

ANTISEMITISM AND RACISM IN HUNGARY

BRIEFING

FEBRUARY 2019

This briefing consists of

1. Summary
2. Positive action regarding Jewish Life in Hungary
2. Hungarian Government support for Israel
3. Concerns about racism and antisemitism in Hungary
4. Relations between the Hungarian Government and the Federation of Hungarian Jewish Communities (Mazsihisz)

1. Summary

Whilst we are pleased that the Hungarian Government says that it is dedicated to strengthening Jewish life in Hungary and that it has an excellent relationship with the State of Israel, there are serious criticisms from the Hungarian Jewish community, which we echo.

Positive:

- The Hungarian Government says it is committed to strengthening Jewish life at home and abroad, e.g. investing millions of dollars in synagogues and cemeteries.
- Hungary hosted the World Jewish Congress in 2013, was the president of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) in 2015/2016 and will host the European Maccabi Games this year.
- The Hungarian Government has a very good relationship with the State of Israel. PM Netanyahu has “excellent personal relations” with his Hungarian counterpart PM Orbán.
- The Hungarian Government and the Federation of Hungarian Jewish communities describe their relationship as collaborative and positive.
- The Hungarian Government says it’s “dedicated towards a true and meaningful Holocaust-remembrance policy.
- The Hungarian Government says it has a “zero tolerance against antisemitism”.
- The Hungarian Government says that is worried about increasing antisemitism on the left.

Negative:

- PM Orbán called Miklos Horthy, former Hungarian statesman, who was partly involved in the deportation and annihilation of Hungarian Jews, and other Hungarian leaders as “exceptional statesmen”.
- According to Yad Vashem, the new Holocaust Museum, which is funded by the Hungarian Government, will “whitewash” Hungary’s own crimes.
- PM Orbán used antisemitic language and tropes against George Soros in his campaign.
- Calling migrants “a poison” and referring to refugees as “Muslim Invaders” are highly problematic.

3. Positive action regarding Jewish Life in Hungary

- The Hungarian Government has put significant funding into the restoration of synagogues, leading to reports of a “Jewish revival” in Budapest. This has come in the form of major government grants, such as \$14.5 million (£11.18 million) for the renovation of the magnificent, 19th Century Rumbach Street Synagogue in the Pest district and \$2.5 million (£1.9 million) for the Salgotarjani Street Jewish Cemetery.
- In October 2016, PM Orbán attended the opening of the new MTK Budapest stadium. Despite the hostility of the local supporters to him and his right-wing, conservative Fidesz party, and the loud booing, he spoke at length about the historic club’s Jewish roots. The stadium will host the opening ceremony of the 2019 European Maccabi Games, which the Orbán government is rightfully proud of. The Hungarian Government has allocated over 30 billion forints ((£79.7million) for infrastructure development projects required for the Maccabi Europe Games Budapest which was announced in June 2017.¹ The UK will send a delegation of around 200 participants accompanied by CST.
- Chabad (the Unified Hungarian Jewish Congregation) has become very close to the Hungarian Government and largely supports the policies of the Hungarian government. Chabad and their organisations are – naturally – important parts of the Hungarian Jewish community, but the Federation of Hungarian Jews Communities fear that Chabad is elevated to the sole representative of Hungarian Jews.
- Under PM Orbán, Chabad has been the recipient of government funding, which has, among other things, allowed it to acquire and refurbish the magnificent Óbuda Synagogue.

¹ <https://dailynewshungary.com/hungarian-government-allocates-huf-30-bn-2019-maccabi-european-games/>

4. Hungarian Government support for Israel

- The Hungarian Government under PM Orbán has been a staunch defender of Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu and the State of Israel².
- Paying a reciprocal visit to Israel a year after hosting Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in Budapest, PM Orbán reaffirmed that Hungary would show “zero tolerance” for antisemitism.
- Netanyahu called him “a true friend of Israel”. PM Orbán said close Israeli-Hungarian ties were due to his “excellent personal relations” with Netanyahu.
- Pledging to cooperate in “anything related to the war against antisemitism”, PM Orbán said the phenomenon was on the rise in Western Europe and on the decline in Eastern Europe and also took the form of “utterances against the State of Israel”.

