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AT THE 1285th MEETING OF THE OSCE PERMANENT COUNCIL**

15 October 2020

On anti-Semitism in the European Union

Mr. Chairperson,

Exactly one month ago, it was 85 years since the adoption in Nazi Germany of the Reich Citizenship Law and the Law on the Protection of German Blood and German Honour, also known as the Nuremberg Laws. This marked the start of the genocide of German Jews, an action that did not arise out of nowhere but was embarked on by Nazi Germany in “small steps”, as Rabbi Andrew Baker, Personal Representative of the OSCE Chairperson-in-Office on Combating Anti-Semitism, recently put it so aptly.

During the Second World War, many countries that were allies of the Third Reich or that were under Nazi occupation had policies similar to those contained in the Nuremberg Laws. By 1941, race laws had been adopted in France, Croatia, Italy, Hungary, Bulgaria, Romania and Slovakia. The result of this institutionalization of anti-Semitism is well known: the tragedy of the Holocaust.

However, 75 years after the end of the Second World War, its terrible lessons are often forgotten or distorted. In recent years, there has been a worrying trend of rising anti-Semitism in various forms – including the desecration of monuments to Holocaust victims and to those who rid the world of the horrors of National Socialism – and a rise in neo-Nazi and right-wing extremist groups and the glorification of the Nazis and their accomplices. This dangerous trend has been confirmed by the findings of the Overview of Antisemitic Incidents Recorded in the European Union 2009–2019, prepared by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA). At the same time, the coronavirus pandemic has exacerbated the situation by creating a string of conspiracy theories even around the supposedly “Jewish origin” of the disease.

According to the report, 1,326 anti-Semitic incidents were recorded in the United Kingdom in 2019 and 687 were recorded in France. In addition, on 22 August, unknown vandals desecrated a memorial centre erected in memory of the victims of the Second World War in the French village of Oradour-sur-Glane. On 10 June 1944, 642 villagers, including Jews, were brutally killed there.

The situation is alarming in Germany where, according to the criminal police, 2,032 politically motivated anti-Semitic crimes were committed last year. This is also the highest figure in the past ten years.

By comparison, there were 1,366 incidents in 2015. Most of the offences were committed by representatives of radical right-wing groups.

The figures for the first half of this year are also disappointing. According to data from the Department for Research and Information on Antisemitism in Berlin, 410 anti-Semitic incidents were recorded in this federal state alone. These include threats, offensive behaviour and damage to property. Even restrictive measures to combat the pandemic have not stopped the wave of Judeophobia.

In early October, it was reported that a student had been attacked at the entrance to Hamburg's synagogue on the day of the Jewish harvest festival of Sukkot. Ronald Lauder, President of the World Jewish Congress, called the incident "a violent, anti-Semitic act of terror". According to Lauder, "[t]he German government must take responsibility in strengthening education so that the next generation understands that hatred of any kind is never permissible. The long-term viability of Jewish life in Germany depends on it."

There is a remarkable nuance to this. According to the media, the attacker was wearing a camouflage uniform similar to that worn by Bundeswehr personnel. A piece of paper depicting a swastika was found in the pocket of his trousers.

In that regard, one cannot help but recall the stories of the discovery of a radical right-wing underground network operating within the German law enforcement agencies and army. As you know, since the beginning of September, the police in North Rhine-Westphalia have been conducting a disciplinary inquiry against some 30 employees who participated in chat groups where right-wing extremist materials were distributed. The Minister of the Interior of North Rhine-Westphalia, Herbert Reul, spoke of abhorrent materials with neo-Nazi, racist and xenophobic content, photographs of Hitler and images of the swastika and the Imperial War Flag. Even more abhorrent retouched images were found of a refugee in a concentration camp gas chamber and of the execution by firing squad of black people. Twenty-nine police officers have been suspended from duty and 12 criminal cases have been opened against them on suspicion of distributing anti-constitutional symbols.

Incidentally, this is the third such incident in North Rhine-Westphalia. In February and March, disciplinary inquiries were conducted in the cities of Hamm and Aachen against three police officers who were found to have right-wing extremist views.

On several occasions in recent years, the German media have exposed right-wing extremist chat rooms set up on the Internet by police officers and public officials from Bavaria, Hessen and Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania.

The army has also been affected by right-wing extremism. In the summer, German Minister of Defence Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer announced the disbanding of the second company of the Special Forces Command after right-wing extremists were identified in its ranks. We should like to add that this is an elite unit of the German Bundeswehr, whose actions had attracted the attention of law enforcement agencies back in April 2017.

In 2019, the Federation of Jewish Communities in the Czech Republic registered 694 incidents of anti-Semitism. This figure is more than twice as high as the previous year (347 cases in 2018). Almost all of the incidents (685 out of 694) were reported online or in the media.

Mr. Chairperson,

A webinar was held on 7 October to present the study “Holocaust Memorial Days: An overview of remembrance and education in the OSCE region”. The speakers emphasized the importance of Holocaust remembrance in combating anti-Semitism, neo-Nazism and aggressive nationalism.

One would expect countries whose Jewish populations were exterminated during the Second World War by the Nazis and their accomplices, including civilians, to defend their historical memory particularly vigorously. The policies of these countries should be aimed at preventing the recurrence of this tragedy and combating modern forms of racism.

Unfortunately, in the case of Lithuania, whose Jewish community was almost completely annihilated, the opposite is true. Before the Second World War, this community numbered around 220,000 people, more than 200,000 of whom died at the hands of executioners. However, in recent years, Vilnius and other cities have seen an increasing number of incidents involving the desecration of monuments. For example, a monument to Holocaust victims was toppled over in Kaunas on 6 October. The President of the Lithuanian Jewish Community, Faina Kukliansky, noted the inaction of the authorities in relation to acts of vandalism. As a particularly cynical concomitant, the same day the monument was destroyed, the President of Lithuania Gitanas Nausėda unveiled a monument in honour of Adolfas Ramanauskas-Vanagas, one of the local Nazi collaborators.

I should like to end with the words of FRA Director Michael O’Flaherty: “Seventy-five years after the liberation of the Auschwitz extermination camp, anti-Semitism is alive in Europe. The coronavirus pandemic has fuelled even more open manifestations of hatred against Jews. And the stakes are high: if Europe keeps on failing its Jewish community, it risks losing it. Then the entire European project will have failed.” The question is, therefore, what exactly are the European Union authorities doing to stop this shameful wave of anti-Semitism and intolerance?

Thank you for your attention.