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Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy

Speech of Dr Gideon Botsch

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Current problems of anti-Semitism in Europe

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Madame Chairman, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would like to extend my warmest thanks to you for the invitation to this hearing and those of our Director, Professor Dr Julius H. Schoeps, who is unfortunately unable to be here with us today.

The Moses Mendelssohn Centre, which was founded in 1992, is an interdisciplinary research institute at Potsdam University. In the context of our priority research into anti-Semitism and right-wing extremism, we are studying not only the problems of hostility towards Jews in the past and the present and of far-right groups but also preventive and punitive measures to avert such problems. Professor Schoeps was also a member of the group of independent experts on anti-Semitism set up in 2009 at the initiative of the German Parliament. We had hoped that the work of this group of experts would be continued on a permanent, professional basis, but, unfortunately, once it had submitted its report, it was disbanded.

My colleague, Dr Olaf Glöckner (MMZ), took over the processing and collection of data in respect of the Federal Republic of Germany in the context of the survey on *Discrimination and Hate Crime against Jews in EU Member States: Experiences and Perceptions of anti-Semitism*, funded by the EU Fundamental Rights Agency. What is particular about this survey is that it does not ask about anti-Semitic stereotypes and prejudices in the non-Jewish population but focuses on the victims' experiences and perceptions of anti-Jewish hostility, in other words to a certain extent on the "Jewish perspective".

You may well already be aware of the results, which were made public in autumn 2013. I would, therefore, simply like to underline a number of key aspects:

- across Europe some 56% of those questioned considered anti-Semitism to be a serious social problem; some 75% believed that anti-Semitism was on the rise;
- anti-Semitism in the media was considered to be the biggest problem (almost 60%), followed by hostility in public areas (over 50%), as well as various forms of damage to Jewish property or cemeteries or through anti-Semitic graffiti;
- more than one out of every five Jews in the EU claims that he or she has recently experienced or had to endure anti-Semitic insults, while 45% fear that this will be the case in the near future. Almost 10% admit that in the last few years they have been victims of violence.

From a political standpoint, the following finding is alarming: less than a quarter of the victims reported anti-Semitic incidents to the relevant authorities; 46% thought that reporting the incident would not make any difference; such incidents were most likely to be reported to Jewish Institutions or to the media; only 15% had recourse to a victims advisory centre. 6-7% left the area where they lived and/or changed their physical appearance so that they could no longer be recognised as a Jew in public. Given these findings, we must conclude that, from the standpoint of the victims, many measures for combating anti-Semitism in Europe come to nothing and in particular that victims have little confidence in the authorities responsible for such matters. In other words: insecurity among Jews living in Europe has increased drastically right across the European Union.

Allow me to summarise briefly the levels at which anti-Semitism is now a cause for concern in Europe:

1. The potential for anti-Semitic attitudes continues to pose a problem in Europe, as various studies into attitudes have shown. It is, however, difficult to obtain representative and comparable data providing a general overview for Europe. As it is scarcely possible to directly change attitudes through the sort of political measures that are to be discussed in this committee, I do not wish to go any deeper into this aspect of the problem.

2. Anti-Semitism in its best-known, perhaps traditional form is to be encountered in many European countries: in the context of radical nationalism and xenophobic right-wing extremism. Neo-Nazi organisations in particular, but also other right-wing groups, regularly propagate militant anti-Semitism, which can also be expressed in anti-Jewish slogans, damage to Jewish property and violent assault. Some such anti-Semitic nationalist groups are now even represented in the European Parliament. There are also youth sub-cultures – for example in certain football fan circles or music scenes – in which anti-Semitic lyrics or songs or anti-Semitic symbols are very common. This radical-nationalist anti-Semitism provides the basis for the denial or relativisation of the national socialist murder operations against the Jews during the Second World War.

3. Despite all the efforts made by Christian Churches and religious communities to rethink their relationship to Judaism from not only a theological but also a social and cultural perspective, religiously motivated, Christian anti-Semitism continues to play an important role.

