



INTERNATIONAL  
**HOLOCAUST  
REMEMBRANCE**  
ALLIANCE

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## **Intervention by IHRA Chair, Ambassador Sandro De Bernardin, at 6th Global Forum on Combatting Antisemitism**

In order to be clear, let me begin with a few words about what the IHRA is. The IHRA is an intergovernmental body which unites governments and experts to strengthen, advance, and promote Holocaust education, remembrance, and research worldwide and to uphold the commitments of the 2000 Stockholm Declaration.

The organization inspires the work of its 31 Member Countries to foster historical research, safeguard testimonies and sites, and promote Holocaust education.

The IHRA does not act on behalf of its Member Countries – the IHRA is its Member Countries.

### The IHRA

- sets expectations for action by each one of its members,
- identifies best practices, conducive to the achievement of shared goals
- follows the situation in each Member Country.

The IHRA operates by consensus.

That is why we expect its deliberations, though not legally binding, to be taken seriously into account as a political reference by the government of each Member Country taking part in that consensus.

Dealing with the Holocaust means not only honoring the victims, safeguarding the historical record of the past, and countering distortion. According to paragraph 3 of the Stockholm Declaration it also means “*ensuring that future generations can understand*

*the causes of the Holocaust and reflect upon its consequences*”. That is why the IHRA included combatting antisemitism in its core activities and why an IHRA Committee on Antisemitism and Holocaust Denial was established, headed currently by Robert Williams and previously by Mark Weitzman

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We realized that when dealing with cases of antisemitism, governments and legislators too often tend – even in good faith – to consider those cases as remnants of the past, as residual manifestation of something that essentially belongs to history. That assumption hinders their capacity to counter what we face nowadays: *i.e.* new ideological elaborations, contemporary manifestations of the “*sleep of reason that produces monsters*”.

In that context, the IHRA Member Countries agreed upon a working definition of antisemitism that would reflect antisemitism in its various developmental stages and mutations, reflect current realities and be of practical use.

The working definition was adopted in May 2016, thanks to the unwavering efforts of the Romanian IHRA Chair, Ambassador Constantinescu.

The IHRA’s role is not to regulate, but to educate. Therefore this working definition is an educative tool, designed to inspire dialogue and reflection on the various forms of antisemitism.

IHRA decisions are not legally binding for Member Countries. Rather we provide tools for use by Member Countries. Accordingly, the IHRA working definition of antisemitism is not a compulsory instrument in any country. But all IHRA members are committed to counter antisemitism effectively and cooperatively. Consequently, they are expected to draw on the most effective tools available.

Indeed, the first difficulty that national authorities (educational system, security, judiciary) encounter when dealing with antisemitism is to decide what forms of behaviour constitute antisemitism. Now they have an *off-the-shelf* product, that they can adopt by-passing lengthy (and often thorny) domestic debates. We know that

these examples, are just that: examples. They are not exhaustive, but they are concrete, relevant and thought- provoking.

Moreover, in providing common indicators and methodologies, such a working definition can serve as a means by which governments and organizations can simultaneously and consistently collect data to assess antisemitism, and address antisemitism either as a form of hate or as an unconscious form of discrimination.

I am pleased that the European Parliament fully grasped the relevance of the IHRA working definition and passed a Resolution (on 1 June 2107) calling on its Member States to apply it.

Likewise, the eight countries<sup>1</sup>, that have already adopted the definition nationally, provide a splendid example that we welcome other IHRA Member Countries to follow.

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What has so far prevented other countries from adopting the working definition ? I detect a number of factors:

- sometimes the argument was put forward that codifying the definition would inhibit free speech;
- sometimes the problem lies with the issue of “equal treatment”, according to which if you make provisions against antisemitism, you have to tackle simultaneously also persecutions of Christians and islamophobia;
  - sometimes the problem had to do with the domestic political agenda, somehow already “occupied” with similar topics. Italy is a case in point. In 2016 our Parliament had lengthy discussions on the approval of a bill to establish heavier sanctions for propaganda of racist ideas and incitement to hate and violence, when they are based on Holocaust

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<sup>1</sup>the United Kingdom (12 December 2016), Israel (22 January 2017), Austria (25 April 2017), Romania (25 May 2017), Germany (20 September 2017), Bulgaria (18 October 2017), Lithuania (24 January 2018), former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (10 March 2018)

denial. In 2017 domestic sensitivities pushed the Parliament to debate and finally adopt a law sanctioning fascist and Nazi propaganda, also through symbolic gestures and commercial items.

With all this in mind, my aim as the current IHRA Chair is to match a realistic vision of what the IHRA can do with the ambition of moving things in the right direction with regard to two main goals: (one) to consolidate the political authority of the IHRA working definition at international level, and (two) to encourage more IHRA members adopting the working definition at national level.

As to the first goal, I intend to

- a) support the crucial work of the IHRA Committee on Antisemitism and Holocaust Denial, which is already working on next steps for the utilization of the working definition;
- b) favour the development of a network of likeminded organizations willing to work together against antisemitism. This goal has been clearly spelt out in the IHRA Strategy approved last November. In particular, I see scope for increasing the quality of statistical data regarding antisemitism in different countries, taking advantage of the common use of the IHRA working definition.

In this respect, I look forward to the establishment of a permanent partnership between the IHRA and the European Commission.

As to national adoptions of the working definition, when delivering the opening speech of the Italian Chairmanship in Berlin on 6 March I stressed a point that I shall maintain with every interlocutor: antisemitism is a poison, that has to be eliminated from the body of our societies before reaching the lethal level. To achieve that, affirmative action is needed.

True, antisemitism is one among other possible forms of discrimination. But it is not equivalent to other forms. It has a specific and peculiar history. It has specific dynamics.



True, we must stand up against all forms of discrimination. But we must study and combat antisemitism in its specificity. We need, therefore, specific instruments. And the IHRA working definition is one.

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Now I come to the prospects of Italy adopting the IHRA working definition. Last year a number of MPs drafted a motion recommending its use, but their initiative could not be discussed due to the early call for political elections.

Then last 29 January, within the framework of the Rome International Conference on Antisemitism, Foreign Minister Alfano announced he had sent a letter to Prime Minister Gentiloni proposing the adoption of the IHRA working definition by Italian government. Then elections took place on 4 March and we are still waiting for hints on when and how a new government will be formed.

But it is significant that the outgoing Italian Minister of Justice Orlando attended this Forum Monday and yesterday. During his tenure, he played a significant personal role in raising awareness of the discrepancy between the number of persecutions for antisemitic offences and the number of incidents raising the concern of the Jewish community.

As soon as the new government is in place, as the Head of the Italian Delegation to the IHRA, I will directly call the attention of the new Ministers most concerned, as well as of the relevant Parliamentary Commissions, to the importance of the matter. I hope that the circumstance of holding the IHRA Chair will add to the effectiveness of my suasion.

In fact, on similar matters the Italian government is already corresponding positively political expectations coming from a number of international organizations Italy is part of (for instance, the Council of Europe and the ODIHR/OSCE). IHRA matters should be granted an equal footing.



As I mentioned before, Italy already sanctions incitement to hate and discrimination as a crime. Nevertheless, the special features of antisemitism – including Holocaust denial, distortion and trivialization – should be formally acknowledged in my country too.