5. Concerns about racism and antisemitism in Hungary

- **March 2014:** A global survey published by the Anti-Defamation League found that around 40% of Hungarians hold antisemitic views. This compares to 12% in the UK, 16% in Germany and 17% in France.³
- **December 2015:** The Hungarian Government cancelled plans for the memorial to Balint Homan, a known antisemite and Nazi collaborator after international pressure. It was to provide the majority of funds for the life-size bronze statue in the central town of Szekesfehevar.⁴
- **August 2016:** The U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum slammed the decision by the Hungarian Government to grant a prestigious award to Zsolt Bayer, a journalist long criticized for articles deemed racist and antisemitic. He has referred to Jews as ‘stinking excrement’ and has written hateful pieces about the Roma.⁵
- **May 2017:** European Commission First Vice President Frans Timmerman, a centre-left Dutch politician, agreed when asked if he thought PM Orban’s comments sounded antisemitic.⁶
- **July 2016:** PM Orbán calls migrants “a poison”.⁷
- **June 2017:** PM Orbán praises ex-leader Miklos Horthy, who oversaw persecution of Jews before and during the Holocaust calling them “exceptional statesmen”.⁸
- **January 2018:** PM Orbán refers to refugees as “Muslim Invaders”.⁹

² <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-israel-hungary-orban-netanyahu/hungarys-orban-tells-israel-that-jews-in-his-country-can-feel-safe-idUSKBN1K919F>

³ <https://forward.com/news/breaking-news/195096/40-of-hungarians-hold-anti-semitic-views-polls/>

⁴ <https://www.timesofisrael.com/us-hails-hungarys-decision-to-cancel-statue-for-nazi-collaborator/>

⁵ <https://jewishnews.timesofisrael.com/award-for-racist-hungarian-writer-sparks-anger/>

⁶ <https://www.jta.org/2017/05/05/global/eu-official-hungarian-prime-ministers-crusade-against-george-soros-is-anti-semitic>

⁷ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jul/26/hungarian-prime-minister-viktor-orban-praises-donald-trump>

⁸ <https://jewishnews.timesofisrael.com/hungarian-jews-criticise-prime-ministers-praise-for-hitler-ally/>

⁹ <https://www.jpost.com/Diaspora/Antisemitism/Hungary-PM-Muslim-refugees-invaders-Soros-statesman-without-a-state-533337>

- **June 2018:** Two-thirds of Hungarian Jews believe antisemitism is a serious problem in their country.¹⁰
- **2018:** The numbers of reported incidents are quite low and there is only one reported physical assault in 2018. However, the EU's recent survey of Jews in Hungary found:
 - 26% responded that anti-Semitism is "a very big problem" and another 51% said it was "a fairly big problem."
 - 24% worry about being harassed and 13% worry about being physically attacked
 - These numbers indicate that the problem is worse than the reported number of incidents would indicate, especially since only 8% reported antisemitic harassment to authorities, the lowest rate in the 12 countries surveyed.
 - On the government response side, only 14% of Hungarian Jews think the Hungarian Government is effectively combating antisemitism.¹¹
- **March 2018:** PM Orbán uses antisemitic language in his long-term campaign against George Soros:
 - *"We are fighting an enemy that is different from us. Not open, but hiding; not straightforward but crafty; not honest but base; not national but international; does not believe in working but speculates with money; does not have its own homeland but feels it owns the whole world."*¹²
 - According to the ADL¹³: "The right-wing government of Viktor Orbán in Hungary has attacked Soros for years, claiming that he seeks to undermine Hungary's national ethos. The vehemence of the anti-Soros campaigns is chilling. For example, a slew of posters that appeared in Budapest last summer [2017] reminded many observers of Nazi-era propaganda used to stir up hatred and violence against Jews... A person who promotes a Soros conspiracy theory may not intend to promulgate antisemitism. But Soros' Jewish identity is so well-known that in many cases it is hard not to infer that meaning. This is especially true when Soros-related conspiracy theories include other well-worn antisemitic tropes such as control of the media or banks; references to undermining societies or destabilizing countries; or language that hearkens back to the medieval blood libels and the characterisation of Jews as evil, demonic, or agents of the antichrist."
- **September 2018:**
 - Aurora (Budapest's Masorti-run community centre) has said that the Hungarian authorities are trying to close it down as soon as possible.¹⁴ The

¹⁰ <https://www.timesofisrael.com/hungarian-jews-see-anti-semitism-as-a-serious-problem-survey-finds/>

¹¹ Correspondence with ADL.

