

# Reflections on the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) survey of Jewish people's experiences and perceptions of antisemitism

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## Introduction

This paper outlines JPR's initial reflections on the findings contained in the new European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) report about antisemitism in Europe. It contains four sections:

1. Background to the study and JPR's involvement in it;
2. A summary of the key findings;
3. A note about data reliability;
4. Our view of how the data should be read and understood.

## 1 / Background

The new study of Jewish people's perceptions and experiences of antisemitism was commissioned and managed by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA),<sup>1</sup> and conducted by

the Institute for Jewish Policy Research and Ipsos MORI,<sup>2</sup> after the JPR/Ipsos MORI team won the project in a competitive tender process.

The FRA is one of the European Union's decentralised agencies providing expert advice to the institutions of the EU and its Member States on a range of issues. The FRA's particular expertise is in working to ensure that the fundamental rights of people living in the EU are protected, and it is in this context that it conducts research on discrimination and hate crime against various minority groups. This particular study focuses on Jews and aims to generate data to support work designed to protect the fundamental rights of Jews across the continent. It is the second such study that the FRA has undertaken about Jews – the previous one, also conducted by JPR and Ipsos MORI, took place in 2012, and the findings were published by the FRA in 2013.<sup>3</sup> JPR also produced a series of follow-up reports using the dataset in the interim.<sup>4</sup>

1 See: [www.fra.europa.eu/en](http://www.fra.europa.eu/en)

2 See: [www.ipsos.com/ipsos-mori/en-uk](http://www.ipsos.com/ipsos-mori/en-uk)

3 See: [www.jpr.org.uk/publication?id=3041](http://www.jpr.org.uk/publication?id=3041)

4 Staetsky, L. D. and Boyd, J. (2014). *The exceptional case? Perceptions and experiences of antisemitism among Jews in the United Kingdom*. London: Institute for Jewish Policy Research; DellaPergola, S. and Staetsky, L. D. (2015). *From old and new directions: perceptions and experiences of antisemitism among Jews in Italy*. London: Institute for Jewish Policy Research; and Dencik, L. and Marosi, K. (2017). *Different antisemitisms: perceptions and experiences of antisemitism among Jews in Sweden and across Europe*. London: Institute for Jewish Policy Research.

JPR's specific role in the new study was to provide expert input on the social scientific study of Jewish populations in Europe and how to measure levels of antisemitism. The core London team – consisting of Dr Jonathan Boyd (JPR Executive Director and project director on the JPR/Ipsos MORI team), Dr Daniel Staetsky (Senior Research Fellow and academic lead on the team) and Richard Goldstein (Director of Operations and deputy project manager on the team) – working with eleven other academic specialists in European Jewry, undertook detailed socio-demographic analysis of the Jewish populations of each of the participating countries, advised on questionnaire development, built and developed the relationships with Jewish community leaders and professionals to help promote the survey, created and managed the survey marketing campaign, monitored and assessed the data gathering process and adjusted the marketing campaign accordingly, and assessed the dataset to advise the FRA on data weighting and analysis.

The work undertaken by all three organisations involved in the project – the FRA, JPR and Ipsos MORI – has resulted in the largest and most extensive study of Jews in Europe ever undertaken. It consists of 16,395 observations across twelve countries (Austria, Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Spain, Sweden and the UK),<sup>5</sup> and it constitutes the best dataset we have ever seen on European Jewry.

## 2 / What are some of the key findings?

As the Director of the FRA, Michael O'Flaherty, notes in the introduction to the report, the results make sobering reading.<sup>6</sup> **85% of Jews surveyed across the twelve countries consider antisemitism to be either a 'very big' or 'fairly big' problem in their country**, and with the single exception of Italy, they place it in the top three social and political problems in the country

when examined alongside racism in general, crime levels, unemployment, immigration, intolerance towards Muslims and government corruption. In four countries – Belgium, Denmark, France and the Netherlands – Jews position it as the greatest problem on that list. **Almost 90% of respondents across all countries surveyed say they feel that levels of antisemitism have increased in their country over the past five years**, with the highest proportions found in France, Poland, Belgium and Germany. **Most Jews (72%) also feel that intolerance towards Muslims has increased over the same period.**

Asked about the specific contexts in which they believe antisemitism to be a problem, there is unanimous agreement across all countries that **the online environment, particularly social media, is most noxious**. In most cases where the results can be compared with those from 2012, **concerns about the levels of online antisemitism have increased over the past five years**. Other arenas also regarded as particularly problematic across Europe were the street, in the media and in political life.

The ideas European Jews are most likely to consider antisemitic include **Holocaust denial and minimisation** and claims that Jews deliberately exploit **Holocaust victimhood** for their own purposes. However, the antisemitic ideas that European Jews are most likely to encounter include **comparisons between Israelis and Nazis** and contentions that Jews have too much **power** in their country. Half (51%) of those sampled report that they have heard non-Jewish people express the former idea in the past twelve months, and 43% the latter. Again, they are most likely to encounter these views online.

