

Building tOlerance, uNderstanding
and Dialogue across communities

Antisemitism Report **POLAND**



Executive Summary

Antisemitism is still a significant problem in Polish society. This is the conclusion that emerges from the quantitative data from previous years and the statements of our interviewees. Within the Jewish community, members often report encountering antisemitism in the form of unsavoury jokes and stereotypes rather than overt discrimination. However, conversations around the Holocaust and Polish-Jewish history frequently lead to antisemitic stereotypes and hate speech. Interestingly, the Holocaust is often the subject of jokes. This may be attributable to the perception of Jews as a historical minority who once lived in Poland.

In educational settings, courses on the Jewish community are overwhelmingly historical, primarily focusing on World War II. Almost all respondents, except non-Jewish youth, agree that contemporary Jewish topics are seldom covered in schools. This gap in multicultural education has led to a lack of understanding about non-discrimination and minority-related issues across various age groups in Polish society.

While younger generations appear to be more tolerant toward minorities and more open to learning about them, the term "Jew" is still reportedly used as an insult among them. Discrimination is not limited to the Jewish community; focus group respondents also identified Ukrainians, Roma, people of colour, and the LGBTQ+ community as other discriminated groups. Despite the majority of focus group participants being women, only one person in each group cited women as a discriminated-against minority.



Introduction

The project and the research

The BOND (Building tOLerance, uNderstanding and Dialogue across communities) project is being implemented between January 2023 and December 2024 in Hungary, Italy, Poland, and Romania. It aims to address the deep-rooted prejudices, hate attitudes and behaviours of society, particularly towards European Jewry. The project also aims to promote understanding, tolerance, and dialogue. Particular emphasis is put on raising young people's awareness of Judaism and antisemitism and on fostering intercultural and inter-religious dialogue. The research was carried out as one of the first steps of the BOND project. Both the project and the research use the definition of antisemitism adopted by the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA). All phases of the research were completed until September 2023, so events after October 7, 2023, and their impact are not included.

The research aimed to provide a comprehensive picture of antisemitism in Poland as a basis for further project activities. The research had limitations: it was conducted within the timeframe and scope defined in the project and with topics relevant to the project's further activities.

Methodology

We employed a multi-method approach that included two parts: desk research and field research. The desk research summarised available literature on the topics identified in the project concerning Poland published in the last ten years. In the field research, we aimed to complement the desk research results by conducting individual and focus group interviews with representatives of previously defined target groups. In June 2023, five focus groups were conducted with the following groups: Jewish leaders, including five women and one representative from various organisations;

Jewish secondary school-aged youth, consisting of two women and two men; national and ethnic minority leaders, comprising five women from minority groups and one representative from various organisations; educators, encompassing five teachers – four women, one man – from small towns in Lubelskie Voivodeship; non-Jewish secondary school-aged youth from small towns in Lubelskie Voivodeship, comprising three women and two men. In total, 20 women and five men participated in the focus groups. In July 2023, four individual interviews were conducted with key experts with specialized knowledge in antisemitism and other forms of intolerance, including one woman and three men. These interviewees ranged from academics and practitioners to a participant in the Future Leaders Program, a religious leader from a non-Jewish community, and a minority community leader. On average, these individual interviews lasted 87 minutes.

