

On how to finally turn a Certain Page in History

The Romanian Chairmanship in Office

of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance

In early March, Romania's Chairmanship in Office of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance - IHRA, the organisation of which I have had the honour to be the Chair, concludes its mandate. At the Bucharest Plenary session, the IHRA adopted by consensus a working definition of antisemitism. This is a practical instrument, a one-page text. A first paragraph establishes that "*Antisemitism is a certain perception of the Jews, which may be expressed as hatred toward the Jews. Rhetorical and physical manifestations of antisemitism are directed against Jewish or non-Jewish individuals and/or their property, against Jewish community institutions and places of worship*". The definition encompasses such examples of antisemitic manifestations as: incitement to harm Jews, fabricated myths about their powers, Holocaust denial, accusations of dual loyalty aso.

We have committed ourselves to promoting this Working Definition on the agenda of other organisations as well, primarily the OSCE and the EU, with Romania acknowledged as a steadfast advocate of adopting this instrument at an international level. We were delighted to see that the British Government has adopted this IHRA-generated Definition as a legal working instrument. Last year, a bill of law has been introduced in the United States Congress, with an aim to give legal authority to the same definition.

There is an explanation for our perseverance on this matter. Tragic instances of antisemitism over the last years in Europe have served to show the importance of an early, unambiguous identification of the roots of antisemitism for preventing acts of violence in the future. To be able to do this, we need to know what antisemitism actually is, how it is manifested, how it is disseminated – so as not to allow ignorance to be taken as an excuse for lack of firmness or for impunity.

A definition of antisemitism can prove its values especially under the current political circumstances in a Europe where populism and nationalism attract an increasing number of followers.

We can give many examples. Politics and speech that are anti-Zionist, or that are antagonistic towards Israel about certain present-day subjects, most of the time include antisemitic formulations. Based on prejudice, some of those who today oppose migration flows to Europe perversely rationalise the decline in public order or the increase security costs as generated by the presence of Jewish communities.

There are already premises that electoral exercises scheduled for this year in a number of European states will witness a display of antisemitically-tinged rhetoric. There is an

increasing number of cases in which in some countries history is being rewritten to serve the aims of aggressive populism or newly invented forms of nationalist “democracy”. Sinister ghosts from the history of the Holocaust are whitewashed by diligent doctrinaires to serve precisely the purposes of this sort of propaganda. As we recall the tragedies of the Holocaust, we ask ourselves what could be more hideous than to once again encounter today in the public sphere, in the media, in social media, anti-Semitic sympathies disguised among far right messages or among base, callous negationist ruminations.

It is unfortunate to witness the propagation from year to year of three weaknesses that compromise Europe’s efforts to combat such a scourge: indifference, hypocrisy, impunity.

The lessons we have learned during this year as Chairmanship in office of the IHRA make very clear to us that we must remain undaunted and unrelenting in cultivating not only the painful memory of the past, but also our duties towards the present and especially towards the future. All this accumulation of turbulence, all the signs of unquiet flagging up the antisemitic threat in today’s Europe must be a call to mobilisation for us in Romania as well, to go out of the comfort zone of ambiguity and indifference.

And yes, our Chairmanship in office of the IHRA has also taught us that a good, broader swath of the Romanian society has begun to acknowledge that vigilance and responsibility are imperative when it comes to antisemitism. In confronting the past and its tragic mistakes, we are starting to do those things that others are reluctant or afraid to do.

We have been pleasantly surprised to see for instance thousands of visitors, interested to learn about the pogroms against the Jews from 75 years ago, touring exhibitions devoted to this subject across the country and in our embassies abroad. A worldwide public has learned about the acts of courage of Romanian individuals now acknowledged as *Righteous Among Nations*. With the help of several external partners, we were able to put in place education programmes for civil servants – professors, magistrates, law enforcement personnel, diplomats – about the Holocaust, about the roots and perils of antisemitism, hatred and discrimination. During this year we have learned as well the impact of positive narratives about Jews, about their history, traditions and talents, about the hundreds of Jews that added to Romania’s international standing. The black-and-white dichotomies, inherited from communist doctrine, on antisemitism and the Holocaust are progressively replaced by the grey nuances so well exemplified in, for instance, Wilhelm Filderman’s Memoirs, and so meticulously expounded in the Wiesel Commission’s final Report regarding the Holocaust on Romania’s territories.

Does this mean however that our mission to prevent and fight antisemitism in Romania is accomplished?

We cannot gloss over facts rigorously documented by the Elie Wiesel National Institute for the Study of the Holocaust in Romania, or by MCA Romania – the Centre for Monitoring and Combating Antisemitism. Too many of them are unfortunately treated with indifference or met with puzzlement by the public. And, according to the EU’s Agency for Fundamental Rights, not all of them are investigated by our law enforcement institutions. There are some who claim that antisemitism in Romania is “an isolated phenomenon”. For others, in order to be able to give pertinent answers, a benchmark, a norm derived from expert analysis, would be needed. It would be utterly wrong to leave such a dilemma open to interpretation.

The experience of the rather convoluted exercise that resulted in the adoption of a Definition of antisemitism by the 31 IHRA member states, followed by its promotion at an international level, has taught me once more how tenuous the line between political will and declarations of good intentions is. That line can be one of peculiar and disappointing ambiguity – all the more so since in fact the only ones that should fear the consequences of assuming and applying the definition of antisemitism are the antisemites themselves.

I am convinced that, by confronting this ambiguity, today’s Romania has the good grace of showing that it is on the right side of history. And the best proof of this would be for the Romanian state to take the official decision to apply the working Definition of antisemitism.

I have witnessed with keen attention the thoughtfulness with which signs of solidarity and sympathy are proffered towards the Jewish community of Romania – at celebratory ceremonies, on traditional holidays, in commemorations. Each and every time I trust these are genuine expressions of respect – normal signs in a normal Romania. But each and every time I cannot repress the thought that the solidarity and sympathy the Romanian Jews need mean a bit more than making moving gestures and expressing ceremonial greetings while in the public spotlight. There is more that we can do, through determination and personal involvement, to see that all forms of latent, insidious antisemitism are condemned and stopped.

Assuming the task of integrally applying the Definition can be an excellent guidance for Romania, towards finally and forever turning a tragic page of national history - and giving an example of responsibility to the world at large. It would be a clear sign that we are prepared to replace preoccupied rhetoric with bold, resolute answers.

At the conclusion of the IHRA Chairmanship, the one imperative that I would therefore take the liberty of emphasizing to the representatives of both the majority and the minority is for all of us to work together for the adoption, sooner rather than later, in the

legal terms considered the most appropriate, of the Definition of antisemitism. Romania would thus be equipped with an effective antidote to impunity perpetuating prejudice and fomenting hatred, and an effective instrument of action for law enforcement institutions. It is a high duty of conscience towards the victims of the past, and even more so towards our fellow human beings of the present day.

Amb. Mihnea Constantinescu

IHRA Chair