¹² https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/democracy-post/wp/2018/04/12/europes-craven-conservatives-are-making-the-same-mistake-as-trumps-republicans/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.e2f043a6b763

¹³ <https://www.adl.org/blog/the-anti-semitism-lurking-behind-george-soros-conspiracy-theories>

¹⁴ <https://edition.cnn.com/2018/12/26/europe/hungary-orban-aurora-ngos-intl/index.html>

- pro-Hungarian government media has slated the Auróra project as a “Soros drug den”.¹⁵
- Now Aurora, which rents office space to a handful of NGOs -- including LGBTQ and Roma support groups -- says it has been pushed to the brink of closure by far-right attacks, police raids and municipality moves to buy the building.
 - Marom, Masorti movement's (Conservative Judaism) organisation for students and young adults, issued a statement condemning the Hungarian Government.
 - Today the Aurora is home to several NGOs -- including the Roma Press Centre, an independent news agency, and the Invisible School, which assists local disadvantaged children. Budapest Pride, an LGBTQ support group, moved into the Aurora the very first day it opened.
 - In the past the US Embassy tried to help without any success. **The Hungarian Government claims that municipalities act independently.**
- **October 2018:** The Hungarian Government announces it is funding a new Holocaust Museum in Budapest. According to Yad Vashem¹⁶, the museum will “whitewash” Hungary’s own crimes:
 - “The museum clearly avoids addressing the role and responsibility of... Hungarian leaders of that era for the plight of the nation’s Jews, and their eventual abandonment to the hands of Nazi Germany,” – Robert Rozett, Director of the Yad Vashem Libraries. It also seeks to gloss over the role of ordinary Hungarian citizens, he said. “It is implied that Hungary was actually a nation of rescuers. This is a grave falsification of history.”
 - **December 2018:** After a sustained campaign against Central European University (CEU), it will close down in Budapest and move to Vienna¹⁷. The Hungarian Government passed the so-called ‘CEU law’ in April 2017, which aimed to restrict the ability of foreign-accredited universities to operate in Hungary. In December 2018, the Hungarian Government refused to sign an agreement allowing it to continue operations in Hungary. This is connected to the ongoing campaign against George Soros (as he funds the university) and refugees and migrants (as the university had offered programs for registered refugees and asylum seekers¹⁸).
 - **December 2018:** Andras Heisler, head of the Federation of Hungarian Jewish Communities (Mazsihisz), was featured, surrounded by banknotes, on the front page of Figyelo, a magazine that supports Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán.

¹⁵ <https://www.thejc.com/news/world/hungary-s-masorti-run-community-centre-says-the-authorities-are-trying-to-close-it-down-1.470551>

¹⁶ <https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-hungary-holocaust-museum/hungarys-new-holocaust-museum-divides-jews-faces-whitewash-accusations-idUKKCN1MT1R4>

¹⁷ <https://www.ceu.edu/article/2018-12-03/ceu-forced-out-budapest-launch-us-degree-programs-vienna-september-2019>

¹⁸ <https://www.insidehighered.com/quicktakes/2018/08/29/central-european-u-suspends-programs-refugees>

When Ronald Lauder, president of the World Jewish Congress, wrote to Orbán to raise concerns about this, Orbán replied¹⁹: *“I am surprised however that you are asking me to limit the freedom of speech and the freedom of press... Despite all my respect for you, I cannot fulfil such a request... I am also confused by the fact that you seem to grab a pen and paper only.”*

6. Relations between the Hungarian Government and the Federation of Hungarian Jewish Communities (Mazsihisz)

The Hungarian Jewish Federation describes its relations with the Hungarian Government as good but has made some notable criticisms.

1. Immigration Policy

The Hungarian Jewish Federation raised concern over the immigration crisis and “uncontrolled immigration” to Europe:

- i. *“We don’t think it is a good practice that many hundreds of thousands of people walk uncontrolled across European countries. This poses a huge risk and the consequence of uncontrolled movements are unpredictable.”*

The Hungarian Jewish Federation clearly stated that human rights and dignity needed to be respected:

- ii. *“Beside the strong control the human rights and human dignity must be taken into consideration at each and every migrant. The Jewish community thinks it is important to handle this situation in a humane way not only due to laws of the Torah but also because of our historical experience.”²⁰*

2. Calling out xenophobia and revisionism

The Hungarian Jewish Federation expressed concern regarding the use of hate speech. No matter who is being targeted, e.g. Gypsies, homosexuals, Muslims, migrants or Jews, hate speech needs to be called out.

- i. *“Hatred is a sickness of the society that can spread rapidly as a virus from one minority to another.”²¹*

¹⁹ <https://www.i24news.tv/en/news/international/europe/190456-181207-orban-dismisses-jewish-leader-s-request-to-limit-freedom-of-speech>

²⁰ In correspondence with the Hungarian Jewish community. President Andras Heisler.