**28% of Jews surveyed say that they have experienced some form of antisemitic harassment in the past twelve months** – online, via email, text message or phone, involving offensive comments or gestures, or someone

5 An additional 200 responses were also gathered in Latvia, but due to differences in the ways in which the data were collected there, the results have been reported separately.

6 See: [www.fra.europa.eu/en](http://www.fra.europa.eu/en)

loitering in a way that felt threatening. Harassment is found to be most common in Germany, the Netherlands and Belgium, and least common in the UK, France and Italy. When asked to categorise the person or people involved in perpetrating these incidents, it is quite common for respondents to be uncertain, but 'someone with a Muslim extremist view' features regularly, particularly in Austria, Belgium, Germany, Denmark, France, the Netherlands and Sweden, as does 'someone with a left-wing political view' in Denmark, Spain, Italy, Sweden and the UK. 'Someone with a right-wing political view' is most likely to be identified as a perpetrator in Hungary and Poland, although it also scores quite highly in Austria and Italy.

**24% of Jews surveyed say they have witnessed other Jews being verbally insulted, harassed and/or physically attacked in the past year, and 20% say that a family member of theirs has been subjected to an experience of this type over the same period. On average, almost half of all respondents (47%) say they are worried about becoming a victim of antisemitic harassment themselves, and even more (56%) say they are worried about their friends or family members falling victim to this.**

According to those who have experienced an incident involving antisemitic harassment, **most (close to 80%) of these incidents go unreported.** Reasons cited for not reporting such incidents most commonly include 'nothing would change' as a result, the incident was 'not serious enough,' or inconvenience.

Perceived levels of **discrimination against Jews** are found to be highest in Germany and Poland, and lowest in Hungary, Italy, Sweden and the UK.

**71% of Jews surveyed across the twelve countries say they avoid wearing, carrying or displaying items in public, at least on occasion, that could identify them as Jewish, although the proportions doing this all the time are much lower, in the range of 2–9% depending on the country investigated. Jews are most likely to do this in France, Denmark and Sweden. 38% say they have considered emigrating from**

**the country in which they live over the past five years because they do not feel safe there as a Jew,** with the highest proportions found in Germany, France and Belgium.

**Most (70%) give a rather scathing assessment of their government's efforts to combat antisemitism,** maintaining that these are either 'probably' or 'definitely' ineffective, although the governments of Denmark, Italy, France and the UK come out better than others. By contrast, the Polish, Hungarian, Spanish and Swedish governments come out particularly badly.

### 3 / Are the results reliable?

In JPR's assessment, the results reflect the opinions of Jews who are engaged in Jewish community life, as well as those who have some degree of connection with a Jewish organisation, however fluid and irregular. The attitudes of self-identifying Jews who have no connection with any part of the Jewish community in their countries are likely to be relatively underrepresented in the findings. A survey of this type could, in theory, over-sample Jews with a particular interest in antisemitism, but significant efforts were made to avoid this in preparation for and during the fieldwork phase, and subsequent tests undertaken on the dataset indicate that, to the extent that such bias exists, it has negligible consequences for the results. In short, given the challenges of surveying Jews – a small, geographically-skewed, difficult to reach and rather difficult to define group – and given the challenges of achieving high response rates in any social survey conducted among any group today, we believe that the results are highly indicative of mainstream Jewish opinion across Europe. Further methodological details can be found in the FRA report (pp.73–78).

### 4 / Reflections on the findings

European Jews are clearly anxious about antisemitism and believe it to be on the increase. They are particularly encountering it online, but significant proportions are also finding it on the

street, in the media and in politics. The forms of antisemitism they may encounter differ somewhat from country to country – in former communist countries such as Hungary and Poland, it retains a right-wing, nationalist flavour; in countries with longer democratic histories, it tends to be informed more by far-leftist and Islamist ideas. Many Jews appear to be cautious about wearing their Jewishness 'on their sleeves'; they are aware that doing so can attract unwanted attention, so they take precautions, at least on occasion, to avoid this. Some are sufficiently concerned to be contemplating emigration from the countries in which they live, to some extent at least, although other data on Jewish migration indicate that the numbers actually acting on this remain rather low in most countries.

However, in assessing the results, it is important to locate this study in the wider context of other research on antisemitism in order to determine whether the perceptions and experiences of Jews found here align with other research findings on this topic. This study adopts a particular approach to measuring antisemitism – namely, by investigating what Jewish people think – but there are other methods, notably examining attitudes towards Jews in the wider society, counting the number of antisemitic incidents that are reported within a given timeframe, and exploring demographic sources, for example on migration, to determine whether any unusual patterns can be observed.

Studies of general attitudes towards Jews are often interpreted quite bleakly too, with some justification, but careful analysis reveals that Europeans are considerably more likely to hold favourable views of Jews than unfavourable ones, although many hold no opinion either way. Indeed, the recent study conducted by ComRes for CNN shows that favourable attitudes towards Jews outweigh unfavourable attitudes by between three and seven to one depending on the country observed.<sup>7</sup> The exception in this instance is Hungary where opinion is essentially equally divided, although most Hungarians are

neutral on the issue. Yet somewhat strangely, Hungary comes out of the new FRA survey rather better than it did in the previous one – Jews there appear to feel a little more comfortable there than they did five years ago – suggesting that more needs to be understood in this particular case.