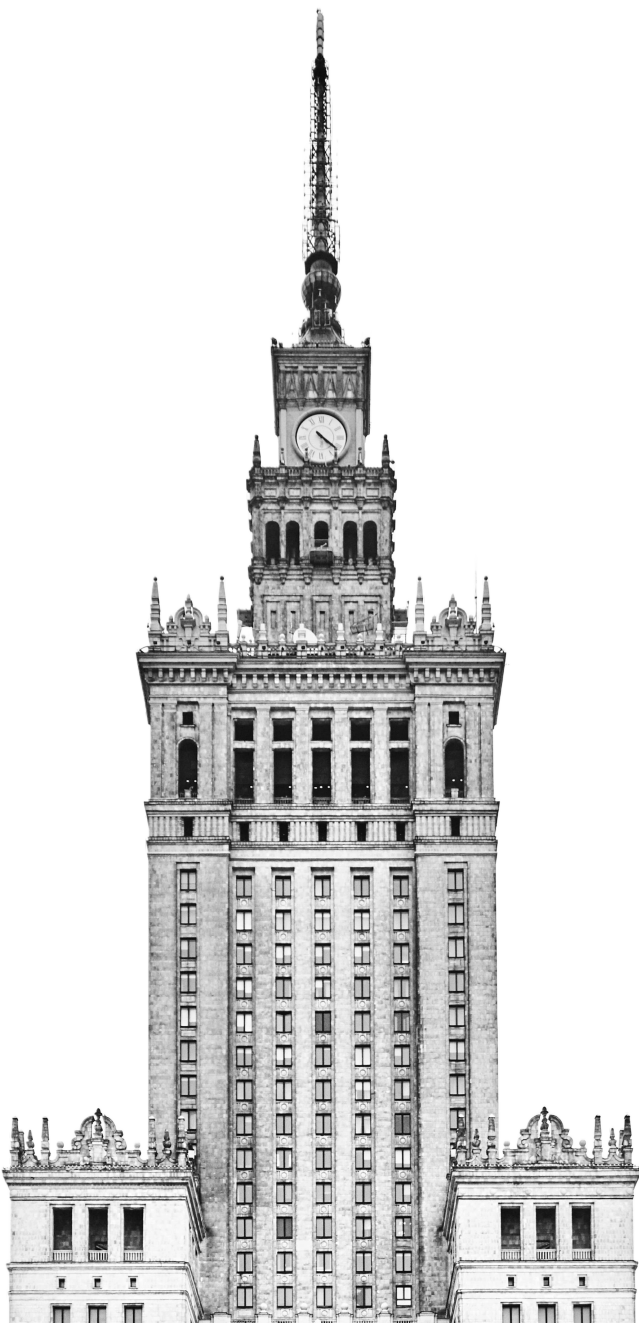


The situation of the Jewish communities in Poland

Historically, Poland had a significant Jewish population dating back to the tenth century, contributing to the country's cultural, economic, and political life. Jewish autonomy was established in the thirteenth century. However, their emancipation varied under different occupying powers after 1795.

In the interwar period, Polish Jews were officially citizens but often faced discrimination. Before World War II, Polish Jews comprised around 10% of the population, but the Holocaust tragically reduced their numbers by around three million. Post-WWII emigration further decreased the size of the community. According to the 2011 census about 8,000 people identified as Jewish in Poland, a small fraction of the total population of 38.5 million. According to the 2021 census, this number has significantly increased, with 17,000 people identifying as Jewish. This increase may be attributed to the option of selecting more than one national identification in the latest census.

Data on the socio-economic status of Polish Jews is limited, but they are primarily urban, secular, and assimilated into mainstream Polish culture. According to the interviewees, the Jewish community does not stand out from Polish society in terms of social, political, and economic status. During the interviews, an expert specialising in the study of antisemitism and other forms of intolerance mentioned, based on his observations, that there is a notable presence of Jews in the IT department. In terms of education level, Jews were said to be no different from the Polish society in general. The results of the field research showed that Jews do not stand out from society in appearance either. Sometimes, they even hide signs suggesting they belong to the Jewish community. Consequently, their belonging to the community is only revealed in conversation if someone asks.



