



Working Group on Antisemitism

3RD MEETING OF THE WORKING GROUP ON THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE COUNCIL DECLARATION ON THE FIGHT AGAINST ANTISEMITISM

SPEECH: VICE-PRESIDENT MARGARITIS SCHINAS

Ladies and gentlemen,

Dear friends,

It is a pleasure to join you today for this virtual meeting of our Working Group on combating antisemitism. Six months have passed since we last met. Six trying months for Europe, and for the entire world.

The coronavirus pandemic is testing our Union's resilience like no crisis before. It has had a profound impact on individuals and communities, revealing many systemic weaknesses in our initial responses, but also challenging us – once again – to reinvent and reinforce the ways we work together to protect lives and safeguard the wellbeing of our societies.

I want to express my full solidarity with Jewish communities, that during the current crisis not only had to endure a disrupted community life, but often shoulder additional responsibilities of providing social services – like running elderly homes in these particularly challenging circumstances. Celebrating Pessah away from close family members and friends certainly made this year different from any other year.

At the same time, Jewish communities have shown solidarity with others through donation calls, supplying food and supporting essential services like the health sector. Your contribution cannot be emphasised enough.

The response to the crisis has brought out the best in human beings, but unfortunately also the worst. In March alone, the World Jewish Congress has reported a 30% increase in antisemitic hate speech online.

This spike in antisemitic and racist conspiracy myths, disinformation and hate speech around the coronavirus does not represent the views of the majority. But the dangers of their proliferation should not be underestimated, and can long outlast the pandemic itself, putting Jewish lives and communities at serious risk.

I am very pleased that my colleague, Vice-President Vera Jourová, is with us today. She will present in detail the Commission's response to such disinformation and conspiracy myths, and we look forward to the conclusions of the panel discussion that will follow, to help us calibrate our next steps in tackling this "infodemic".

If anything, the pandemic brought once again to the fore the urgency to tackle antisemitism in a holistic way, as laid down in the 2018 Council Declaration. The adoption of national strategies is of paramount importance, as a comprehensive framework in every EU country to safeguard and foster Jewish life.

It is an essential stepping stone towards guaranteeing that all Jewish Europeans can live, work, study, practice their faith and pursue their life goals like any other member of society.

We are pleased to see progress in several member states. Interministerial structures are being created to prepare these strategies, and some member states aim for adoption in the second half of 2020.

But we all know we need to do more, and faster. We should not wait for the next terror attack to remind us of the consequences of inaction.

The rise of Jew-hatred and antisemitism poses a threat to our democratic values, to the essence of our European way of life. So, I encourage you to be ambitious. I know that later today, there will be a session for member states to share information about progress. Please use it to set operational targets and timelines, and let us know how – concretely – we can support you on the Commission's side.

I warmly welcome the fact, that the upcoming German Presidency of the Council has placed particular focus on the fight against antisemitism. We have agreed to work hand-in-hand not only to keep the issue high in the political agenda, but to help achieve tangible progress towards these national strategies. This is a clear priority for me.

I have taken the opportunity to systematically meet with national authorities and Jewish communities in my visits to Member States. Even though this has become harder in the coronavirus era, I will continue to actively reach out to your Ministers to get an update on progress towards the adoption of national strategies and see how we can best align and mutually reinforce our efforts. With the help of the Fundamental Rights Agency, we will closely monitor progress.

You can count on the Commission's full support. Stepping up security for Jewish communities, online and offline, remains an area of paramount importance. We will continue to mainstream it in our policy-making, including through our upcoming Security Union Strategy – an emblematic initiative of this Commission to be presented in the coming months.

To support member states efforts in securing places of worship, a 12-million-Euro call for proposals of is currently underway and I would invite you to make full use of this support. The details and ways to participate will be presented to you later today.

Having the robust laws in place and enforcing them effectively is another key aspect of protecting Jewish communities. European legislation, obliges Member States to criminalise public incitement to violence or hatred against Jews, including criminalising Holocaust denial and distortion.

It is essential for this legislation to be correctly implemented. We are already working with Member States on (i) collecting and recording data of hate crime, (ii) training for law enforcement and judiciary and (iii) the protection and support for victims. We will soon be adopting a victim rights strategy, which will also address the plight of hate crime victims.

But for these measures to work effectively, they must be firmly rooted in a common understanding about antisemitism. We can't fight what we can't define. The working definition of antisemitism of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance is a valuable benchmark for taking a systematic, victim-centred approach. Its examples can guide us to uncover antisemitic bias.

17 EU Member States have already adopted the definition and we encourage all others to endorse it as a non-legally binding guidance tool, in line with the 2018 Council declaration. Once endorsed, practical application has to follow.

To further support member states in the use of this working definition, we will be working together with the IHRA on practical guidance, bringing together best-practice examples and recommendations that we will share with you before the end of the year.

Fighting antisemitism is a fight for all of us – a fight on many fronts.

If normalcy for Jewish life in Europe is our ultimate goal, and it has to be, we must press on to ensure the measures we take bring about change for the Jewish communities. A true change of paradigm.

I am convinced, Europe as a whole will live up to the expectations. And I am determined for the Commission to contribute its part in an ambitious way.

In the next meeting of this Working Group, which I would propose to hold in December, I hope we will be able to discuss on the basis of more national strategy plans on the table.

And I sure hope to have the pleasure then to meet all you again in person.