

Antisemitism Creeps Back as Hungary and Poland Fail to Draw Red Lines

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Since the end of communism, Poland and Hungary have made great strides in eradicating antisemitism. But this prejudice remains embedded in both populations, which has been exploited by the two governments in recent remarks and deeds.

Few interviews have received such media attention in Hungary recently as that given by Germany's Europe Minister Michael Roth. In the interview with t-online, published on August 21, Roth warned that Poland and Hungary do not care about the protection of ethnic and sexual minorities, highlighting Hungary's "rampant anti-Semitism" as one of the reasons why the EU's Article 7 procedure – which suspends certain rights from a member state – had been launched against Hungary.

Ignoring much of Roth's list of grievances against the Hungarian government – lack of rule of law, judicial independence, and media freedom – Budapest focused on that charge of antisemitism. Germany's new ambassador to Hungary was promptly summoned to the Foreign Ministry in Budapest for a dressing down, Minister of the Prime Minister's Office Gergely Gulyas wrote about what he termed insolent and baseless accusations, while Justice Minister Judit Varga protested against double standards in the EU.

While Roth was admittedly critical of his own country in the respect of rising antisemitism, the Hungarian government's main argument – that contrary to many Western societies where verbal and physical attacks are on the rise, Hungary provides a safe environment for its Jewish community – has some weight.

In Germany, the number of violent antisemitic attacks surged by more than 60% in 2018 from the year before, while anti-Semitic acts in France that year increased by more than 70%. By contrast, in Hungary and Poland violent attacks on Jews are rare.

In Hungary, whose Jewish community of about 100 000 is the largest in Central Europe, Jewish festivals are regularly organised, cemeteries have been restored and cultural

institutions receive generous funding. “The Hungarian government’s protest is justified if we look at cases of violent antisemitism: there are practically no such incidences in Hungary, whereas in the UK or Germany, where prejudices are less ingrained, attacks on Jewish people and the vandalising of their cemeteries are on the rise,” Andras Kovacs, a renowned sociologist and Hungary’s best-known expert on the issue of antisemitism, told BIRN.

The national-conservative Fidesz government also prides itself on being a close ally of Israel and of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in particular, who has described Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán as a “true friend of Israel”.

“The Hungarian prime minister knows perfectly well that anything even resembling antisemitism can seriously hamper Hungary’s international political and business relations,” Agoston Mraz, director of the government-friendly Neozopont Institute, told BIRN.

Mraz admits that it is difficult and takes a long time to tackle ingrained prejudices in society, but he thinks the current leadership is doing its best, with the government’s trump card evidently Israel. “The political alliance between Hungary and Israel has strengthened lately and this is clearly incompatible with antisemitism,” Mraz said.

Poland has also made significant progress over the last three decades in embracing its small Jewish community, which today numbers 30,000-40,000.

“When I moved to Poland in 1990, the country I found was one trying to redefine itself, anxious to move past difficult elements in its history, rejecting communism, fascism and, to some extent, antisemitism too,” Michael Schudrich, Chief Rabbi of Poland, told BIRN. “It was a country overwhelmingly open to Jews and Jewish culture, where one could do a lot to empower Poles with Jewish roots and help non-Jews understand the contribution of Jews to Polish culture – after all, Jews have been part and parcel of Polish life for over 1,000 years.”

But over the last few years, many experts note that antisemitism has started to rear its ugly head again in various aspects of Polish and Hungarian life. “In the last years – in the last year even – we’ve heard things that we had never heard before in 30 years. Nasty things and lies about Jews, which is very concerning and hurtful for us,” Schudrich said.

Poisonous political discourse

For many, Poland's presidential campaign this summer, which led to the re-election of the incumbent Andrzej Duda, created a worrying precedent.

Antisemitism expert Rafal Pankowski, of the Warsaw-based "Never Again" Association, describes the closely-fought election as the first time that leading politicians from the governing Law and Justice (PiS) openly deployed antisemitic rhetoric, which he worries will have long-term negative consequences.

