

## **Hungary, Romania and Slovakia / Dr. Raphael Vago**

### **Hungary**

The most complex and contradictory developments in Europe during 2014 took place in Hungary, which by the beginning of 2015 continued to reflect the deep divisions in Hungarian political life, between the center-right FIDESZ, the extremist right wing Jobbik and the liberal-left, over Hungary's past: the need to face the fate of its almost 600,000 Jews who perished in the Holocaust and evaluate the inter-war and war time Horthy regime. 2014 saw the intensification of debates and differences of opinion accompanying the events commemorating the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Holocaust in Hungary. In fact 2014 became a test case for the delicate balance and relationship between various parts of Hungarian society, the media and the political spectrum. The year 2014, which was designated by the Hungarian government and the Jewish community for a series of events and activities in Hungary and abroad, became the focal point of strong differences of opinion not only concerning the politics of memory in today's Hungary, but also the rise of antisemitism, and the government's handling of those issues. In the context of the widening gulf in the public and political discourse, yet another front was opened, with the deep differences between the Jewish community leadership and the government. Several forums of high level dialogues took place and their format continues in 2015 in an effort to the cancel the boycott and refusal by the Jewish community to participate in some major projects and plans during 2015, including rejection of approved grants for various activities planned for 2014.

In the words of Rabbi Schlomo Koves, Jews can now feel antisemitism in the street, although physical attacks on Jews are rare. Acts of vandalism against Jewish targets continue, the most notable one in March 2015 when 20 graves were vandalized in the town of Gyongyos, including the scattering of human remains, which was described by the head of the small local Jewish community as "unprecedented", and by Prime Minister Orban, as a "barbaric deed". (see The Times of Israel, 23 March 2015)

Public opinion surveys on the level of antisemitism are usually disputed and debated, questioning the methods of research, the samples and the questions – in Hungary and elsewhere. Perhaps as a characteristic attitude to the various approaches and often the media's need to generalize, one Hungarian newspaper referred in its headline to one such sample of 1200 persons, as "Last year the Hungarian was an antisemite as he was in 2013" (see Nepszava, 26 March, 2015) – describing the results which indicated a certain trend towards more extremist antisemitic attitudes.

While the number of incidents is not on the rise, the main danger in Hungary is the attempt to "whitewash" the antisemitic past, rehabilitate aspects of the Horthy era and emphasize Hungary's alleged loss of sovereignty in March 1944, during the German occupation, in an attempt to relativize Hungary's role in the destruction of its Jewry.

This aspect was highlighted by an ongoing public debate and demonstrations focusing on a controversial statue erected in July 2014 on Freedom Square in Budapest, never yet

officially inaugurated; it depicts Germany's imperial eagle striking down on archangel Gabriel, Hungary's guardian angel, symbolizing Hungary's innocence versus Nazi aggression, in commemoration of 19 March 1944, the date of the Nazi occupation of Hungary. On the other hand, continuing opposition to the statue, among others in the form of a counter-exhibit "Living Memorial" reflects the attitudes of wide segments of the Hungarian public, not only Jews, that the statue deflects Hungary's responsibility for the Holocaust.

Another major bone of contention is the major project on the "House of Fates", a planned educational center which became the focus of ongoing debates claiming that the project's aims are not clear, that the voice of the Jewish community and its major organization, MAZSIHISZ's, has not been taken into consideration and has not been sufficiently involved in the plans. (see numerous references in Hungarian Spectator, Galamus Csoport, HVG, 168Ora, Elet es Irodalom, Nepszabadsag and other Hungarian media outlets)

The nationalist wave riding high on the effects of the economic crisis, criticism leveled by factors in the US, EU against the Fidesz government, and a feeling by the Hungarian government that Hungary is unjustly being criticized, have also affected and strained relations between the Hungarian government and the major Jewish organization in Hungary, MAZSIHISZ, as well as world Jewish organizations abroad.