As can also be seen from the aforementioned survey, Jewish citizens now perceive the greatest threat to come from people who are of immigrant background and usually from predominantly Muslim countries of origin. Accordingly, most attacks, insults and threats are attributed to this group of people. As I already said, this is the subjective level. Reliable data about the real number of incidents are difficult to collect, even at national level, and comparable data are quite simply unavailable at European level. Whether and to what extent anti-Semitic stereotypes, which draw on individual passages in the Koran and other Muslim traditions, play a role here is disputed by experts. The idea that anti-Jewish attitudes have their roots in predominantly Muslim communities within Europe is also disputed: Are these not simply reactions, which are linked first and foremost to the political culture of the majority society? Are the views expressed by individual Muslim communities or religious groups of political Islam not being taken up by those with anti-Semitic tendencies? Or does the way in which public discourse is received in countries of origin play a role, for example through the influence of the anti-Jewish message portrayed in their information and entertainment media? One thing is sure and that is that hostile acts by members of this group are as a rule more frequent when Arab-Israeli tensions in the Middle East increase – with the tragic climax in the so-called Second Intifada in the early 2000s, but also in the context of military conflict in the Lebanon, in the Gaza Strip etc. It is equally clear that these attacks and hostile acts are unprovoked, and that they are more frequently directed against the Jewish community or individual Jews than against the institutions of the State of Israel. Such deeds are clearly motivated by anti-Semitism. However, a certain belief in European societies that such attitudes are justified reinforces the perpetrators in their acts. The unilateral recognition of the Palestinians as the victim of Israeli aggression and the stereotype reaction that such acts are unacceptable but understandable because they are “a last-ditch attempt”, hamper the necessary clear rejection of anti-Jewish attacks in the name of “anti-Zionism”.

4. This brings me to a further point which is a particularly sensitive/thorny issue for the EU: anti-Semitism with Israel as its main target. Similar stereotypes and hateful images are now used to describe the State of Israel and its Jewish population as were used to describe the Jews in traditional anti-Semitism. Israel is seen to function as a “collective Jew” among states and nations. Collective measures are accordingly taken against Israel today, just as they traditionally were against Jewish individuals. The best example are the boycotts against Israel, which despite their, in my opinion, distinctive anti-Jewish character, find widespread acceptance and sympathy in European societies. As the aforementioned survey of the way in which anti-Semitism is perceived by European Jews also showed, they consider anti-Semitism conveyed by the media to be a particular cause for concern. This, to a significant extent, concerns the unfair, factually inaccurate and biased reporting on the Middle East conflict by many media, including quality media. This form of anti-Semitic “Israel-criticism” is admittedly to be found in all political camps and social strata. It is, however, clearly voiced in the left-wing and liberal left-wing political spectrum in particular.

5. Tenacious myths of “Jewish conspiracy against the world” and the dark intrigues of “Jewish finance capital” have never completely disappeared and are still surprisingly widespread in new media and social networks, in particular in networks which, quite unsparingly and indiscriminately, accuse the established media of systematically lying. Content is circulated on the Internet which blames the Jews for all real or presumably undesirable developments of our times. This includes everything from climate change, allegedly pandemic moral corruption (buzzword homosexuality) and migration to war and violence. Such accounts tend to overlap with resentment against the USA, anti-Semitism aimed at Israel and (particularly in Germany) also with anti-Semitism to ward off blame if not deny or relativise the Holocaust. One might consider those who spread such conspiracy theories to be mad while at the same time relatively harmless if they restrict their activities to the virtual world. But this threat is also beginning to be expressed, and to some extent to be put into action, in the real world. In Germany there is currently an extremely fast-growing movement, whose members claim that their weekly demonstrations and vigils are designed to achieve world peace, but which, in reality and quite massively, foster myths of world conspiracy, which are generally speaking rooted in anti-Semitism or at least remain linked to anti-Semitic ideology.

In my opinion, this last example illustrates the biggest challenge that anti-Semitism and animosity against Jews present today: it is no longer possible to clearly distinguish the various reasons for hatred towards the Jews and the different stereotypes; they have combined to form a dangerous cocktail. The ranting against “rich Jews”, their perceived role of “eternal victims” and the policy of the State of Israel now provides common ground for people of different political, social, national, cultural and religious backgrounds.

In the context of both the positive and negative experiences in countering right-wing extremism, which we at the Moses Mendelssohn Centre have studied, among other things by taking as an example the German federal land of Brandenburg, I would like to make a few short remarks about combating anti-Semitism: *First*, in order for anti-Semitism to be clearly and unequivocally rejected in politics and society, there must be an anti-anti-Semitic consensus. *Second*, there must be unequivocal solidarity with the victims of anti-Semitism, which must not be accompanied by any sort of expression of understanding for the perpetrators, no matter how justified it might seem. *Third*, there must be an awareness and recognition of anti-Semitism as a social and political problem for Europe, at all levels and in all of its forms. *Fourth*, the problem must also be regularly and comprehensively documented and empirically researched, and the results should be published in regular reports. *Fifth*, coordinated and decisive measures are required to counter anti-Semitism: through the prevention of anti-Semitic offences and acts of violence as well as legal, administrative and material penalties; by promoting civil society's anti-anti-Semitic initiatives with the aim of making anti-Semitism as well as right-wing extremism, xenophobia and other forms of discrimination a cross-cutting issue; finally, through appropriate educational measures in both a curricular and non-curricular context as well as in adult education.