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Concerned Jews urge European voters to reject extremes

Election campaigns across continent bear anti-Semitic undertones, Jewish community warns, pushing many to consider leaving Europe

By DAVE CLARK | 22 May 2019, 4:20 am | 0

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Illustrative: A man wears a kippah at a demonstration against anti-Semitism in Berlin, Germany, April 25, 2019. (Carsten Koall/Getty Images via JTA)

BRUSSELS, Belgium (AFP) — The campaign for this week’s European elections has raised the specter of a surge in extreme nationalist and populist views, and no community is more concerned than the continent’s Jews.

Recent years have seen an increase in anti-Semitic speech and violence in many parts of the continent, with once taboo language sometimes creeping into mainstream politics.



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Before World War II and the Holocaust, Europe counted more than nine million Jews. Today the community numbers fewer than two million, and its leaders fear more departures.

European Jews are urging their neighbors to vote for unity and to reject extremism when they go to the polls in European Parliament elections set for Thursday through Sunday.

“We know... maybe better than anyone, what Europe was built on, after the Holocaust, after the horrors of the war,” Ariella Woitchik, director of European affairs at the European Jewish Congress (EJC), told AFP.

“And we don’t consider that peace is a given thing.”

Woitchik spoke in Brussels, the EU capital and a city where soldiers and police still mount guard outside synagogues and kosher shops five years after a murderous gun attack on its Jewish Museum.



People pay their respects in front of a makeshift memorial at the entrance of the Jewish Museum in Brussels following a deadly terrorist attack, on May 25, 2014. (AFP/Georges Gobet)





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The threat is not imagined or exaggerated, according to the European Union's Agency of Fundamental Rights, which recently conducted a wide-ranging survey in 12 member states.

"Findings from the 2018 survey show that hundreds of respondents personally experienced an anti-Semitic physical attack in the 12 months preceding the survey," the report said.

"More than one in four of all respondents experienced anti-Semitic harassment at least once during that period."

In January, EU Justice Commissioner Vera Jourova spoke out against anti-Semitism, warning: "When Jews have left Europe in the past, it has never been a good sign of the state of Europe."

But Jews are once again considering leaving Europe, as many did before and after World War II.

"The numbers have gone down in the past 20 years. There used to be two million Jews, it went down to 1.6 million," Pinchas Goldschmidt, Chief Rabbi of Moscow and president of Conference of European Rabbis, told AFP.

"A lot of people left. We had a whole wave of terror in France, Belgium, Denmark and in other places. So we see these elections as extremely important, giving a message to the Jews of Europe that you're still welcome in Europe."

Modern European parties, even those on the far right, rarely openly espouse anti-Semitic views, but the recent election campaign has had worrying undercurrents for the community.

In Hungary, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's party has made a target of Jewish financier and philanthropist George Soros, accusing him of secretly plotting with Brussels to swamp Europe with immigrants.



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Illustrative: Danish soldiers guard the synagogue in Copenhagen, Denmark, on September 29, 2017. (AFP PHOTO / SCANPIX DENMARK / Mads Claus Rasmussen)

“It wasn’t overt, but there were some tropes used,” Goldschmidt said.

This week Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki of Poland sparked outrage by declaring that if Warsaw paid reparations for Jewish property stolen during the Holocaust it would be Hitler’s “posthumous victory.”

This came after a far-right candidate in the Polish city of Kielce interrupted a televised debate to try to place a kippa on a ruling party candidate’s head, declaring: “They kneel before the Jews.”

For Goldschmidt, the excesses of the campaign reflect a broader trend of spreading hatred that has even seen German extremists marching with neo-Nazi symbols.

“We have the Brown Shirts marching in Germany. Anti-Semitism has again been invoked as part of the mainstream... politicians are not afraid to use it when they need it,” the rabbi said. “World War II is turning into a memory and people are forgetting what it was like to live without a European Union, without all those values that are so important for a continent that was at constant war for hundreds of years.”



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Police officers stand in front of the venue of the "Schild und Schwert" (Shield and Sword) neo-Nazi festival, in the small eastern German town of Ostritz on April 20, 2018. (AFP PHOTO / John MACDOUGALL)

Jewish community leaders accept that many mainstream politicians have, in some cases belatedly, begun to realize the scale of the problem, even if they have struggled to confront it.

Groups like the EJC have been successful in some cases in convincing EU and member state agencies to adopt the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's definition of anti-Semitism.

But the tone of the debate in Europe has raised concerns, and community leaders have urged all to vote against the extremes.

"It's definitely linked," Woitchik argues. "Whether it comes from the left or the right, both extremes are extremely negative... It spreads hatred, whether it is online or... through very violent physical attacks.

"So all this creates a feeling of anxiety among the Jewish community. Now we have even talked about an emergency feeling because if things don't get better, people are even contemplating leaving Europe," she said.

"The message that we are trying to spread now... is to call on people to vote and to vote for a pro-European party."

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