The tensions reached a new high with the decision of MAZSIHISZ to boycott the government-organized and supported Holocaust commemoration events and activities; this step was also backed by Jewish organizations abroad, and, as Rabbi Andrew Baker, the American Jewish Committee's Director of International Affairs stated: "the efforts of the Hungarian government to rewrite history are absolutely traumatic". (JTA, 11 February 2014, Haaretz, February 2014) In this spirit, the leading historian of the Holocaust in Hungary, and Holocaust survivor, Randolph L. Braham, returned a prestigious state award to the Hungarian government in protest of the rewriting of history in Hungary. (see AP, 26 January 2014)

The political polarization in Hungary is reflected in the major issues related to the past and present of Hungarian antisemitism and Hungary's role in the destruction of its Jewry. There is no doubt that the Hungarian government is and should be sensitive to the rise of antisemitism, as noted by sources within and outside of Hungary. Headlines, such as "Is Hungary Sliding Back to Nazi-Era Anti-Semitism?" (cnnnews, 19 March 2014) must be of concern to the government, the opposition and civil society.

It must be emphasized that the Hungarian government, through its representatives and diplomats abroad, such as in Israel, have actively participated in all events commemorating the tragedy of Hungarian Jewry, and have spoken of Hungary's role, responsibility and "shameful" role in the Holocaust, as Prime Minister Orbán expressed it in January 2015 on the occasion of the International Holocaust Day. (see AFP, January 2015). Hungary's ambassador to Israel, Nagy Andor who represented Hungary in numerous public and academic events in Israel, during 2014 expressed in clear terms

Hungary's assumption of responsibility for its role in the Holocaust, and in opposing any forms of antisemitism. In the past few years criticism has been leveled against Hungary, claiming that the government often speaks in two voices – one at home, not blocking, even promoting historical revisionism, while acting abroad with a continuing commitment to take responsibility for Hungary's role in the Holocaust of its Jewry.

Having become the chair for the next year of IHRA – the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance, in March 2015, Hungary will have to prove its commitments to the memory of the Holocaust and to combating all forms of racism and anti-Semitism.

During the "Protective Edge" operation in Gaza in summer 2014, there were small scale anti-Israeli demonstrations with the participation of Palestinians along with extremist politicians from Jobbik. Signs and slogans such as: "Zionist murderers", "Terrorist Israel" abounded. (see, Free Hungary. 17 July, 2014) The leader of Jobbik, Gabor Vona spoke out against the "baby murderer Israeli state". (see freehungary.hu 25 July, 2014)

Thousands participated at a major interfaith rally at the main Budapest synagogue with the participation of Israel's Ambassador, Ilan Mor, while a counterdemonstration was held by Jobbik. (see JTA, 29 July, 2014) The numerous extremist sites, as kuruc.info – from within and outside of Hungary continued their vicious antisemitic and anti-Roma propaganda.

However, an interesting trend could be observed by the end of 2014, namely a slow process of internal divisions and new voices from Jobbik, as the Party leader, Gabor Vona, struck a more moderate tone, even showing understanding towards the pain of all victims of suffering. While it is too early to evaluate whether this change of tone, is tactical or of a more strategic nature, it does reflect Vona's view that by reducing the antisemitic and anti-Roma racist attitudes, Jobbik can penetrate deeper into further segments of Hungarian society. (see Hungarian Spectrum, March 2015)

There is no doubt that Hungary remains high on the map of antisemitic alerts among European countries. Much of the present trends in antisemitism are directly related to the ongoing process of trying to establish a national narrative on Hungary's past in the inter-War and during the Second World War, as well as its role in the Hungarian Holocaust. It seems clear that just as 2014 was a year of major tests – with the events commemorating the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Holocaust in Hungary, so 2015 will also be judged by the government's record in combating racism and antisemitism.

## **Romania**

Antisemitism in Romania is characterized by a relatively few violent incidents, sporadic cases of vandalism against Jewish targets such as cemeteries and synagogues, but a continuing trend justifying Romania's wartime regime of Antonescu, revival of groups and movements spreading the ideas of the pro-Nazi Iron Guard, and various forms of Holocaust denial. As Romania's then President Basescu emphasized during his visit in

Israel in January 2014, "Romania has come a long way on Holocaust remembrance, but denial persists". (JTA, 20 January 2014)

On the commemoration of Holocaust Day in Romania in October 2014, leaders of the Jewish community and Romania's leadership stressed Romania's recognition of the Holocaust and the need to teach the legacy of Holocaust and combat antisemitism.