During the campaign, which pitted Duda against the liberal Warsaw mayor Rafal Trzaskowski, key PiS politicians and the state broadcaster TVP, widely seen as little more than a propaganda tool for the governing party, depicted Trzaskowski as an agent of "a powerful foreign lobby" and suggested he would "fulfil Jewish demands".

That latter charge refers to Poland being currently the only country in the EU not to have legislated on property restitution for Holocaust victims, despite signing the Terezin Declaration on Holocaust Era Assets and Related Issues, a non-binding commitment to adopt measures righting economic wrongs related to the Holocaust. Despite insistence from the US, one of the few countries still able to influence PiS politicians, the government remains adamant it will not pay anything. At the same time, it argues that Poland itself is due damages because of how much it suffered at the hands of the Nazis and Soviets.

During the presidential campaign, PiS politicians referred to statements made by Trzaskowski that he was open to discussing the issue of restitution. "Only someone without a Polish soul, a Polish heart and a Polish mind could say something like that," PiS leader Jaroslaw Kaczynski said during the campaign.

Duda himself expressed his opposition to any settlement of Jewish claims, saying he would never favour one ethnic group over another. TVP further attacked Trzaskowski for admiring a "Jewish philosopher", referring to older statements by the Warsaw mayor that he was a "believer in the god of [Baruch] Spinoza".

Scapegoating minorities has become routine for PiS, which attacked refugees on the campaign trail in 2015 and LGBT people during various electoral battles over the last two years. While its politicians and supporters had mainly steered away from making blatant antisemitic remarks themselves, PiS's historical narrative of Poles as World War II's biggest victims has sometimes reeked of historical revisionism or even denialism.

Far-right parties, which have been represented in the Polish parliament since 2019 by the Konfederacja (Confederation) alliance, started mobilising against any Jewish restitution, even organising a 10,000-strong demonstration in front of the US embassy in Warsaw last year. In response, the governing party, whose leader Kaczynski infamously echoed the words of the German politician Franz-Josef Strauss in his 1986 campaign for the state election in Bavaria by declaring he wanted no other party to the right of his party, became increasingly vocal on the issue as well.

Agoston Mraz of the Neozopont Institute also invokes Strauss's famous declaration when describing Fidesz's attempts to keep to the centre ground of politics while also trying to win over more radical voters. The Hungarian government has declared zero tolerance against antisemitism, but many experts find the current political discourse more equivocal.

Sandor Szakaly, director of the government-created Veritas Historical Institute, caused international uproar in 2014, when he called the 1941 deportation of Jewish people – partly refugees from Poland, Germany and the former Austro-Hungarian Empire – to Kamianets-Podilskyi (currently in Ukraine) “a police action against aliens”. Nazi German reports said a total of 23,600 Jews were murdered in the massacre there. Despite calls for his resignation, Szakaly clung on to his position by apologising for offending some people, while still claiming to have employed “historically correct terminology”.

State recognition of people who openly embrace antisemitic ideas is also weakening the credibility of the Hungarian government's claim to zero toleration. The government recently awarded the Hungarian Order of Merit to controversial historian Erno Raffay, who compared current migration trends with the “Jewish takeover” of Hungarian institutions in the 1930s. “A migrant community came to Hungary, multiplied and dragged us out of positions in science, school, academia, university, banking... If we let migrants in, because we are liberals, the consequences will be that we are going to be driven out of our wealth, our positions,” Raffay said during a lecture in November 2015.

Then there is the inclusion of writers in the national curriculum who advocated antisemitism in the 1930s, while it is difficult to deny that the campaign launched against Hungarian-born US financier George Soros (himself a Holocaust survivor), depicting him as Hungary's No.1 enemy, has a strong undercurrent of antisemitism, even though government spin doctors repeatedly play down this narrative.

However, experts warn that it is not only Fidesz that is walking this tightrope in trying to appeal to more nationalistic voters while claiming to occupy the centre ground of politics.

