

Keynote speech. World Jewish Congress, governing board. Paris 12 November 2006

“Xenophobia, anti-Semitism and the rise of the extreme right in Europe”

The *Kristallnacht* was remembered the other day in Germany. A gang of neo-Nazis in Frankfurt an der Oder were arrested after they had teared up wreaths and scattered candles that had been placed at a memorial for the anniversary of the destruction of the synagogue 1938.

Last month I had the possibility to travel widely in the unified Germany in order to assess the present human rights situation. I noted a firm determination by many leading politicians to confront the past, to expose the terrible history in every detail and to secure that the next generation is informed – they have welcomed the new holocaust memorial in the midst of Berlin.

However, I also noted the plague of right wing extremism, especially in the eastern *Länder*, the former DDR. Neo-Nazi groups try to recruit among the young unemployed and succeed in too many cases. They are established in several local assemblies and they poison the atmosphere with their hate propaganda, provocative demonstrations and violent bullying.

I also observed that the extremists appear to be more numerous and their fear mongering against migrants particularly vicious in districts where there are no - or almost no - foreigners. The physical absence of the scapegoats seems not to deter them, on the contrary.

Xenophobia is a serious problem in all parts of Europe today.

Extreme right wing parties are represented in several national parliaments and do in some countries influence the government policies. Far right parties received more than ten per cent of the votes in the latest elections in France, Poland, Italy, Netherlands, Romania, Belgium, Denmark, Austria and Bosnia-Herzegovina.

In response, other political parties have unfortunately adjusted their policies in order not to be outflanked by the extremists - with the result that extremist positions have been made “mainstream”.

Neo-Nazi parties, on their side, now typically seek a foothold in politics through taking part in municipal elections, trying to get representatives into local assemblies. They work at the base level and focus on the unemployed and others in despair.

There is a clear link between these political activities and the frequency of hate crimes. Some of the perpetrators are enrolled in the extremist groups and others are influenced by their propaganda.

The precise scope of hate criminality in Europe today is difficult to assess as most governments still have not introduced an efficient system of collecting and organizing data in this field. Also, we could assume that a great number of offences never become reported to the police.

However, available data do suggest that the hate crimes continue to be alarmingly widespread and most probably are on the increase.

The Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) presented last month an overview of hate-motivated violent incidents in OSCE countries during the first half of 2006. They included crimes related to racism, anti-Semitism, anti-Ziganism, Islamophobia and homophobia.

Cases were presented of black Africans being stabbed or beaten to death; Roma groups targeted in mob violence; and Jews physically attacked and synagogues and cemeteries badly defaced. The report also gave factors about Muslims abused and mosques and Islamic schools vandalized; and gay demonstrations physically attacked and homosexuals harassed. Other targets of hate-crimes were persons with disabilities.

In the chapter on anti-Semitic crimes the report listed the case of the young French Jew who was kidnapped and tortured in February 2005 and who later died of his injuries; the stabbing of nine people in a Moscow synagogue in January this year; and the stabbing of a young boy and beating of another four boys in Dnipropetrovsk, Ukraine, in April.

Another important report on hate crimes was published last year by the New York-based organization Human Rights First.¹ It said that such crimes had become more frequent and that, for instance, the number of violent anti-Semitic offences in France had increased 63 percent from 2003 to 2004.

Another finding in the report was the “disturbing new wave of violent anti-immigrant crimes across Europe reflecting anti-immigrant policies and practices established by governments”.

That conclusion is somewhat harsh on the governments, but it has to be recognized that there is a link between government policies towards migrants and the phenomenon of xenophobia. Politicians refer to popular resistance to justify the current restrictive approach towards migrants. The other side is that present policies in reality make many

migrants into *unwanted people* – and that message is likely to perpetuate prejudices in society.

On a continent which is rapidly aging and soon will be in direct need of many more immigrants, few politicians are ready to explain this fact and to argue for an open, welcoming attitude towards those who are prepared to come. Migration is seen as a problem not as a possibility or a right.