Antisemitism in Poland

Level and trend of antisemitism in society

Antisemitism is still a significant problem in Polish society. This is the conclusion that emerges from the quantitative data from previous years and the statements of our interviewees. According to a study from 2012, antisemitism is a complex issue consisting of three elements: traditional prejudice, secondary prejudice, and belief in a Jewish conspiracy. Traditional prejudice, rooted in historical religious motives, involves beliefs such as Jews using Christian blood ritually or bearing responsibility for Christ's death. Secondary antisemitism is subtler, it includes denying one's anti-Jewish biases, downplaying the Holocaust, and sometimes holding Jews accountable for it while viewing the Holocaust as a tool for Jewish advantage. Holocaust denial and distortion play a significant role in this form of antisemitism, justifying antisemitic beliefs by accusing Jews of fabricating history. This denial can be both "hard" (rejecting the historical truth of the Holocaust) and "soft" (covertly questioning aspects of it). Essentially, the legacy of the Holocaust, which includes those forms of denial and distortion, is used to perpetuate antisemitism. Belief in a Jewish conspiracy is associated with the view that Jews secretly try to control the world order. It is a form of modern antisemitism, centering around the idea that Jews seek power. It attributes unity and secrecy to them. In Poland, secondary antisemitism and conspiracy antisemitism were relatively widespread in 2021. This is evidenced by high averages on scales measuring these attitudes, while traditional antisemitism was less present. On a scale where the maximum value was seven, the average score for secondary antisemitism was 3.39, suggesting a moderate level of secondary antisemitic beliefs among the study participants. Similarly, the average score for conspiracy antisemitism was also 3.39, indicating a moderate level of belief in antisemitic conspiracy theories. In contrast, the mean score for traditional antisemitic beliefs was lower at 1.96. This suggests that participants showed, on average, a lower level of belief in traditional antisemitic ideas compared to secondary and conspiracy antisemitism. Antisemitic attitudes in Poland are, to some extent, also linked to criticism of Israel.

Anti-Israel attitudes are most correlated with conspiracy antisemitism. However, survey results indicate that even a traditional form of prejudice can reinforce resentment toward Israel.

In 2021, researchers observed a general decrease in the level of antisemitism in Poland, but this change varied across different types of antisemitic attitudes. While acceptance of traditional antisemitic views increased significantly in 2017 compared to 2014, there was a substantial decline in these attitudes by 2021. The changes in antisemitic sentiment appear to be primarily linked to the socio-political climate within the nation. Secondary antisemitism, on the other hand, remained relatively stable from 2009 to 2021, indicating that modern forms of antisemitism appear to be resistant to socio-political changes. As for the belief in a Jewish conspiracy, the trend declined until 2014 but experienced an uptick in 2017 before declining again in 2021.

It seems interesting that most respondents (80%) of the Polish Prejudice Survey from 2021 declared that they did not personally know any Jews. Over the period 2009-2021, the level of declared contact did not change much. This context is noteworthy because it highlights the presence of strongly negative attitudes toward a group whose members Poles rarely experience personally. This phenomenon is referred to in research on antisemitism as 'antisemitism without Jews.'



Limited data exists on the correlation between the COVID-19 pandemic and antisemitism in Poland. The topic of the significance of the pandemic for antisemitic attitudes practically did not appear in the interviews. However, a report on social trends among Poles during the pandemic revealed heightened emotions toward minority groups and increased levels of disgust directed at these groups. According to a study published in 2021, in terms of positive sentiments towards outgroups, Jews did not receive high rankings among Polish individuals. They were situated in the middle of the scale regarding being associated with feelings of disgust. Hence, the survey implies a need for improvement in expressing positive emotions towards Jews. On a global scale, antisemitic incidents during the COVID-19 pandemic have been notably prevalent in Europe – and thus presumably also in Poland – accounting for nearly 50% of incidents against minority groups in 2021. Since the onset of the pandemic in 2020, conspiracy theories have emerged linking Jews or the State of Israel to COVID-19, suggesting they benefit from global suffering. Antisemitism and hate speech have notably surged on social media platforms. There has been an alarming increase in the trivialisation of the Holocaust, with Holocaust symbols used in protests against COVID-19 measures, accompanied by inappropriate comparisons of pandemic restrictions to the persecution of Jews.

In reports listing which demographic characteristics are relevant to the expression of antisemitism, gender is one of the significant factors. The results show that men express antisemitic attitudes more often than women. Factors such as age, level of education, and income also, to some degree, contribute to holding antisemitic beliefs. Antisemitism is more often expressed by older people, those with lower levels of education, and people with lower incomes. In our field research, participants expressed concern about overtly problematic actions, such as cemetery vandalism and the appearance of swastikas. They underscored the absolute inappropriateness of such acts and the necessity to confront them.

