

Intervention by Rabbi Pinchas Goldschmidt

Verbatim

Mr Chairman, honoured Ministers and Ambassadors,

Thank you for inviting me to address the Council of Europe's, Council of Ministers, in order to address the concerns of the Jewish communities of Europe. I would like to thank the Hungarian Presidency of the Council of Europe for initiating this hearing. Thank you Dr Daniel Holtgen for this initiative, and I am also happy to acknowledge the presence of Dr Felix Klein of Germany.

I would like to speak today of two main issues, which concern the Jewish community of Europe. One, is the issue of religious freedom or the practice of religious freedom. In order to make sure that a Jewish community can continue to live and flourish in all the countries united under the Council of Europe, there has to be one aspect, which should be clear to everyone. Protection against grassroots anti-Semitism, State sponsored terrorism, governmental anti-Semitism in all its forms, or attacks in the social media, is not enough. But there is another part needed, to guarantee the Jewish future, and I'm very much grateful to the German government for renaming the position of Dr. Klein as a person in charge of Jewish Life in Germany, and we are also thankful to Germany for initiating its declaration to the European community of guaranteeing the Jewish future.

One very important aspect of guaranteeing a Jewish future, is the issue of freedom of religious practice. And here we are experiencing in the last 12 years ever-mounting problems. The truth is that it's mostly not geared and directed against the Jewish community of Europe. We are just the collateral damage. It is mainly an anti-immigration measure aimed at new Europeans, especially those coming from the Middle East and those of the Islamic persuasion. It is a way, I would say a politically correct way, to make life difficult to those religious communities, who just immigrated to Europe. It is aimed at restricting their religious freedom, especially in terms of preparation of meat according to their

customs, or our customs, and the circumcision of children, which has been part of the tradition of Jews for more than three thousand years and for the Muslims, as long as the Muslim tradition exists.

So, it is impossible to speak about a Jewish future if in certain countries in Europe there are definite attempts, before in Germany, also lately in Iceland, to disallow and to outlaw the practice of circumcision. What legislators often don't understand, because of lack of knowledge of minority religions in general, is that by passing such a law and forbidding such practice, it basically means the end of an organized Jewish community in their country, because circumcision is universally accepted in the Jewish community and such a law would bring the majority of young Jews to leave their country of residence. I don't think that any European country wants to do that, less than a hundred years after the Holocaust.

The attempts of outlawing the Jewish and Muslim way of slaughtering animals has very little to do with animal rights, the same way, anti-circumcision laws have very little to do with children's rights. If these were the issues, then why don't these legislators work together with the religious communities to regulate those practices, instead of outlawing them? Why are most restricting laws pushed by the far right? It is basically an anti-immigration measure. That is the reason Switzerland passed such a law in 1895, in order to stop religious Jews immigrating from Russia. This is also the reason that it was the fourth anti-Jewish law passed by Nazi Germany in 1933, in order to get the Jews out of Germany.

We would like to see on a European level and also on the level of the Council of Europe, seminars, as well as conferences, which will include the issues of guaranteeing religious freedom, the freedom of religious practice, throughout Europe for its religious minorities. Because if we do not include that, then a very important aspect of the struggle against forces which want to put an end to the Jewish community, is going to be missing. This threat is seen by members of the Jewish community as not any less dangerous than physical attacks against individual Jews, against schools, community centres, and synagogues. This is one issue,

I would like to raise today with you, Mr. Chairman, that this has to be included in the conversation on the question of anti-Semitism and guaranteeing a Jewish future.

Number two. We, in Europe, we have been experiencing anti-Semitism in many different ways and in Western Europe, especially in Belgium and France and Germany there have been physical attacks, as Dr. Klein mentioned. At anti-Israel protests, manifestations, many times anti-Semitic slogans were used by demonstrators, Jews were attacked, and not long ago, a rabbi was attacked in the city of Cologne in Germany.

We know that the great majority of Muslims living in Europe would like to live in peace and in harmony with the Europeans in general, and also with its Jewish community. There are quite a few Muslim religious leaders we've worked with during the last four years, we've also created the Muslim Jewish Leadership Council in Vienna four years ago, and we have collaborated against Islamophobia and against anti-Semitism. However, unfortunately, there are forces, and when I speak about forces, I'm speaking about countries outside of Europe, which influence religious communities in Europe with messages of anti-Semitism. This anti-Semitism is many times mixed with very strong anti-Israeli language, and the radicalisation of Muslim clergy and the radicalisation of Muslim youth. At our meeting with Chancellor candidate Armin Laschet of Germany two months ago, we raised the issue of the schoolbooks used in the general German school system to teach Islam to German children of the Islamic faith. Those books are not prepared in Europe, those books are being prepared in Turkey, and they have very problematic passages. Islamic life in Europe is also being financed by Iran and by Qatar, and we see the tendency that materials are being used, misused and abused, even in the state school curriculum in order to radicalize and to promote anti-Semitism. This issue is very concerning, and we'd like to have Dr. Daniel Hölting, as well as Dr. Felix Klein see into this and to work with us together to make sure that in schools in Europe, as well as in its religious communities we are strengthening the moderate elements, the European elements, and we are strengthening those elements who want to live in peace and in harmony with all the other minorities in Europe.

I always love to quote Romano Prodi who said that Europe is an assembly of minorities, this rainbow of assembly of minorities, this is Europe, and only in this way we can ensure the Jewish future, by, on the one hand, fighting the radicals and the forces financing the radicalization, and, on the other hand, ensuring that old Europe is not fighting back against mainstream religion by outlawing accepted religious practice, but making sure that all different parts of the European society are being fully integrated within the European landscape.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.