



We must not let down our guard, the rise in antisemitism in Europe is putting our democracy at risk

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Speaker

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Dear Ms Kalenova,

Dear Mr Bilewicz,

Dear Mr Kotek,

Dear colleagues and guests,

At the beginning of my mandate as President, I visited the former concentration camp of Auschwitz- and the time I spent in this place of indescribable pain and sadness is something I shall never forget.

It is incomprehensible how humankind, how our diverse and rich European cultures could commit such an atrocity.

But, as Primo Levi said: *"We cannot understand Fascism, but we can and must understand from where it springs, and we must be on our guard...because what happened can happen again...For this reason, it is everyone's duty to reflect on what happened."*

Recent events are showing us that we must not let down our guard and believe that the 60 years of peace in Europe are to be taken for granted. Our Fundamental Rights, which are enshrined in Article 2 of the Treaty of the European Union are not to be taken for granted.

It is inadmissible that last year saw the largest number of anti-semitic acts in decades, leading to an increasing sense of emergency among Jewish communities worldwide.

Anti-Semitic incidents rose by 70 % last year in France, for example, and 60% in Germany.

In Belgium, 39% of Belgian respondents said they had experienced anti-semitic harassment in the last year.

This insecurity and fear impacts everyday life: almost a third of European Jews avoid attending events or visiting Jewish sites because they do not feel safe.

And it is already impacting our communities and the European diversity we are proud of: in Belgium, a study by the Fundamental Rights Agency has revealed that 42% of Belgian Jews had considered emigrating in the last five years.

Our streets and squares, villages and cities- all public spaces must be places of exchange and safety for everyone.

Beyond anti-Semitic acts, regrettably, we're also observing a general rise in intolerance and hatred against other minorities. A study showed that while 10% of Europeans admitted they had unfavourable views of Jews, 16% said they had negative views of LGBTI people, 36% said they had unfavourable views of immigrants, 37% said that about Muslims, and 39% said it of Roma people.

And this intolerance is perpetuated and increased by social media bubbles, hyper-connectedness and a growing acceptance of hate speech on the internet, which translates back into our physical world.

What can we do to protect the diversity of our cultures and forms of religious expression, and open culture which lies at the core of our European identity?

What can we do to counter Antisemitism?

We must act.

Objective data is certainly an important basis, and the European institutions for example have released two important studies recently:

- A study named "Experiences and perceptions of antisemitism - Second survey on discrimination and hate crime against Jews in the EU" was released by the EU's Fundamental Rights Agency in December 2018;
- and the "Eurobarometer survey on Antisemitism" was released on 22 January 2019

However, let me now invite our experts to take the floor, who will certainly be able to provide us with more insights and perspectives: Our keynote speaker will be Ms Raya Kalenova, Executive Vice-President and CEO of the European Jewish Congress, followed by Mr Michal Bilewicz of the University of Warsaw and Mr. Joel Kotek of the Free University of Brussels (Université libre de Bruxelles- ULB).

We will then have time for questions and exchange.

But first, Ms Kalenova, the floor is yours.