

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Fighting anti-Semitism is important not because Jews deserve more care and better protection than other people.

Fighting anti-Semitism 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.

It seemed that the horrors of Holocaust should have to eliminate anti-Semitism forever. Unfortunately, these hopes did not come true. Anti-Semitic rhetoric, direct or indirect justification and even glorification of Holocaust are more and more often encountered throughout the world.

Therefore, combatting anti-Semitism not only remains a topical issue on the political agenda but even becomes more acute and urgent.

Just a couple of months ago, violent outbreaks of anti-Semitism in Europe, such as physical and verbal assaults, attacks on synagogues, arsons, desecration of cemeteries reached so dangerous level that German, French and Italian Foreign Ministers had to make a strong statement with this regard. ICCA Steering Committee welcomed this statement and called upon all governments to join Germany, France and Italy in this strong condemnation and the commitment to act.

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 fuelled by anti-Semitic prejudice, in no way does it help to find a peaceful solution for the conflict.

In other words, modern anti-Semitism often takes a form of “anti-Israelism”, as a rule, disguised as the care for human rights, peace and democracy – what makes this kind of intolerance even more dangerous and detrimental to the genuine peace-building efforts in the region.

As a matter of fact, the number of anti-Semites, xenophobes and extremists in our societies is not that big. However, too many people, including political leaders and opinion-makers, do not raise their voices against manifestations of anti-Semitism and, therefore, silently accept them. In my view, not only outbreaks of intolerance

but rather *tolerance to intolerance* demonstrated by our societies, gives rise to serious concerns.

This is why involvement of parliamentarians is so important. Many people, and, in particular, in my region – i.e. Eastern and Central Europe – tend to believe that elected representatives are obliged to blindly reflect the views of the people who elected them. This is true only to some extent. Politicians have also another mission: they ought to undertake political leadership, to advance and promote progressive ideas which are not yet fully shared by the majority in their societies. Abolition of the death penalty or ensuring equality of gays and lesbians are good examples. If politicians simply follow the majority opinion, the capital punishment would still exist in many European countries, as surveys reveal.

Similarly, with regard to manifestation of anti-Semitism in the modern world, a strong, vocal and united response on the part of parliamentarians is needed. To ensure this, coordination and networking are indispensable.

Unfortunately, in many instances elected members of parliaments are reluctant to raise their voices against anti-Semitism. Let me put it bluntly - often this happens out of opportunistic and cynical considerations, of the fear to lose votes of those citizens whose attitude towards Jews is negative, in particular, growing Muslim communities.

In the Eastern and Central Europe growing anti-Semitic sentiments are of somewhat different nature. Jews are often blamed for the crimes of the Communist regimes, despite in many countries of the region exactly the Jewish minorities suffered the most not only under Nazi occupation but also from Communist oppression and organized state-led anti-Semitic campaigns.

In the Baltic states substantial public resentment is also caused by the continuing debate about tragic events of the World War 2, when indeed many people there collaborated with Nazis and took part in the Nazi crimes. Unfortunately, attempts to exonerate these people – in particular, to present members of the Latvian SS Legion not as tragic victims of history but as heroes and freedom-fighters - are rather widespread. Hostile foreign propaganda exploits this politically, trying to accuse all the Baltic nations in sympathy towards Nazism. Needless to say, this is wrong. But in public opinion, blame is often put on Jews – as if because of them the Baltic states become politically vulnerable. This is an additional factor fuelling anti-Semitic moods.

Growing number of political parties which – in a more or less explicit form – manifest sympathy towards anti-Semitic ideas is another dangerous phenomenon in the nowadays Europe. Such parties as “Golden Dawn” in Greece and “Yobbik” in Hungary are most frequently mentioned in this respect, but, as a matter of fact, similar parties that defend xenophobic and intolerant ideas exist in most of the European states. Moreover, representation in parliaments and municipalities and real political influence of these parties is growing.

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, mothertongue, 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 and international parliamentary bodies.

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 a year 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. Here too, enhanced international cooperation between different national parliaments is of crucial importance.

To sum up. Current trends in Europe and beyond give rise to serious concerns about growing anti-Semitism, xenophobia and intolerance. Therefore, the ICCA should step up its efforts, engage more parliamentarians and take initiative in elaboration of new mechanisms of both political and institutional nature so that to effectively meet these new challenges and threats.

Boriss Cilevics, MP, Latvia

*ICCA working meeting, London, 2/09/2014*