²¹ “”

- **July 2017:** Andras Heisler wrote an open letter to PM Orbán asking him to stop the newly launched anti-Soros campaign and to remove the anti-Soros billboards from the streets. The Federation did not imply that campaign was antisemitic but indicated that its effects may generate antisemitic impulses. In his response PM Orbán defended the stance of the government and Hungary's right to 'self-defence'.
- **July 2017:** The Hungarian Jewish Federation urged Orbán to halt his antisemitic campaign against Soros²²
 - Orbán responded angrily: "*I do not expect either thanks or recognition for our fight against illegal migration, but a modicum of assistance from your community would be appreciated*"²³
- **January 2018:** The Hungarian Jewish Federation condemned a senior member of PM Orbán's Fidesz party for participating in a memorial for a Nazi-allied wartime leader on Holocaust Remembrance Day.²⁴
- **June 2018:** PM Orbán made in which he described Miklós Horthy, Hungarian admiral and statesman during the Holocaust, and other Hungarian leaders as "exceptional statesmen" for leading the country after the traumatic disintegration of the Austro-Hungarian Empire after World War I.²⁵
- **December 2018**²⁶: The head of the World Jewish Congress on Sunday called on PM Orbán to publicly condemn an anti-Semitic image on the cover of a pro-government magazine.

7. Board of Deputies recent engagement on this issue

- **April 2018**²⁷: The Board of Deputies expressed concern at the messages at the heart of Orbán's election campaign.
- **June 2018:** Senior Vice President, Dr Sheila Gewolb, and International Relations Officer, Marius Bischoff, met the Hungarian Ambassador Kristóf Szalay-Bobrovniczky at the Hungarian Embassy to discuss Hungarian-Jewish relations, and the Hungarian election campaign. Sheila Gewolb expressed concern about PM Orbán's rhetoric, particularly in the 'Stop Soros' Campaign prior to his re-election in April 2018.

²² <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-hungary-soros-orban-jews/hungarian-jews-ask-pm-orban-to-end-bad-dream-of-anti-semitism-idUSKBN19R24L>

²³ <http://abouthungary.hu/news-in-brief/pm-orban-to-head-hungarian-jewish-communities-a-modicum-of-assistance-would-be-appreciated/>

²⁴ <https://www.timesofisrael.com/hungary-jews-angered-by-rightwing-memorial-on-holocaust-day/>

²⁵ <https://www.timesofisrael.com/israel-accepts-hungarys-clarification-over-pms-praise-for-nazi-allied-wwii-leader/>

²⁶ <https://www.timesofisrael.com/jewish-leader-urges-orban-to-condemn-anti-semitic-image-on-hungarian-magazine/>

²⁷ <https://twitter.com/BoardofDeputies/status/983388160272027650>

- **September 2018**²⁸: The Board of Deputies raised concerns that British Conservative Party MEPs voted in defence of Hungary's populist, right-wing government of Viktor Orbán in the European Parliament.
- **September 2018**: Hungarian Ambassador Kristóf Szalay-Bobrovniczky sent a letter to Sheila Gewolb protesting over the recent statement by Board of Deputies President Marie Van der Zyl.
- **December 2018**²⁹: Board of Deputies offers support to Hungarian Jews following antisemitic attack in pro-government magazine.
- **January 2019**³⁰: The Board of Deputies held a meeting with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office to relay concerns about antisemitism and human rights in Hungary and backing the campaign to protect Aurora Jewish community centre in Budapest.
- **January 2019**³¹: Jewish News reported that president Marie van der Zyl vows to challenge Hungarian minister in controversial meeting
- **February 2019**³²: Hungary's UK Ambassador Szalay-Bobrovniczky responded to a Jewish News report about concerns over his country's treatment of its Jewish population.
- **February 2019**³³: The Board of Deputies released a press statement in which it raised concerns in meeting with Hungarian Secretary of State, Vince Szalay-Bobrovniczky.
- **February 2019**³⁴: The Guardian reported that Hungary tells UK Jewish group to 'mind its own business' over antisemitism.

²⁸ <https://twitter.com/BoardofDeputies/status/1040159462584143872>

²⁹ <https://twitter.com/BoardofDeputies/status/1069169609041985537>

³⁰ <https://twitter.com/BoardofDeputies/status/1083053501775777794>

³¹ <https://jewishnews.timesofisrael.com/board-president-vows-to-challenge-hungarian-minister-in-controversial-meeting/>

³² <https://jewishnews.timesofisrael.com/opinion-your-report-was-a-betrayal-of-hungarys-good-work/>

³³ <https://www.bod.org.uk/board-of-deputies-president-raises-concerns-in-meeting-with-hungarian-secretary-of-state/>

³⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2019/feb/13/hungary-tells-uk-jewish-group-to-mind-its-own-business-over-antisemitism>