

10 September 2020

Working together to fight antisemitism in Europe: Structures and strategies for a holistic approach

German Presidency of the Council of the EU

When the IHRA was drafting the working definition of antisemitism in 2016, the hope was that it would prove to be a useful tool, for the IHRA as well as for anyone else that would want to use it. But we couldn't have known at the time the impact it would have.

It has worked to further broaden the discussion about what antisemitism is and which mechanisms are used to normalize it. It has led to much debate, reigniting discussions around how we can identify antisemitism and – importantly – how we can combat it.

The IHRA definition has raised awareness, especially among policymakers, that this dangerous phenomenon exists in all societies. This fact is no longer questioned. We know antisemitism exists. That it is a problem that affects all of society. And that it requires all of society to combat.

However, we still have much work to do in terms of sensitizing individuals and institutions to the existence of antisemitism. According to a 2018 survey from the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA), only 36 % of the general public say that antisemitism has increased in the past five years, compared with 89 % of Jews. Public awareness of this problem clearly has a long way to go. The IHRA working definition of antisemitism can serve as a useful educational tool in this regard and can provide an essential mutual starting point for discussion – and for action.

Of course, the working definition does not stand alone in the fight against antisemitism. It is one piece – an essential piece – of a larger mosaic of projects, guidelines and recommendations, memorials and museums, and research. When taken together, it contributes to a world that remembers the Holocaust, to a world without genocide, to a world where antisemitism has no place.

We must, especially now at a time of crisis when antisemitic discourse is inching toward the mainstream, strengthen this mosaic, this network. I commend the EU for the manifold activities in this regard, launched by the Commission but also supported by parliamentary resolutions. As



IHRA Chair, I am grateful that the German EU Council Presidency has made this topic a focus and continues to emphasize it, especially when considering the unprecedented challenges we are facing during the current pandemic.

We must support projects like the European Jewish Cemeteries Initiative, which protects Jewish burial sites across Europe, especially in areas where Jewish communities were completely destroyed in the Holocaust.

We must accept our responsibility as governments and start initiatives like the Global Task Force Against Holocaust Distortion established by the German Presidency of the IHRA, which will provide recommendations to policymakers on how to combat Holocaust distortion.

We must provide much needed support to museums like the Anne Frank House, which has unfortunately been forced to shut its doors due to the effects of the pandemic.

We must foster innovative research carried out by a new generation of scholars examining recently opened archives like those of the Vatican.

All of these activities and institutions work together to create a world in which the facts of the Holocaust are abundant, where antisemitism has no place.

We must, especially now, ensure that these remembrance and education efforts can weather the storm of the pandemic, so that our democratic societies can emerge from this challenging time intact.

As a speaker, I would normally try to close with something positive, but this is difficult to do with the matter at hand. So instead I will leave you with the remarks of Edith Bruck, an Italian Holocaust survivor of Hungarian descent.

In her address to the ministers of foreign affairs and high-level governmental representatives who gathered to adopt the 2020 IHRA Ministerial Declaration in January, Ms. Bruck made it clear that the fight against antisemitism is far from over. She emphasized that there had been a painful “change in mentality,” that she now “found it difficult to go into schools,” where she regularly speaks to students, “because she sees a new kind of racism, antisemitism, fascism and discrimination.”

This should give us all pause.

Let’s remember that we all have an obligation to make sure this “change in mentality” does not gain traction. The IHRA working definition of antisemitism is a starting point, but our efforts cannot end there.