In the shadow of a strict migration policy there are now some ten million irregular migrants in Europe, more or less in hiding and easy victims of exploitation by ruthless employers. The fact that also irregular migrants have certain human rights is not widely recognized.

Immigrants are of course not angels and among them there are also xenophobic forces at play, encouraged by social and material difficulties and hostility in the surrounding.

Some individuals in the growing Muslim populations in Europe have been influenced by anti-Semitic propaganda on the internet and through Arab-language media. A number of the anti-Semitic actions during recent years have also been committed by young first or second generation immigrants. Their motives, it is said, relate to the Middle East conflict.

This is of course no excuse. An attack against a Jew could never be justified by what Israel or the Israeli army does. Such attacks are nothing but sheer anti-Semitism and should not be explained away.

Also, some verbal criticisms against Israel are in reality masqueraded anti-Semitism, for instance, when they take the form of attacks against Jewish individuals because they are Jews or humiliate their faith and heritage. Cartoons depicting Israelis with Nazi symbols are deeply offensive and unacceptable.

This does not mean that all criticisms against Israel's military actions and methods – for instance now in the Gaza strip – are anti-Semitic. Many critics have no such leanings and intentions and among them are a number who care very deeply about Israel.

This is certainly not about choosing between Israelis and Arabs. It is sobering to remember that neo-Nazis and other extreme right-wingers in Europe are both anti-Semitic and anti-Arab. Ideally, we should join hands against them.

It was important that the President of the World Jewish congress took a public position against the infamous Danish cartoons. I hope Arab leaders one day will react in a similar fashion to anti-Semitic cartoons. We do sometimes see Jewish organizations support the building of a mosque and also Muslims argue for the protection of synagogues – but this should be normalcy.

Governments in Europe have not done enough - but they have made attempts to stem intolerance and hate crimes through legislation, police work and awareness programs. Together they have given xenophobia a fairly high priority in the pan-European organizations.

OSCE has organized conferences on anti-Semitism and ODIHR continues its monitoring activities. EU:s monitoring centre on racism and xenophobia in Vienna (EUMC) publishes important reports – a coming one will be about Islamophobia. Within the Council of Europe there is a committee against racism and intolerance (ECRI) doing regular country reports.

These very initiatives have, however, exposed the need improve government policies on several points. Let me list six of them:

First, there is a “*data deficit*” on hate crimes, the monitoring is insufficient. There is a clear need for a better system of data collection, analysis of the data and reporting on the frequency, type and perpetrators of such acts.

Second, there is a need to strengthen the *legislation* as such. “Racist motives” should be seen as an aggravating factor in prosecuting hate crimes.

Third, the prevention of hate crimes and acting upon them must be made a priority in *police work* on both local and national level.

Fourth, *media* have a responsibility in this field. While respecting their freedom of expression, media people should be encouraged to abstain from negative stereotyping and to promote rights-based values.

Fifth, the *inter-religious dialogue* should be further promoted in order to counter ignorance and promote the ethical values which are common between the Abrahamic faiths. Hopefully, such a dialogue will also encourage moderate religious leaders to tackle the problem of fanatic extremism within their own folds.

Sixth, *non-governmental organizations* could make a real difference. A vibrant civil society could provide vaccination against xenophobia. Such voluntary groups should be supported, including those who offer an alternative to those youngsters whom the extremists try to recruit.

There is, however, one more point – perhaps the most important of all: that we give the next generation the best possible start.

Our *schools* must be equipped to handle xenophobic tendencies among pupils and to provide effective knowledge to promote tolerance and respect for those who are different.

The Polish doctor, author and educator Janusz Korszak died in Treblinka with the 190 children from his orphanage in the Warsaw ghetto. But he left behind a message of trust

in the child, that we should respect each individual child and teach each of them to respect one another – as equal human beings.

That message should be repeated and repeated and repeated.

ⁱ “*Everyday Fears: a Survey of Violent Hate Crimes in Europe and North America*”. Human Rights First, September 2005