Informal meeting of the General Assembly
26 June 2019, 9:30am-12:30pm, General Assembly Hall

Combating Antisemitism and Other Forms of Racism and Hate: The Challenges of Teaching Tolerance and Respect in the Digital Age

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Coordinator on combating Antisemitism

"Fighting *against* antisemitism means fighting *for* democracy"

Madame President,
Secretary-General,
Excellences,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

There could not be a better moment and place to discuss this global threat to democracies and societies. Defending human rights is at the core of the European project, and the fight against antisemitism is an intrinsic part of it.

Jean-Claude Juncker, the President of the European Commission aptly stated: "*Our Union was built on the ashes of the Holocaust. Remembering it and fighting Antisemitism is our duty towards the Jewish community and indispensable to protect our common European values*".

[Forms of Antisemitism]

Contemporary antisemitism comes in many forms: it appears in its traditional racist form with roots in Christian theology, or as part of Islamist extremism; it hides behind anti-Zionism or appears unmasked as conspiracy theories, Holocaust denial or Holocaust distortion. One thing is clear: all forms of antisemitism are equally pernicious.

In living memory of the Shoah, we are today at a point where antisemitism has become disturbingly normalised once again. 9 of 10 Jewish Europeans experience antisemitism as their number one problem in day-to-day life.

And even every second European of the general public regards antisemitism as a problem in their country.

Given our history, we know, when antisemitism is on the rise, something bigger is going on. As Holocaust scholar Deborah Lipstadt pointly said: “If you care about democratic society, fight antisemitism”.

Like for any other form of hatred, it is the responsibility of governments, of civil society and of international organisations like this one to stand up against it.

[Hate speech]

In history, every media revolution fuelled not only progress but was accompanied with downsides allowing extremists, hate-preachers and conspiracy believers to better connect and spread their toxic messages:

In the 15th century, the letterpress spread accusations of Jews as well-poisoning and child-murders; in the 20th century, radio and TV were used by fascists and communists to spread antisemitic propaganda.

Today the internet – along all the progress it brings – has also become a melting pot of extremism. An unholy alliance of neo-Nazis, Islamists and far-left extremist joint in believing in a Jewish conspiracy, controlling governments, the economy and the media. They call their enemies "Rothschild", "Soros", "Zionists" or the "Jewish state".

Therefore, when understanding antisemitism, we can also deconstruct current inflaming racism against other minorities. The attack on the Pittsburgh synagogue epitomized the link between Jew hatred and the accusation against Jews for having helped refugees in the US. In a time when truth is challenged, conspiracy myths and antisemitism flourish.

It usually takes only hours for claims to circulate that "the Jews" are behind catastrophies: be it 9/11 or the recent Notre Dame fire. It took merely three days for the headline "Les Juifs brûlent la France" to appear on social media.

Conspiracy theories mutate into hate speech and contaminate hearts and minds.

[EU action]

Europe, on all levels, has taken action. We chose to see, define and condemn antisemitism. In December, all 28 EU Member States unanimously adopted a Council declaration on combating antisemitism and protecting Jewish communities. As a result, national strategies on antisemitism shall be adopted by the end of 2020.

Protecting freedom of expression is an essential value gained in democracies, which we have to defend against those that exploit this right by inciting hatred and violence. In contrast to many other parts of the world, Europe has legislation criminalizing speech inciting hatred and violence, including Holocaust denial and distortion.

And what is illegal offline is also illegal online.

In 2016, the European Commission pioneered the way and concluded a voluntary code of conduct with all big IT companies, such as Facebook, Google+, Microsoft, Youtube and Twitter in which they committed to take down flagged illegal hate speech within 24 hours. Three years on, the Code of Conduct is delivering: While less than one third of illegal content was removed when we started, today, almost three quarters of are removed.

Currently, civil society organisations and courageous citizens are usually at the fore of countering hate speech and thus may even become targets themselves. Therefore, we have

urged EU member states to increase efforts bringing perpetrators to court.

Finally, we know that hate speech can lead to hate crime. All recent tragedies in Paris, Pittsburg, Poway, Sri Lanka or Christchurch have in common that the internet and social media played a role in radicalising the perpetrators. Therefore, the European Commission has proposed legislation that will oblige companies to remove terrorist content within one hour of order by a public authority. Companies will be liable for non-removal across the EU.

[External dimension]

But antisemitism is not just a European problem and the EU is determined to fight it beyond its boarders together with its partners.

We welcome the launch of the United Nations Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech last week, to address the root causes and drivers of hate speech across the globe and trust that it will be a game changer.

We also welcome the initiative by Ahmed Shaheed, the Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion and Believe, to issue a UN report on antisemitism. I was impressed by his remark at a meeting in Geneva last year, where he acknowledged: “we have underserved the Jews” and promised to do something about it. We trust that your report will have a strong impact in UN countries and help them to step up their efforts in addressing antisemitism.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Hatred of Jews has been haunting us for centuries. But as a European and as a German that 30 years ago saw the Berlin Wall come down, I know that unthinkable change can happen.

So, I firmly believe, our goal should not only be to contain antisemitism, but to roll it back.

After all, fighting *against* antisemitism means fighting *for* democracy and *for* an open and divers society.

This is what Europe stands for – at home and in the world.

Thank you!