Nevertheless, the interviewees highlighted a deeper unease stemming from ambiguous remarks, often beginning with 'I don't have anything against Jews, but...' and expressions of nostalgia for the pre-war Jewish community that do not translate into active support for today's Jewish population. The participants cited statements where Poles professed acceptance of Jews only if they remained inconspicuous in public spaces. To summarise, there seems to be an affection for Jews as long as they are out of sight, not encountered face-to-face. This reveals a stark lack of interaction with the Jewish community. Antisemitic attitudes, it appears, are rooted in fantasy, myths, and perhaps a fear of real-life contact.

Antisemitic stereotypes, prejudices, conspiracy theories

A study conducted by The POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews revealed dominant narratives and language used to discuss Jews in contemporary Poland. The research involved the analysis of a wide range of materials, including newspaper articles, tweets, books, films, television series, covers and graphics from 1950 to 2022. The study identified ten main themes in these narratives. One major theme was the belief in the existence of a 'Jewish lobby', closely linked to the actions of the State of Israel and the global Jewish diaspora, particularly in relation to their claims to pre-war property. Other common narratives included the belief that Jews contributed to a negative image of Poland, a belief that Jews refused to acknowledge the hospitality of Poles and their shared victimhood during the war. There were also conspiracy narratives that portrayed Jews as secret agents linked to Freemasonry, global conspiracies, and the global leftist movement. Finally, some narratives blamed Jews for all negative world events, associating them with concepts such as disease, corruption, and danger.

The findings from the field research confirmed the existence of the prejudices mentioned above and stereotypes about Jews that are prevalent in Poland. The respondents' examples were consistent with the desk research outcomes, illustrating several prevalent misconceptions. Firstly, according to the interviewees, there is a persistent stereotype associating modern Jews with the death of Jesus Christ. Additionally, there are beliefs attributing exceptional intelligence and an ability to navigate life successfully to Jews, which can be a veiled form of conspiratorial antisemitism. Common stereotypes also encapsulate the notion that Jews are somehow not genuine Poles and the idea that they are inherently smarter and wealthier. A common erroneous assumption is that all Jews adhere to Orthodox traditions, which leads to the misconception of the Jewish community as a strictly Orthodox sect.

The interviewees suggested that there is a form of cultural antisemitism in Poland, particularly related to stereotypes associating Jews with wealth (e.g. the belief that Jews always have money, unjustly but cunningly earned). These stereotypes have been deeply rooted in Polish culture for many years. Some people may not even recognise these cultural codes as antisemitic, further illustrating the normalisation of these beliefs in society. The stereotype of Jews having money is so vivid in Poland that some people do not consider it antisemitic.

The most common conspiratorial antisemitic narratives center around claims that Jews pursue domination over financial institutions, the global economy, and even the entire world and that they act secretly. Jewish interviewees faced similar conspiracy theories in our field research. The belief they most commonly mentioned is that influential global corporations and economic dynamics are invariably under the control of Jews or other mystical forces, with the presumption of a Jewish presence coordinating these movements extending into political and economic spheres since 1989. It was also an interesting observation that some conspiracy theories contradict perceptions of Jews in other countries, such as the US. Interviewees explained that in Poland, the stereotype of Jews secretly ruling the country has been combined with the same content regarding Freemasonry, while the two groups in the USA are their opposites.

These findings align with the results of the POLIN's research. Their analyses also repeated narratives showing Jews as members of influential groups such as Freemasonry or simply as the elite of society. Beliefs based on historical context were also mentioned during the field research. One of these is the belief that Jews, as police officers, collaborated with the communist authorities and arrested Poles. It was clarified that the majority of police officers were Poles, and a small percentage were Jews. Nonetheless, there is an association of Jews with the security forces. Another conspiracy theory holds that the Holocaust either did not occur or that it was the responsibility of Jews. The last example brought up during the interviews stems from a myth propagated within the Catholic community, which is the baseless narrative that Jews abduct Christian girls to use their blood for ritual purposes.

