

Anti-Semitic incidents drop sharply in Poland and Hungary, watchdogs say

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Despite recent widespread concern of rising anti-Jewish sentiment in Eastern Europe, monitors recorded 20-30% fewer incidents in 2017 than year before

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JTA — Despite widespread concerns recently of a rise in anti-Semitism in Poland and Hungary, watchdog groups in both countries said the number of incidents recorded there in 2017 dropped sharply from the previous year.

In Hungary, the Jewish community's watchdog on anti-Semitism, TEV, said this week in its annual report for 2017 that it had recorded 37 anti-Semitic incidents compared to 48 in 2016, constituting a 23 percent decrease. Some 100,000 Jews live in Hungary.

In Poland, which is home to some 20,000 Jews, Deputy National Prosecutor Agata Gałuszka-Górska last month said that the number of anti-Semitic incidents had dropped by 30 percent, to 112 last year from 160 in 2016. Anti-Semitic hate crimes accounted for about 6 percent of all hate crimes recorded, she said.

Poland and Hungary have right-wing governments that clash frequently with the European Union over their refusal to comply with its policy of admitting immigrants from the Middle East.

In November, 60,000 people attended a nationalist march in Poland that featured anti-Semitic and anti-Muslim rhetoric. Some local Jews say the government is tolerating ultranationalism that elevates the risk of anti-Semitic violence. Opposition by Israel and Jewish groups to Poland's passing in January of a law that criminalizes blaming the Polish nation for Nazi crimes has fueled fresh reports of rising anti-Semitism in Poland.

Meanwhile, Hungary's government is facing similar criticism for its billboard campaign and propaganda against George Soros, a Jewish billionaire and Holocaust survivor who funds liberal causes and organizations and supports the settling of hundreds of thousands of Middle East immigrants.

But the anti-Soros campaign last year "has not led to any visible increase in anti-Semitic incidents," Kalman Szalai, TEV's secretary-general, told JTA. He said Jews in Hungary generally do not fear physical attacks on the street like their coreligionists in France, Belgium, Germany and elsewhere in Western Europe.

Most of the incidents recorded in Hungary last year and in 2016 featured hate speech. The rest were cases of vandalism.

In Poland, Andrzej Pawluszek, the prime minister's secretary, was quoted by the PAP news agency last month as saying "Official data, both domestic and from EU agencies, do not confirm the thesis about the increase of anti-Semitic attacks in Poland, disseminated by some circles."

Rafal Pankowski, a critic of the government and co-founder of the Polish anti-racism group Never Again, said the data only partially reflect reality on the ground in Poland. He said that following the passing of the law on rhetoric about the Holocaust, "In the space of one month, I have seen more anti-Semitic hate speech than in the previous 10 years combined."

The reported decrease in incidents, he told JTA, "results largely from the changes in registering them by institutions in the recent period." It is true, he added, that "there are not many physical attacks on Jews in Poland — and there are not many Jews in Poland anyway — but the level of anti-Semitic hate speech has increased radically in the first months of this year. Despite the existence of anti-hate speech laws, they are rarely used against the perpetrators."

Separately, the state of Bavaria in Germany also reported a decrease in anti-Semitic attacks last year. The total of 148 incidents recorded in 2017 constituted a 22 percent drop from the previous year.

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