Violations to make it easier to prosecute crimes involving discrimination and incitement of hatred. All of this legislation is scheduled for final adoption in mid-May.

At the same time, in cooperation with other ministries, NGOs, and researchers, my office has drafted a National Program Against Intolerance. Public debate on the program just came to close and I hope to submit a revised version to the Cabinet next month. It foresees a wide range of activities, including strengthening existing programs for inter-cultural education, information campaigns, media monitoring, setting up hotlines, involving NGOs and more.

While developing new legislation and policy documents, my office is also involved in overseeing the distribution of government subsidies to minority groups, including the Jewish community. Jewish groups have not only received subsidies to carry out their own cultural events, but have been active in organizing other minorities as well, helping them to present themselves to the broader public and promoting inter-cultural dialogue.

Under the auspices of the President's office, a Historical Commission has worked since 1998 conducting research on the crimes of the Nazis, the Soviets and their local collaborators, working with schoolteachers to reform history teaching and raising public awareness. Over the last year, the Commission has been quite active with regard to the Holocaust. In June 2003 it organized a conference on Latvia under Nazi German Rule. In October it held another event focusing on study of the Holocaust. It has published a new collection of articles on the Holocaust and cooperated with the Latvian association of history teachers to promote the introduction of new research insights into teaching.

While coming to terms with the past, it is important to look ahead and to prepare for future challenges as well. These are historic days for much of Central and Eastern Europe, including Latvia. At the beginning of this month, along with a number of other countries in the region, we joined the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. In a few days, along with nine other countries in the region, we enter the European Union. At last year's conference, I argued that membership in the EU and NATO will help to liberate Central and Eastern Europe from the shackles of the past. Further, I suggested that for the first time in generations, the region has the chance to be truly free, prosperous and secure and that this should make a poor breeding ground for anti-Semitism.

Why is there a basis for optimism? First of all, never has democracy been as strong as it is today in the region. All the new EU member states met the Copenhagen political criteria: "stability of institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human rights and respect for and protection of minorities." Membership means that the countries of the region are in the process of breaking a centuries-old pattern of backwardness, accentuated by 50 years of communist tyranny and the suppression of all manner of minorities. For the first time, we will no longer be the doormats of the Great Powers, satellites ruled by dependent elites, "victims of history, but important actors shaping the policy of one of the richest trading blocs in the world. This Europe seeks to develop its poorer regions, give voice to smaller members and maintain a common standard of democratic development.

Central and Eastern Europe has long been home to weak states. The elites of these states, particularly under communist rule, occasionally fostered official anti-Semitism in an attempt to garner popular support. EU membership strengthens the institutions of these traditionally weak states and restricts the opportunities for anti-Semitic politics to flourish. The adoption and implementation of the Racial equality directive and related Community action program against discrimination are just the most notable examples.

One facet of social change in Central and Eastern Europe demands attention now. Economic revival and political stability means that outmigration is being reversed and the region is slowly becoming a magnet for immigrants, asylum-seekers and refugees. While continuing to address indigenous brands of intolerance, it is important to prevent the importation of bigotry through appropriately targeted programs of education, information and social work with new arrivals. Despite this and other challenges, the future gives cause for cautious optimism.