

ENGLISH only

Statement by Nils Muiznieks,
Minister for Social Integration of the Republic of Latvia,
at the OSCE Conference on Anti-Semitism
in Vienna, Austria
19-20 August 2003

[Check against delivery]

I would like to thank the organisers of this conference for a very important initiative. I am gratified that the OSCE has focussed attention on issues of intolerance and non-discrimination, as both Latvia and I personally have worked and continue to work closely with the OSCE. In my previous life as head of a human rights NGO, I cooperated intensively with the OSCE Mission to Latvia until it closed at the end 2001 and with the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities. Now it is my great honour to work with the OSCE and address you as Latvia's Minister for Social Integration. I would like to share some thoughts on anti-Semitism and institutional and legislative mechanisms for combating it in Central and Eastern Europe more generally, before narrowing the focus to our challenges and efforts in Latvia.

I would like to start by briefly commenting on anti-Semitic attitudes, speech and behaviour throughout Central and Eastern Europe. Though Roma and Sinti are now the most common targets of racism, discrimination and violence, anti-Semitic speech and attitudes remain widespread and deeply engrained throughout the region. The European Values Survey conducted in 1999 asked respondents throughout the region which groups they did not want to have as neighbours. The level of ethnic distance felt towards Jews in Central and Eastern Europe was more than twice as great as that felt in the 15 European Union member states. These attitudes are often reflected in anti-Semitic discourses and occasionally, even ideologies.

Analysts such as Michael Shafir and Vladimir Tismaneanu have noted the link between anti-Semitism and conspiracy theories. In a number of countries one sees what Shafir has called the "Judaization of enemies", wherein every political enemy can be and often is turned into a Jew. The double legacy of Communism and Nazism has led to what Tismaneanu has termed "competitive martyrology," wherein people stress their own suffering under the communists or Nazis and trivialize the unique tragedy that befell the Jews. One manifestation is placing all blame on the Germans and ignoring or downplaying the collaboration of one's own countrymen. Another is de-Judaizing Holocaust victims, of which the classic examples were the efforts by some to de-Judaize the victims of Babi Yar and Auschwitz. Remarkably, in a region that claimed

4/5 of all Holocaust victims, one still encounters Holocaust denial with surprising frequency.

Before turning to behaviour, I would like to note how law enforcement has responded to hate speech in Central and Eastern Europe. It should be noted that this is not a clear cut issue from a legal standpoint. The precise point at which intolerant speech crosses the line and qualifies as incitement is difficult to locate and varies across countries within the OSCE. The case law of the European Court of Human Rights does not provide much guidance either. Most human rights experts would argue for a narrow interpretation. Within this narrow interpretation, appeals to or justification of discrimination or violence against a person or persons because of their real or imputed ethnic or cultural origin should be prohibited. Law enforcement in the region has taken a very narrow interpretation, and not only because there are quite a few racist and anti-Semitic policemen, prosecutors, judges and politicians. Freedom of expression was the first freedom gained with the fall of communism and thus, authorities are hesitant to set limits on it, especially if there is no clear, universally accepted Western standard. Thus, the response has been to prosecute anti-Semitic hate speech rarely, if at all.

To what extent have anti-Semitic attitudes and ideologies in the region translated into behaviour? I have seen no recent comparative studies on harassment or direct or indirect discrimination against Jews in the region. However, about two years ago the European Monitoring against Racism and Xenophobia organised an event on racial violence and asked me to give a presentation on the situation in the EU candidate countries. I found that, compared to Western Europe, data were scarce, but that the best information came from NGOs such as the member committees of the International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights, the European Roma Rights Centre and the Union of Councils for Soviet Jews. The data that were available probably represent only the tip of the iceberg. By far the most frequent victims of violence were Roma, followed by asylum-seekers, and only a few cases involved Jews. Given the attitudes, discourses and ideologies mentioned above, however, this should be no cause for complacency. While monitoring and combating extremist groups and conducting education for tolerance, there is an urgent need to improve data collection throughout the entire region. Hopefully, the inclusion of the candidate countries by the European Monitoring Centre against Racism and Xenophobia into its RAXEN monitoring network will lead to an improvement here.

