



## COMBATING ANTISEMITISM FOSTERING JEWISH life



# 1<sup>st</sup> MEETING OF THE WORKING GROUP ON THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE EU STRATEGY ON COMBATING ANTISEMITISM AND FOSTERING JEWISH LIFE

VIA VIDEO-CONFERENCE  
14 – 15 December 2021

## Summary Report

### ***Background***

The Working Group meeting aims to present and discuss the actions put forward by the EU Strategy on combating antisemitism and fostering Jewish life in order to find best ways for their implementation, in accordance with the needs and specificity of each country, as well as to support Member States in the designing, developing and implementation of national strategies on combating antisemitism. Below report gives an overview of the discussions and issues raised by speakers and participants in the different sessions of the working group.

The event took place during two days, 14 and 15 December 2021, in an online format, and focused on the main actions put forward by the strategy under its three pillars and the ways in which Member States, Jewish communities, civil society organisations and international organisations can support its implementation and use it as a basis for the development of their national strategies and actions.

### ***EU Strategy and national strategies***

The EU strategy on combating antisemitism and fostering Jewish life, which was adopted on 5 October 2021, encourages Member States to draw up national strategies by the end of 2022, and outlines the main actions that the Commission recommends to be included in those strategies.

At this first Working Group, the Commission emphasised the need to include the Jewish community in the drawing up of the national strategies to ensure acceptance of and commitment to their implementation. The Commission also noted that engagement with Jewish organisations ensures that the strategies fully



reflect the concerns of the community. Such a collaborative approach takes time, however, and the Commission is therefore eager to ensure that Member States embark on this process at the start of the year, if they have not done so already.

### **[Keynote speech]**

On the first day, the European Commission Vice-President for Promoting our European Way of Life, Margaritas **Schinias**, gave the keynote speech. The full speech can be found [here](#).

### **The underreporting of hate speech and crime:**

Eight out of 10 Jewish people say that they do not report even the most serious antisemitic incidents they experience. Support for a harmonised methodology for reporting antisemitism was voiced. One speaker emphasised that first responders should receive training on how to recognise incidents of antisemitism, adding that it is the responsibility of authorities to ensure that this occurs.

The Commission says that data will be continuously available through the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA), while another survey on perceptions of antisemitism among the Jewish community will be carried out in 2023. Though security is a national competence, a call for applications will take place in 2022 for funding for the security of places of worship.

### **The growing threat of online hate speech:**

An online poll carried out at the event found that more than a quarter of participants believe that combating antisemitism online is the topmost priority for any national strategy. (Fostering Jewish life and education were similarly prioritised.)

For the French Presidency of the European Council combating online hate speech is a priority. It sees the Digital Services Act as a central tool in this effort. Speakers warned that violent content online directly correlates to violent actions offline. The growing problem of alternative platforms, such as Telegram, was also raised. Such platforms, described as “breeding grounds of hate speech”, are commonly not moderated and allow for anonymous content.

Several participants noted that conspiracy theories – many of which stem from the US but spread quickly online – often have an antisemitic element. The expression of conspiratorial tropes and ideas is a changing phenomenon and therefore day-to-day monitoring is vital. EU funding could help improve research into online hate speech, especially the ones found on these alternative platforms. One speaker noted that incidents of online antisemitism are not always as clear and obvious as historic manifestations, adding that training is required to improve their detection.

The Commission said that it encourages Member States to ensure online hate crimes are prosecuted.

### **The problem of Holocaust denial, distortion and trivialisation:**

Holocaust distortion and trivialisation is a growing problem as recent antivax demonstrations underscore. The Holocaust is increasingly being misused to support tendentious arguments and causes. The IHRA has produced a powerful film to highlight the problem<sup>1</sup>. But one delegate noted that the issue is complex and constantly changing. It was also said that Holocaust distortion spreads faster when young people know little about the Holocaust.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.holocaustremembrance.com/resources/publications/holocaust-distortion-growing-threat-film>



The IHRA has also produced a toolkit for recognising Holocaust distortion and denial<sup>2</sup>. It is supporting its efforts through its social media campaigns #ProtectTheFacts<sup>3</sup>. The Commission suggested that International Holocaust Remembrance Day (27 January) could be an opportunity to further promote the IHRA/UNESCO campaign against Holocaust distortion.

Several speakers emphasised the importance of preserving places of memory as ‘living witnesses’ to the Holocaust. Nevertheless, as the last few remaining survivors pass away, new ways of keeping alive their memory must be found. The Commission’s intention to promote a ‘network of places where the Holocaust happened’ was viewed favorably, with many agreeing that raising awareness among local communities of their Jewish heritage is an effective way of combating misinformation and promoting respect for Jewish culture.

### **The advantage of adopting common indicators of antisemitism:**

The ‘Networks Overcoming Antisemitism (NOA) Project’, a project funded through the EU Rights, Equality and Citizens programme, has developed indicators based on international standards that will allow progress at Member State level on key policy areas to be measured. Delegates reported that such indicators can be useful to Member States when monitoring the implementation of their national strategies on combating antisemitism.

### **The threats posed to Jewish practices (*Shechita* and *Brit Milah*):**

One speaker called on the Commission to issue a recommendation for Member States to legally protect Jewish practices such as ritual slaughter of animals and male circumcision. Another said that the Jewish community would willingly play a role in the drafting of EU legislation that guarantees freedom of religious practice.

Several participants believe that these practices have been threatened in recent years by animal rights and child welfare campaigns. It was highlighted that many of the concerns that have been raised were based on misinformation and is being amplified by the media. It was suggested that the origin of such concerns might be antisemitic, with one delegate referring to historic parallels. Restrictions on religious practices are also being used as an anti-immigration tool, it was said.

The Commission mentioned that a conference on the practice of ritual slaughter in the EU will be organised in 2022, featuring representatives of Muslim and Jewish communities. Several participants noted that the inability to carry out Jewish traditional practices would lead to Jewish people leaving their country of origin or the EU completely.

### **The vital role played by teachers:**

One delegate noted that the Romanian parliament has passed legislation mandating the teaching of the country’s Jewish heritage in schools. However, many emphasised the urgent need to equip teachers with the right tools for explaining antisemitism to children. One said that training on the teaching of antisemitism should begin at the start of any teaching-training course.

Teachers are in the frontline of calling out new types of antisemitism, according to one participant. However, the issue of teacher protection was also raised, with one speaker noting that teachers can receive threats when covering the Holocaust in class.

<sup>2</sup> <https://againstdistortiontoolkit.holocaustremembrance.com/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.againstholocaustdistortion.org/>



**The need to promote Jewish life and heritage:**

One speaker expressed dismay that streets are still being named after antisemites. He highlighted a ‘huge’ lack of knowledge about Judaism, especially among the less educated.

Another delegate said that Jewish culture needs to be better represented in popular culture. Jewish contributions to culture need to be highlighted, with positive role models included in school and university courses. The maintenance of Jewish heritage sites, such as cemeteries, could be a starting point for dialogue and greater awareness. Their ‘orphaned’ nature was highlighted by several participants – i.e. only a small percentage of synagogues are in use, because so many Jewish people were murdered during the Holocaust. Protection of these places is therefore a responsibility for society as a whole and not the Jewish community alone.