

PRESS RELEASE

Defending Democracy: Building Resilience Against Toxic Narratives and Foreign Influence

(Munich - 13 February 2026) - The Chief Rabbi and President of the Conference of European Rabbis, Rabbi **Pinchas Goldschmidt**, the Belarusian human rights activist and Laureate of the Charlemagne Prize 2022, **Maria Kalesnikava**, and the Chairman of the Committee on Défense, Interior and Foreign Affairs of the Federal National Council of the United Arab Emirates, **H.E. Dr. Ali Rashid Al Nuaimi**, brought together a distinguished panel of international experts for a lunch debate at the Munich Security Conference 2026 entitled "Defending Democracy: Building Resilience Against Toxic Narratives and Foreign Influence". The event examined antisemitism as an early warning indicator of democratic vulnerability and a strategic threat within contemporary hybrid warfare environments.

The discussion addresses how extremist narratives, disinformation, and foreign influence operations undermine democratic institutions, social cohesion, and societal resilience across Europe and its neighbourhood. Democracy's erosion rarely begins with tanks – it starts with narratives. Authoritarian systems test the resilience of open societies by attacking truth, pluralism, and civic courage. When dissenting voices are silenced and independent institutions dismantled, democracy itself is at risk.

Chief Rabbi Pinchas Goldschmidt, President of the CER and Laureate of the Charlemagne Prize 2024, emphasised that antisemitism functions as democracy's early warning system. A dramatic rise in jihadist attacks across Europe in recent years, he noted, has fortunately resulted in comparatively few fatalities – thanks to effective European security measures. Yet the situation remains alarming: "If a young boy wearing a kippah cannot walk the streets without fear, we still have a problem." Hatred against Jewish communities, he stressed, is never isolated but signals broader erosion of pluralism and the rule of law. Despite the challenges, he underlined the importance of responsibility and resolve, stressing that optimism is neither naive nor optional.

Maria Kalesnikava, a Belarusian human rights activist and Laureate of the Charlemagne Prize 2022, warned that democratic space can close quickly. In Belarus, she said, there was a moment when it became too late to prevent authoritarian consolidation. Reflecting on her imprisonment under the Lukashenko regime, she underscored that repression is a political choice made by those in power – not by those who defend freedom. At the same time, she expressed confidence in civil society and the long-term prospect of a free Belarus, emphasising the importance of peace and solidarity.

H.E. Ali Rashid Al Nuaimi outlined a comprehensive and preventive strategy to combat antisemitism: reforming educational systems, reshaping religious narratives, strengthening legal frameworks, promoting coexistence, and establishing clear standards for religious leadership. Sustainable change, he argued, requires transformation across the entire system rather than isolated measures.

Participants agreed that antisemitism acts as a gateway ideology, mobilising extremist networks through conspiracy myths and disinformation. Countering it demands stronger legal and intelligence frameworks, decisive action against online radicalisation and foreign influence operations, and visible interfaith solidarity as democratic self-defence. Protecting Jewish life is therefore not only a moral imperative but a strategic necessity: a society that safeguards its minorities safeguards its democracy.

The panel was moderated by international journalist **Ali Aslan**. The distinguished audience included academics, media and national politicians.



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For media inquiries, please contact: Press.de@rabbiscer.org.

About the Conference of European Rabbis:

The Conference of European Rabbis was founded in 1956 in the United Kingdom and represents some 1,000 members and 800 active rabbis who lead congregations from Dublin to Vladivostok. From its new headquarters in Munich, the CER campaigns for the religious rights of Jews in Europe. It also promotes religious freedom and interfaith dialogue to counter growing radicalisation in politics and society, to better combat anti-Semitism and religiously motivated extremism, and to enhance the security of religious communities in Europe. Since 2011, the President of the CER has been the exiled former Chief Rabbi of Moscow, Pinchas Goldschmidt, who has been nominated for the 2024 Charlemagne Prize in Aachen. For further information, please visit: www.rabbiscer.org

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