

Downplaying Holocaust in political discourse

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Nowadays explicit denial of Holocaust is rare in political discourse and can be noticed only in the language of extreme marginal politicians. However, downplaying Holocaust, distortion, manipulation and keeping silent on it increasingly penetrates agenda of mainstream parties. This is manifested in different forms.

1. Presenting Holocaust as “a purely Jewish matter”

Fighting anti-Semitism is important not because Jews deserve more care and better protection than other people. It is important because, historically, anti-Semitism is the most extreme and salient example of how prejudice and intolerance may evolve to systemic harassment and discrimination and ultimately result in organized extermination of millions of people, including women and children, simply on the basis of their religious or ethnic identity. Therefore, remembering Holocaust is important not only for Jews but also – and rather – for all people, regardless of their origin or belief.

2. The Holocaust issue is closed. All the problems have been solved, Jews are securely protected, perpetrators condemned and punished, and the problem is not worth mentioning anymore. Needless to say, this is far from being true. Anti-Semitic incidents and violent attacks on Jews occur in many places in Europe. Not surprisingly, the point mentioned above is often made in the context of the debates on restitution of Jewish property lost during Holocaust.

3. Trivialization of Holocaust is oftentimes accompanied with references to “selfish interest of Jewish organizations”, which, in some politicians’ words, try to gain on the tragedy of the past.

4. Not rarely, various forms of abuse of Holocaust are related to “PR-war” over the Middle East conflict, up to allegations that “genuine” Holocaust is perpetrated by Israel against Palestinians. Anti-Semitic sentiments play extremely destructive role with regard to attempts to bring peace to the Middle East. Needless to say, the State of Israel cannot and should not be immune from criticism simply because it is a Jewish state. But when this criticism is not based on genuine human rights concerns but clearly fueled by anti-Semitic prejudice and dangerously borders with Holocaust denial, it is highly detrimental to the genuine peace-building efforts in the region and, ultimately, harms Palestinians even rather than Israelis.

5. Last but not least, mentioning Holocaust is sometimes avoided in order not to play into hands of hostile propaganda directed against some Central and East European states for alleged collaboration with Nazis. Blame is often put on Jews – as if because of them these states become politically vulnerable. Moreover, Jews are often accused in participating in and even orchestrating of crimes of the Communist regimes, despite in many countries of the region exactly the Jewish minorities suffered the most also from Communist oppression and organized state-led anti-Semitic campaigns.

While the number of anti-Semites and xenophobes in our societies is not significant, too many political leaders and opinion-makers do not raise their voices against manifestations of anti-Semitism, including trivialization and downplaying of Holocaust. Therefore, not only outbreaks of intolerance but rather *tolerance to intolerance* demonstrated by political class, gives rise to serious concerns.

Growing number of political parties which – in a more or less explicit form – manifest sympathy towards anti-Semitic ideas is a dangerous phenomenon in the nowadays Europe. Moreover, representation in parliaments and municipalities and real political influence of these parties is growing, too.

Therefore, it is essential to establish reliable safeguards and prevent the situations when explicitly xenophobic parties come in power through formally democratic procedures, as was the case with the German Nazis in 1933. Formally correct voting procedures are not enough to entrench

genuine democracy. The substance of the ideas offered to voters does matter, too. The parties that do not accept such basic values as equality of all people, regardless of religious belief, ethnic origin, mother tongue, gender or sexual identity, should be disqualified from political competition. Needless to say, the procedures for such exclusion must be transparent and based on objective criteria. Setting up such procedures requires close cooperation between the parliaments, international parliamentary bodies and, essentially, human rights lawyers.

In particular, parties whose agenda is seriously marred by anti-Semitism or other types of racism, xenophobia and intolerance, should not have the right to participate in the international parliamentary assemblies. More than two years ago, I was among those members of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe who signed a motion aiming at introducing the possibility not to ratify credentials of those members of national delegations who represent xenophobic and anti-Semitic parties. So far the efforts to introduce such provisions produced limited results. Therefore, enhanced international cooperation with this regard is of crucial importance.