The effectiveness of rapid and strong responses to antisemitic events was proved by the protests of MCA Romania, (The Center for Monitoring and Combating Antisemitism) a major monitoring and activist organization, the leadership of the Federation of the Jewish Communities led by Dr. Aurel Vainer, who frequently raises issues on antisemitism and historical revisionism in the Romanian Parliament, where he is a member, and by the Elie Wiesel Institute for the Study of the Holocaust in Romania which is also very active in responding and acting against any form of racism, antisemitism and Holocaust denial.

In June 2014 the governments of Romania and Israel held the second round of intergovernmental consultations. The Romanian government delegation was led by Prime Minister Victor Ponta (see Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 24 June 2014), who declared in an interview to the Jerusalem Post (25 June 2014) that there is no antisemitism in Romania. Similarly, in numerous public and academic events, the Ambassador of Romania to Israel, Andrea Pastarnac has emphasized Romania's recognition of its responsibility for the Holocaust, in promoting Holocaust education and combating antisemitism. Romania is already planning several major events in anticipation of 2016, when it will assume the yearly chairmanship of IHRA- the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance.

Events linked to the past and current trends continue to figure in Romania's public and political scene. In December 2014, Romania's Ambassador to Armenia, Sorin Vasile was recalled over an antisemitic joke using Jewish stereotypes and homophobic statements, at a speech at the American University in Erevan. A complaint about his speech was initiated by MCA Romania. (See, JTA/The Times of Israel, 10 December 2014)

A major scandal erupted when Romania's President, Klaus Johannis decorated Octav Bojza, an anti-Communist political activist and President of the Association of Former Political Prisoners in Romania, who has been accused by MCA Romania of praising "fascists who murdered Jews during the Holocaust".(see, "Romanian watchdog group protests honoring fascist sympathizer", JTA, 23 January 2015) Following the criticism, Bojza told the Adevarul daily that he was "not antisemitic" and that he "rejects extremism of any sort".

The printed and electronic media often publish facts and details about the history of the Holocaust in Romania, such as in item in Ziare.com , whose title gives the essence of the article, "Jews in Transnistria – when the Romanians were their butchers" ( see Ziare com. 30 January 2014)

The continuing forms of Holocaust denial, the myth of the Red Holocaust caused by the Jewish communists, figure frequently in the Iron Guard's internet publications, such as "Cuvantul Legionar". An article in "Revista 22 " (15 May 2014) called attention to the numerous antisemitic publications and web sites, which should not exist in a normal country which is a member of the EU; the author, Anca Manolescu presented some quotations from such sites, including allegations that "Nazi Germany was provoked by the Jewish mafia", and reference to "the Zionist paranoia called Holocaust".

During Operation Protective Edge in the summer of 2014, there were no significant anti-Israeli expressions or demonstrations, aside from the extremist web sites.

### **Slovakia**

The activities and impact of extremist groups or persons must often be seen on a larger perspective which would enable to evaluate ongoing trends on a longer time framework. Such an approach should be applied in evaluating the fluctuations in the influence and presence of extremism in Slovakia.

As it was noted in Anti-Semitism Worldwide 2013, the most significant development in 2013 in Slovakia was the election in November of Marian Kotleba, the former head of a banned neo-Nazi party, Slovak Togetherness and currently the leader of the People's Party – Our Slovakia, as Governor of the Banska Bystrica region, (see, Martin Ehl, The Triumph of Extremism in Slovakia, Transitions Online, 26 November 2013). Extremist sites celebrated the event, hailing it as a "monumental victory for the European people as a whole, and Slovakia in particular...the hardcore nationalist Marian Kotleba won 55.5% of the votes".(Daily Stormer, 24 November 2013) This electoral victory was significant, as in the last two parliamentary elections the People's Party-Our Slovakia gained only a marginal number of votes, while the increase in regional support raised the alarm among civil society in Slovakia. While direct antisemitic remarks were few, Kotleba's movement openly praises the war-time regime of Tiso, and challenges the idea that Tiso's regime bore responsibility for the country's crimes against Jews during the Holocaust. Observers have noted the increased influence in the movement of some elements from the Catholic Church. (Transitions Online, 25 November 2013) The movement is openly racist against the Roma- a major social and political issue in Slovakia, as in Hungary. The party platform refers to the "need to ensure safety in the surroundings of Roma settlements and to fight "unfair favoritism of Gypsy parasites". (Open Society Foundations, 4 December 2013) The major significance of the regional victory in the Banska Bystrica region was the possibility of a growing impact of right-wing extremism in Slovak mainstream politics, by the election of an extremist politician as regional governor, impact on regional politics, that, like the Hungarian Jobbik, indicates signs of growing extremism among Slovak voters; at the EU level – there is yet another indication of the strengthening of extremist parties and movements, not on the fringes of political life, but enjoying wider support from frustrated elements in society.