Antisemitic hate speech and hate crime

According to a survey from 2016, Jews are one of the most disliked groups in Poland. In 2017, a survey on hate speech found that approximately two-thirds of respondents had experienced hate speech directed towards Jews. Surprisingly, comments directed at Jews were considered the least insulting compared to hate speech against Ukrainians and refugees.

The research from 2021 indicates a slight correlation between all forms of antisemitism and respondents' education level, age, and political preferences. Specifically, individuals with lower education levels, older respondents, and those identifying as 'right-wing' politically tend to exhibit a higher propensity for expressing antisemitic views. People who are more educated and from large cities have more contact with hate speech and are more sensitive to it and perceive it as more offensive.

Antisemitism on the political level

For the last eight years, right-wing parties, particularly Law and Justice (PiS), have dominated Polish politics in terms of antisemitic narratives, with a focus on maintaining Poland's and the Polish people's reputation. These narratives tend to be protective, centered around the Holocaust, World War II, and relations between Poles and Jews. Right-wing politicians highlight the mutual victimisation of Poles and Jews during the Second World War and blame the Germans for this victimisation. While acknowledging Polish involvement in the Holocaust, some politicians of Law and Justice view instances of Poles killing Jews as the actions of a demoralised social minority. In addition, certain narratives allege that Jews were complicit in their tragic fate by collaborating with the perpetrators. The last debate on this topic in Poland in 2018 came with a proposed amendment to the Act on the Institute of National Remembrance. In this debate, besides the arguments mentioned above, appeared a narrative that Jews were responsible for crimes committed against Poles in the period after World War II.

Right-wing parties are particularly characterised by expressions of prejudice and the use of hate speech. However, our interviewees pointed out that all political parties, to a comparable degree, insinuate the Jewish origin of their opponents to deprive them of the trust of voters. One expert explained that the significant aspect of this narrative is that both the political right and left employ the term "Jew" as an insulting epithet. This suggests that individuals engaged in politics when faced with disagreement, are derogatorily labelled as Jewish. This is an example of antisemitism that relies on creating a connotation between a sense of untrustworthiness, Jewish origin, and a particular politician.

Results of the field research showed that politicians use prejudice and hate speech against minority groups in political discourse as a strategy to gain the support of citizens. Therefore, hateful narratives by politicians are particularly common during election periods. These statements align with the findings of a study conducted in August and September 2023, which monitored the prevalence of hateful content on public television during the pre-election period.

The study revealed that content relating to Jews ranked fourth in terms of frequency amongst hateful content relating to all the examined minorities. Some politicians exploit these prejudices to gauge public reactions and gain attention from citizens. Antisemitism frequently ranks among the top three or four issues in public discussions, often coinciding with anti-LGBTQ+, anti-refugee, or anti-immigrant narratives. Notably, there is an overlap between antisemitism and anti-Muslim sentiments. Often, multiple biases against different groups, most commonly antisemitism, anti-LGBTQ+, and anti-refugee sentiments, are publicly highlighted simultaneously.

Antisemitism in the sporting sphere

Despite the small size of the Jewish minority in Poland, a significant portion of the population still displays antisemitic attitudes, which is particularly evident in football stadiums where the term 'Jew' is frequently used in a derogatory sense. Research on antisemitism in Polish football culture classifies and analyses information related to this problem, revealing that it often occurs in cities with a history of Polish-Jewish coexistence and lingering tensions. Various forms of antisemitism are identified within football, with a notable focus on the intense relationship between fans and the figure of the "Jew" as a means of expressing contempt and hatred. This phenomenon stands as a striking example of antisemitism in an environment devoid of Jewish individuals.

The interviewees also mentioned so-called soccer fan antisemitism. In Poland, a distinction is made between soccer fans who are interested in sports and those who exhibit aggressive behaviour and treat the context of a match as a battlefield or an excuse to lash out. In these fan communities, popular chants and shouts often include antisemitic hate speech. The popularity of these antisemitic phrases, particularly evident on the internet, was also pointed out during our interviews.

