

Address by Ambassador Janez Lenarčič

Director of the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions
and Human Rights (ODIHR)

**Launch of Teaching Tools to Combat
Anti-Semitism for Lithuanian
Secondary Schools**



Vilnius, 2 July 2009

Dear Minister,
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure for me to participate in the official launch of teaching materials to combat anti-Semitism.

Out of 56 participating States of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), Lithuania is the third country to host such an official launch event of these materials. Last year we launched materials in Germany, in March we did it in Poland, and now we are here. At the same time we are developing materials with nine other countries: Austria, Croatia, Denmark, the Netherlands, the Russian Federation, Slovakia, Spain, Sweden and Ukraine.

We are grateful for the opportunity to co-operate with the Lithuanian government and experts in this important endeavour.

*

Over the last years, hate crimes and violent acts of anti-Semitism, racism and xenophobia have been on the rise in many parts of the OSCE region.

The level of anti-Semitism in a country is an important barometer for the general level of tolerance and openness towards diversity in society. When anti-Semitism is on the rise, other ethnic or religious groups may also face acts of hatred and intolerance.

Anti-Semitism can manifest itself in anti-religious, racist, or other forms. It can appear as world conspiracy theory, as blood libel, as Holocaust denial or as repetition of centuries-old prejudices, for example that Jews would control the financial world. In the previous century Jews were often blamed to have invented communism.

Recent developments – the worsening global economic crisis, the war in Gaza – have shown again that when things go wrong, anti-Semitic prejudices rise.

It is worrying that many of the different forms of anti-Semitism historically encountered in Europe can still be seen today.

In practically every country of the OSCE we observe the acts of anti-Semitism on different level and in different form.

*

The reported anti-Semitic hate crimes in Lithuania over recent period ranged from violent physical assaults, to vandalizing of

Jewish community centres, Holocaust memorials and cemeteries. Some events were highly publicized: you are all aware of neo-Nazi marches in recent years, during which anti-Semitic slogans and symbols were used.

Very worrying are signs that anti-Semitic sentiment is not only expressed by extremist parties: it is also visible in general public discourse. We regularly receive information about anti-Semitic articles or cartoons in mainstream media.

Lithuanians themselves have suffered from a horrible crime: the deportation of Lithuanians to Siberia and Central Asia during the early years of the Soviet occupation. Tens of thousands of Lithuanians lost their lives due to these crimes. There is no doubt that those were despicable crimes.

In recent years some Lithuanian media and governmental officials have often put these two historical crimes in relation to each other.

The suffering of a people under Stalinism should not be an excuse to ignore the reality of the Holocaust, but should rather increase the sensitivity to it.

In short, there is clear evidence that anti-Semitism is a problem in Lithuanian society and I want to call on the governmental bodies to address this seriously.

At the same time, I also have to applaud the efforts of the government in this area.

- The strong condemnation by the government of the neo Nazi march that took place on Lithuania's Independence Day in 2008 and of the vandalizing of the Vilnius Jewish Community building in August 2008 sent a strong and important signal.

- I am also aware that the government has been reviewing legislation in this area and I stress that ODIHR stands ready to assist steps to improve legislation in the area of anti-Semitic and hate-motivated crimes.

- Last but not least, Lithuania has fulfilled an important OSCE commitment to promote remembrance of the Holocaust. Not only does Lithuania commemorate the Holocaust on the UN Holocaust Memorial Day, 27 January, but it has introduced its own Holocaust Memorial Day, on 23 September, the date of the destruction of the Vilnius Ghetto.

*

In response to worrying developments throughout the OSCE area, OSCE participating States have in the past years undertaken number of commitments to combat such acts of intolerance and discrimination.

These commitments include efforts to collect better data on hate crimes, to strengthen the response of police to such

crimes, and to develop educational programmes to tackle bias and prejudice at an early age.

Our office, the ODIHR, is mandated to assist participating States in implementing the commitments they took upon themselves.

To this end, we have developed a number of tools and assistance programmes, including for example training programmes for police and prosecutors, preparing and presenting a Guidebook on hate crime legislation to be used as a reference tool by legislators, policy-makers, law enforcement officials and civil society.

*

My purpose here today is to point out that education is an effective means to combat anti-Semitism.

Within the OSCE, education, including education on anti-Semitism and on the Holocaust, is recognized as one of the most important and effective means for preventing and responding to all forms of intolerance and discrimination, as well as for promoting integration and respecting diversity.

We have the responsibility to educate our youth so that they grow to become democratic, open minded people that are able to build a society free from intolerance, discrimination and

anti-Semitism. ODIHR delivers a small contribution to these efforts with the teaching materials that we are presenting today.

It is our hope that the students who will work with the teaching materials will learn that some information they may have heard about Jews might not be facts, but anti-Semitic prejudice.

Education about anti-Semitism means education against prejudices, and education to promote conditions necessary for a democratic and open-minded society.

The teaching materials to combat anti-Semitism are not dealing with the history of Jews, but with the history of anti-Semitism.

They do not explain the roots of anti-Semitism by portraying Jews, but by portraying non-Jews.

They also try to explain that anti-Semitism is not a problem of Jews – although it is a problem for Jews.

*

As I mentioned earlier, teaching materials, similar to the ones we are launching today, have also been launched or are still being developed in eleven other countries in the OSCE region.

In each country where the materials are produced, the content is adapted according to the history and the current situation in that country, and is based on the curricula and the needs of teachers and students. The customized country versions are put together by national experts based on an intensive and consultative process of research and drafting.

*

At this point I want to particularly thank the experts from the Yiddish Institute at the Faculty of History at the Vilnius University, especially Assistant Director Ms. Ruta Puišyte, for excellent co-operation and for all the efforts that they put into this project over the last couple of years. I also want to mention the Anne Frank House in Amsterdam, whose knowledge and expertise was a vital factor in the implementation of this project.

I want to thank the Lithuanian Ministry of Education and Science. We look forward to further opportunities to continue this collaboration.

In closing, I would like to wish all of the teachers, trainers and pedagogues, who are present here today and will work with these materials, much success in your work. You have a crucial role to play in using these materials and contributing to the promotion of tolerance, mutual respect and understanding in Lithuania.

Thank you.