How does Latvia look in the broader regional context? We have not seen the Judaization of enemies, but Latvians occasionally engage in the immoral competition in suffering and have had a difficult time in dealing with the issue of collaboration with totalitarian regimes. While

our Latvian and Russian extremist groups are small by European standards and have not committed any acts of racially motivated violence, they share a common anti-Semitic ideology. The members of one underground neo-Nazi group called "Thundercross" were caught in the late 1990s and did several years in prison after blowing up a Soviet-era monument and distributing anti-Semitic propaganda. The leader of another neo-Nazi group called "Patriot" was tried and put out of business after printing an article comparing Jews to ticks and calling for the incineration of both. The group also put out a Latvian translation of an anti-Semitic American satirical comic book called "Tales of the Holohoax." Several members of a Russian neo-Nazi group in Latvia called Russian National Unity were put into jail after they were caught committing armed robbery. I recently asked the prosecutor's office to launch an investigation against a right-wing publisher who printed a Holocaust denying article, as well as began serializing a Latvian translation of the Protocols of the Elders of Zion.

But these open anti-Semites are few in number – far more common are the closet anti-Semites, those who cling to a distorted version of history, Nazi-era stereotypes of the Jew-Bolshevik link, those who are just outright insensitive, stressing their own suffering while denigrating the Holocaust. Here the police, prosecutors and courts can do little. That is why the government of Latvia has for several years devoted considerable attention to education and supporting the Jewish community.

Since 1998 the President has had a special history commission to study the crimes of the Nazis, the Soviets and their local collaborators. The commission not only conducts research, it also engages in public outreach efforts. Education of the public is supplemented by efforts in schools, where a new multi-media teaching packet on the Holocaust has been introduced, alongside Latvian and Russian-language adaptations of the Swedish government's excellent textbook on the Holocaust "Tell ye your children..."

All civil rights strategies aim not only at addressing the prejudices of the majority, but also at empowering the minority. The government has thus sought to support various activities of the Jewish community – the state supports a public Jewish secondary school with over 250 students, subsidises a Judaic Studies Centre at Latvia University and the Museum "Jews in Latvia" which documents the Holocaust in Latvia. Our president Vaira Vike-Freiberga has taken an active leadership role on this issue.

In November, immediately after the elections, the four parties that created a government decided to create a new post to coordinate minority policy, promote social cohesion and take responsibility for efforts to combat racial discrimination and intolerance, including anti-Semitism. The governing parties looked beyond their own membership and asked

me, a non-party professional, to undertake the job. In the 7 months since I have taken office, I had to fight for a budget in a period of austerity, build a new structure with a staff of 21 from scratch and lay down new policy directions.

Among my top priorities is developing a national action plan against intolerance, racism and discrimination. I believe such an action plan is the appropriate institutional home for policy to combat anti-Semitism. While drafting and implementing such an action plan was a core recommendation of the European Conference against Racism and the UN World Conference against Racism, I was surprised to discover that very few OSCE countries are doing so. We launched the public debate on the need for such a plan in April, when we organised a national conference together with the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance. We prepared a discussion document compiling survey data on attitudes towards various groups and perceptions of discrimination, statistics on complaints, descriptions of court cases, and a critical review of the anti-discrimination legislative framework. The new EU anti-discrimination directives require us and other EU aspirant countries to improve our anti-discrimination legislation.

Membership in the EU not only prods us to improve our legislation. I think it will lead to changes in consciousness as well. If the experiences of Ireland, Spain and Portugal are any guide, EU membership helps to free one from the shackles of one's past. It seems likely that the liberating impact of EU and NATO membership will help Latvians and other East Europeans overcome the instinct to see themselves as victims and to place the responsibility for their plight on internal and external "others." For the first time in several generations, they will be truly free, prosperous and secure, and that should make for a poor breeding ground for anti-Semitism.