During the period under review - from late 2013 to spring 2015, Kotleba's activities in the Banska-Bystrica region focused on divisive local issues – local scandals, facing charges

of financial irregularities, anti-EU, anti-US statements, but generally he has refrained from voicing extremist ideas, while never backtracking from his original ideas. Thus, his influence may, in the long run, become a danger to democratic stability, as an extremist politician riding high on the wave of xenophobia and historical revisionism may gradually gain more respectability and acceptance not only by fringe groups, but by more mainstream segments of public opinion, as a "normal politician".

The attempts to rehabilitate Tiso and his wartime regime are a constant feature of Slovak antisemitism and historical revisionism, as noted in the past researches of Pavol Mestan, the Director of the Museum of Jewish Culture in Bratislava (see Antisemitism Worldwide of the past two decades).

A yearly test for the impact of revisionist ideas is the yearly march in Bratislava commemorating the March 1939 foundation of the wartime Nazi allied puppet state led by Jozef Tiso. A march by neo-Nazis took place in March 2014, commemorating the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the "independent" Slovak State was as usual countered by a demonstration and supported by Bratislava's mayor. (Slovak Spectator, 17 March 2014) A similar demonstration in March 2015 in Bratislava did not result in clashes between the extremists commemorating the wartime Fascist state and an anti-fascist counter demonstration, as the two groups were separated by the police. (Slovak Spectator, 16 March 2015) The counter-protest was organized by the "Bratislava without Nazis Initiative".

Antisemitic rhetoric, also among Catholic priests continued. A Slovak priest, Emil Floris said, in a mass in Cadca, Northern Slovakia, that the Jews are to blame for their Holocaust, and the same may happen to the Romanies (Gypsies). In his speech, the cleric not only used antisemitic clichés but warned that because of the behavior of the Roma – "who abuse system and the charity of the people", the same may happen to them. The speech of the Catholic priest was condemned among others, by Lucia Kollarova, the spokeswoman of for the Jewish Religious Communities in Slovakia. (see Prague Post, 16 September 2014)

It should be noted that extremism in Slovakia focuses on the one hand on historical revisionism, defending the record of the fascist puppet Slovak state led by Jozef Tiso, and discrimination against the Roma population.

The Slovak government and society is continuing to cope with the country's role in the Holocaust of Slovak Jewry. In a meeting marking the 73<sup>rd</sup> anniversary of the introduction of anti-Jewish legislation, Prime Minister Robert Fico apologized for Slovakia's actions during the Holocaust and spoke on the "mad ideas of fascism". ( see Prague Post, 10 September 2014) Those deeds, declared Fico, bring everlasting shame on those who participated in them. At the same time, they are a strong warning against it ever happening again". The meeting was attended by President Andrej Kiska and Pavel Paska, the Speaker of the Parliament.

According to the official Slovak viewpoint, "while the amount of racially motivated crime is in decline, extremists are adopting increasingly sophisticated ways of spreading their message online". (see, Government taking note of online extremism in Slovak Spectator, 21 March 2015) Racist discrimination and spread of hatred is shifting from the street to the virtual domain, according to the official view. The number of extremist crimes is decreasing; in 2014 police reported 40 crimes, compared to 54 such crimes reported in 2013. (ibid)

As in other former communist countries in Central and Eastern Europe, there were no significant anti-Israeli, antisemitic events related to Operation Protective Edge in summer 2014.

Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign and European Affairs, Miroslav Lajcak visited Israel in November 2014, and in his talks with Israeli Foreign Minister, Avigdor Lieberman, both sides confirmed the "excellent level of bilateral relations".