Perception of antisemitism in the Jewish community

When answering the questions on personal experiences with antisemitism and other forms of intolerance against minority groups, Jewish participants of our field research recalled their first experiences. They stated that when experiencing antisemitism, they were unaware of what they faced and only felt internal objections without knowing why or how to react. Those encounters took place in school or at the university. Presently, the respondents are mostly faced with antisemitism online. Holocaust distortion was the most common example of antisemitism among respondents' non-Jewish friends. A widespread form of antisemitism was anti-Israeli attitudes expressed both by the right and the left side of the Political sphere and predominantly by younger people prone to misinformation and fake news. However, the fear of antisemitic attacks was not very high among all the Jewish respondents, even though only 20% have experienced it in recent years. All the attacks they have experienced in recent years were verbal and carried out by random strangers and as a result of "going public". The experiences described include an instance where a respondent's Jewish identity was revealed online, leading to an online hate attack. Another respondent encountered a passerby who bumped into her and expressed frustration by hostile shouting. Additionally, an intoxicated man yelled while passing by a synagogue on a Saturday night. These incidents illustrate various forms of discrimination and hostility faced by individuals due to their Jewish identity.

Interestingly, respondents indicated that Poles react to someone being Jewish with surprise and confusion highlighting a significant lack of awareness about interacting with members of minority groups in Poland. Verbal forms of antisemitic attacks resulted in feelings of surprise, fear, and anger in the victims. To cope, they sometimes resort to humor as a defense mechanism to lessen the sting of such encounters, paradoxically giving their aggressors an opportunity for self-reflection and potentially a path to redemption.

However, this leaves the victims burdened with feelings of distress and desolation. Moreover, respondents noted an increased sense of alertness following such incidents, which is further intensified by media coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Antisemitic slurs, slogans, and tropes about Jews are popular and firmly embedded in the Polish language. As a result, many antisemitic sayings and expressions are present. According to the interviews, the most common are: "Jews have money and influence.", "Jews all know each other.", "They are always behind political events.", and the accusations of Israel being a terrorist country and occupier.

According to respondents participating in the field research, talking about the Holocaust in Poland and the Polish-Jewish history always results in mentioning antisemitic stereotypes and hate speech. The interviewees also spoke about the handling of antisemitism by the Jewish community and its leaders. Interviewees noted that some Jews do not read certain attitudes as discrimination (e.g. football chants or everyday catchphrases with antisemitic content). The reason may be that they have experienced such attitudes too often and are used to them. This process of getting used to antisemitism can sometimes also play the role of managing the fear of being harassed. That is, when experiencing hate speech or antisemitic behaviour, members of the Jewish community explain it to themselves as being common.

To cope with antisemitic harassment, some members of the Jewish community attempt to normalize these encounters and emotionally distance themselves from the attacks. Additionally, there are efforts within the Jewish community to mitigate future harassment by engaging with local residents. They are establishing inclusive environments aimed at fostering familiarity and positive interactions. Some synagogues have opened up their spaces to the neighbourhood, organizing social and cultural events, as well as various activities, to promote community and understanding.

Enmity against other minority groups in the country

Poles' attitudes toward various minority groups have fluctuated over time. Until 2013, they were becoming more open toward Jews, Romas, and Ukrainians, but from 2014 to 2017, there was a decrease in acceptance. In 2021, positive attitudes toward these minority groups increased again. Meanwhile, from 2016 to 2021, acceptance of refugees and homosexuals also changed, with the largest increase in acceptance in 2021. Still, the most rejected in 2021 were refugees, Roma, and homosexuals.