Antisemitic incident data<sup>8</sup> also tend to be analysed despondently and rather downplayed when the findings reveal a reduction in counts; indeed, in mainstream Jewish discourse, there is a common assumption that incidents are happening with increasing regularity. Yet it is difficult to prove this empirically; by necessity, these figures can only be based on the numbers of incidents *reported*, rather than the number that actually take place. On the one hand, the high levels of non-reporting found in the FRA survey demonstrate that studies investigating antisemitic incidents significantly undercount the numbers of incidents that actually occur, although it is worth noting that hate crime data against all groups suffer from the same problem. On the other hand, the fact that the FRA survey finds that many of these incidents appear to involve online harassment and are not reported because they are not considered sufficiently grave to merit it, further helps to cement research findings showing that much of what is occurring involves nasty comments that cause upset and discomfort, rather than violent physical assaults. It seems that much of the antisemitism that exists in Europe today manifests itself in general discourse and culture – Jews appear to be saying that the nature of that discourse feels increasingly uncomfortable and threatening.

The findings about online antisemitism may well help to explain why temperatures are rising so much. In the age of social media, Jews are much more likely to hear about any antisemitic incidents that take place than would have been the case in the past, and this dynamic almost inevitably heightens anxieties. Furthermore, as was revealed in the JPR/Community Security Trust study of attitudes towards Jews and Israel published last year, antisemitic ideas are diffused far more widely across society than assessments of how

7 See: [www.comresglobal.com/polls/cnn-anti-semitism-in-europe-poll-2018](http://www.comresglobal.com/polls/cnn-anti-semitism-in-europe-poll-2018)

8 See, for example, [cst.org.uk/data/file/e/5/Incidents%20Report%20January-June%202018.1532518541.pdf](http://cst.org.uk/data/file/e/5/Incidents%20Report%20January-June%202018.1532518541.pdf)

many antisemitic people exist suggest, so in the online environment, the probability of encountering antisemitic comments is quite high.<sup>9</sup> Thus, the conversation about antisemitism is becoming more fraught and threatening in part because of the new means of communication that exist, and much more work needs to be done to understand how these affect levels of anxiety, and the extent to which fluctuations in concern reflect perceived changes in antisemitism, or actual changes.

The high levels of anxiety found in the FRA survey should also be cross-referenced with data examining Jewish migration from Europe. These indicate that the numbers that are leaving are low and steady in many cases – for example, from the UK, Germany and Hungary.<sup>10</sup> However, the case of Jews from elsewhere – particularly from France – tells a different story. In response to the Islamist terrorist attacks that have taken place there, over 23,000 French Jews have emigrated to Israel over the past five years, about 5% of the whole, and an unknown number of others have left for other destinations. Whilst numbers have declined over the past two years following the spikes of 2014 and 2015, the French picture demonstrates what is likely to happen if terrorism against Jewish targets, particularly of the jihadist type, is not stopped firmly in its tracks. Given the number of deadly attacks that have taken place in recent years, Jews across Europe are right to be concerned, and their broader experiences of direct low-level harassment, irrespective of where it comes from, only serve to exacerbate their anxieties. The added factor of a political discourse in several EU Member States that questions Jewish loyalties, condemns Jewish values and sensibilities, doubts Jewish people's motives or runs roughshod over Jewish history, further aggravates the situation, irrespective of whether it comes from the left or the right.

So policy makers reviewing the FRA data should take the findings extremely seriously. The fact that so many Jews regard antisemitism to be a problem in their countries and that so many

believe the problem is becoming worse over time, should serve as a wake-up call not only for governments, political parties and policy makers working throughout Europe, but for European society as a whole. It is unconscionable that a long-established minority on the continent – indeed, a minority that has been based in Europe for as long as, if not longer than much of the so-called indigenous population – should feel so vulnerable and uncomfortable. The FRA findings suggest that something is awry in contemporary Europe, despite all of the noble and virtuous efforts that have been made to protect people's fundamental rights over many years. These efforts do appear to have reduced levels of discrimination against Jews from officialdom, but the new FRA findings suggest that there remains an ambient culture that, in some places more than others, is experienced by Jews as inhospitable, even chilling. It is worth noting that the Jewish population of Europe has declined dramatically over the past 150 years: a century and a half ago, Europe's Jews constituted almost 90% of all Jews in the world; today they comprise less than 10%. If fears continue to grow among this small and ageing population, it is likely that only a tiny remnant will remain. For all Europe's claims of promoting a culture of liberalism, tolerance and human rights, the experience of the continent's oldest minority today stands in sharp contrast to these aspirations. It's time to start asking why.

9 See: Staetsky, L. D. (2017). *Antisemitism in contemporary Great Britain. Key findings from the JPR survey of attitudes towards Jews and Israel*. London: Institute for Jewish Policy Research.

10 See: Staetsky, L. D. (2017). *Are Jews leaving Europe?* London: Institute for Jewish Policy Research.

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