“The whole Hungarian political elite has a problem here, not just the government,” said Kovacs, referring to a recent scandal caused by the antisemitic remarks of the joint opposition’s candidate, Laszlo Biro of the far-right Jobbik party, which is infamous for making racist and, to a lesser extent, also antisemitic remarks, but which is now trying to manoeuvre itself toward the centre of Hungarian politics

Biro, standing for election in a rural constituency in October, was forced to apologise after his nomination as the joint opposition candidate for posting virulent antisemitic remarks on Facebook. The opposition coalition – ranging from leftists and greens to liberals and former far-right extremists – decided to support him nonetheless, in the hope that his victory would break Fidesz’s two-thirds majority in parliament.

“The opposition also sends out ambiguous messages: they are outraged at any sign of antisemitism in the government’s camp, but if there are higher political goals, they simply close their eyes,” Kovacs said.

“Anyone instrumentalising antisemitism is doing something wrong,” said Poland’s Chief Rabbi Schudrich. “Don’t ask me who is worse: the one who hates because he hates, or the one who expresses hate to benefit politically. I’m not sure which one is more dangerous.”

Heard on the streets

These mixed signals are seeping into wider Polish and Hungarian society – in which antisemitism has never been totally expunged, even if it became marginal in the 1990s – coarsening the public discourse and resulting in more public acts of vandalism and verbal abuse.

Kovacs cites surveys on prejudices, based on questions like “do you think Jewish people have too much influence in the media or in the financial world?”, which showed that roughly one-third of Hungarians hold some form of antisemitic views. “This is higher than in Germany for example, where the ratio is 25%. You wouldn’t guess but – based

on stereotypes – the country with the strongest antisemitic attitude in the EU is Greece, with one of the smallest Jewish diaspora [of around 5,000].”

While there is a level of socially accepted antisemitism in Hungary, the head of research and analysis at Mazsihisz, the Association of Hungarian Jewish Organizations, who did not wish to be quoted by name, told BIRN that Jewish people do not have to worry about their safety in Hungary. Even so, “On rare occasions, it happens that Jewish people wearing kippas are insulted in the streets. There is a recurring phenomenon of vandalising Jewish cemeteries, often in communities where you do not have any Jewish people. Sometimes you see swastikas painted on billboards, or Stars of David in elevators or staircases in the inner cities. We have registered around 130 such cases last year, but no violent acts,” he said.

Radical discourse and hate speech are present in the online sphere too, but it is no worse than in other countries, he added.

In Poland, the PiS government in 2018 caused an international scandal when it launched an effort to criminalise the use of the term “Polish death camps” or any other phrasing that implied Poles were responsible for crimes against Jews during the Holocaust.

According to Pankowski, the debates around this law represented a turning point for Poland. “It opened the discursive space for anti-Semites to organise politically around antisemitic tropes – the norms changed,” the expert said during an online discussion about antisemitism hosted in July by Indiana University.

Michal Bilewicz, a social psychologist at the Centre for Research on Prejudice at Warsaw University, told BIRN that while Poles who hold antisemitic views were self-censoring due to the norms of political correctness in Polish society up to 2015, “today, these people are more willing to express their views and feel that these opinions are legitimate. This is obviously caused by government rhetoric.”

“There may be few physical attacks on Jews in Poland, but the main reason for that is probably the fact there are few visible Jews walking on Polish streets,” Pankowski told BIRN. “In contrast, we document many acts of violence against property, especially symbolic sites, such as Jewish cemeteries or monuments to the victims of the Holocaust. And, of course, we register a high level of hate speech cases – and I’d say hate speech can also be regarded as a form of violence.”

Pankowski also noted that in the last year, “the proliferation of conspiracy theories linked to the coronavirus pandemic has further activated stereotypes about Jews,” in Poland and elsewhere.

Yet Chief Rabbi Schudrich, known for his upbeat, constructive style, stresses that, “it’s always easier to hear criticism than positive things” and that his community is already developing mechanisms to deal with these new challenges. “We live in a democracy, we have the right to disagree. We will vocally oppose all forms of antisemitism and any other form of discrimination – this is our responsibility.”

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