Field research identified Ukrainians as the minority group most frequently affected by discrimination, with Russians, Belarusians, and ethnic and religious minorities such as Roma and Muslims also significantly impacted. LGBTQ+ individuals, women, and people of colour were mentioned with comparable frequency. Additionally, several responses highlighted discrimination faced by people with disabilities and those who are non-neurotypical. The respondents attributed the decline in minority conditions after 2015 to a political crisis and the use of propaganda characterised by hateful and divisive rhetoric. The situation deteriorated with the arrival of Syrian refugees at the Belarusian border and the ongoing conflict in Ukraine, leading to increased hostility towards the Russian minority in Poland. This hostility has expanded to include prejudices against other groups, with narratives falsely accusing Chechens and Belarusians of supporting Russia, contributing to civilian attacks on these communities and escalating discrimination against refugees, Ukrainian Roma, and Russian-speaking Ukrainians.

Summarising the field research findings, the most prevalent prejudices and stereotypes depict minorities as a nuisance and as entitled to special treatment. This results in feelings ranging from annoyance to outright hostility. Ukrainian men are often told to go home and fight in war. Ukrainian women are accused of taking social benefits from Poles and destroying Polish marriages. Roma are called Gypsies and portrayed as thieves who dishonestly make money. Representatives of the LGBTQ+ community are dehumanised; for example, gay men are accused of harming children.

Similar accusations are directed at people of colour. The last group, women, are considered unstable, hysterical, unprofessional, and assigned to the role of mother.

Field research has led to the conclusion that the most prevalent form of prejudice manifestation is the use of hate speech on social media. The frequency of different types of prejudice reported was fairly uniform across the focus groups, with each group identifying a distinct type of prejudice as most prevalent. This variance could be attributed to the groups' more frequent exposure to certain types of prejudice. The most frequently observed form of prejudice was identified as everyday, casual antisemitism, characterised by telling antisemitic jokes and using offensive language. Respondents noted that while any minority could be subjected to attack, the absence of discourse about a minority is also perceived as discriminatory. This neglect is rooted in a tendency among the Polish majority to perceive society as homogenous, with a mindset that 'others' are viewed negatively and 'their problems are not ours to solve'. This marginalisation extends beyond religious or ethnic minorities to include individuals with disabilities, who face exclusion at educational, social, and political levels. Respondents also reported that hate speech is widely accepted in society and that prejudices exist throughout the population. According to them, biases and a lack of anti-discrimination sensibility are prevalent among teachers, who are unwilling to open up and learn.



Antisemitism prevention in education

Topics related to Jewry, antisemitism, and the Holocaust in the official educational curricula

Before the collapse of Communism, Polish students lacked awareness of Jews' prevalence in various Polish towns; however, the existence of death camps for Jews on Polish land was largely present in school curricula. Since 1989, Holocaust education has been mandatory in Poland but not as a standalone subject. Recently, there has been a trend towards historical denial and revisionism, attempting to diminish the historical involvement of Polish citizens in antisemitic pogroms. Legal restrictions and international criticism have prompted concerns regarding the quality and accuracy of Holocaust education in Poland, particularly under the Law and Justice government which is perceived as conservative and nationalist.

Drawing from our field research, in Polish schools, the topics of Jews, antisemitism, and the Holocaust are introduced, primarily within history and Polish language classes. Mandatory readings cover subjects like pogroms in Poland and the Holocaust. However, the depth of discussion and explanation of these topics to students largely depends on individual teachers. Personal experiences with compulsory readings in school, such as "Mendel Gdański" by Maria Konopnicka and "Medaliony" by Nałkowska, provided the first exposure to the concept of pogroms during education and were recalled in the field research as quite shocking.

Educational materials and activities addressing antisemitism

According to the interviewees' experience, numerous academics, researchers, educators, and leaders within the Jewish community are actively engaged in combating antisemitism. They create and utilise various resources, including reports on antisemitism in Poland as well as educational materials about Israel.

The interviewees emphasised the importance of countering antisemitism through improved education that offers accurate information about Jews and their history. They also recommended organising events that facilitate interactions between Poles and members of minority groups. Another effective approach would be to invite Israeli experts to participate in university conferences to foster closer connections and dispel hostility. Additionally, creating materials to help identify hate speech and prejudice is essential. Notably, there is a need for specific Polish examples of Holocaust denialism tailored to the linguistic and social context and aligned with the statements of public figures. This localised approach would address the unique aspects of the issue within the Polish context.



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