

Young Jewish Europeans: perceptions and experiences of antisemitism

Summary of findings

July 2019

JPR's study, drawing on data we gathered in 2018 for the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA), paints an unprecedented portrait of young Jewish Europeans today. It explores the nature of their Jewishness, their attachments to Israel and their perceptions and experiences of antisemitism. The full report was published by FRA, the European Commission and JPR, and launched at the European Commission in Brussels in July 2019.

Having been part of European life for hundreds of years and contributed in many ways to the construction of Europe's cultural, political, economic and social fabric, Europe's Jewish population has now been in a state of numerical decline for a century and a half. Decimated by genocide and driven away by persecution, poverty and the promise of a better life elsewhere, the surviving remnant now constitutes less than 10% of the world's Jewish population, down from 90% of the total in the second half of the nineteenth century. Moreover, Jewish Europeans today are disproportionately old – their age structure is top heavy – and while precise age distributions remain uncertain at a continental level, relatively few are part of the generation of young adults.

Nevertheless, over a million Jews live within the countries of the European Union (EU) today, most notably in France, the United Kingdom, Germany and Hungary. The young Jewish adults among them constitute a vibrant, well-educated group, with strong roots in Europe and strong attachments to the countries in which they live. With close to 80% of them born in the European countries

where they currently reside, and almost 90% holding citizenships of those countries, Europe's young Jews are very much part of Europe, much like their forebears.

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JPR's report, commissioned by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) and sponsored by the European Commission, focuses on these young adults. The age band is defined here as those aged between 16 and 34 years, and the study frequently contrasts them with two other age bands (35–59-year-olds and 60-plus year-olds) to identify similarities and differences. Its particular interest in young adults is because they represent the future of Europe's Jews. They are the generation that has grown up and come of age both in the aftermath of the Maastricht Treaty, and in a context that has seen resurgent antisemitism in different parts of Europe, sometimes from the far-right, sometimes the far-left, and sometimes in the form of Islamist terrorism. In many respects,

they hold the keys to the future of Jewish life in Europe, as well as to the possibility of creating and maintaining a unique European form of Judaism and to the potential of bringing the best of Jewish tradition, culture and insight to help build the Europe of tomorrow. The decisions they take – not least, whether to remain in Europe and be part of the project to strengthen it, or to leave Europe out of fears for their safety as Jews – will speak volumes about the nature of Europe and its ability to absorb and respect cultural difference.

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The European Union and its Member States are required by law to do everything in their power to combat antisemitism effectively and to safeguard the dignity of the Jewish People. Yet as two recent surveys of discrimination and hate crime against Jews in the EU, both commissioned by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA), clearly show, the persistence and prevalence of antisemitism hinder people’s ability to live openly Jewish lives, free from fears for their security and well-being.¹ The second of these surveys focused on the experiences and perceptions of antisemitism among Jews living in twelve EU Member States – Austria, Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Spain, Sweden and the United Kingdom. It was the largest study ever conducted among Jews in Europe and, like the first study, was undertaken by a consortium of the UK-based Institute for Jewish Policy Research and the international research agency, Ipsos. The follow-up report summarised here, which focuses

specifically on the young Jewish Europeans within that dataset, was written by the Institute for Jewish Policy Research for the FRA and the European Commission.

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The study demonstrates that young Jewish Europeans are able to practice their Judaism reasonably freely: high proportions report celebrating Passover and fasting on the major Jewish holiday of Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement) and having strong Jewish identities. However, much like their parents and grandparents, the memory of the Holocaust looms large within their identities, alongside their connections to Jews both near and far – to their families, to Israel, and to the Jewish People as a whole. Belief in God plays a less important role for them. While higher proportions of young Jewish Europeans report having a stronger religious identity than the older two cohorts, for many, their Judaism is about being part of a people, a culture and a civilisation, with a long history and a strong moral code.

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Yet in spite of their deep roots in Europe and their general ability to participate in Jewish life, they see a great deal of antisemitism around them. Four in five believe antisemitism to be a problem in their countries, and the same proportion believes the problem to have deteriorated in recent years.

1 European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) (2013), *Discrimination and hate crime against Jews in EU Member States: experiences and perceptions of antisemitism*, Luxembourg, Publications Office of the European Union (Publications Office); and FRA (2018), *Experiences and perceptions of antisemitism: Second survey on discrimination and hate crime against Jews in the EU*, Luxembourg, Publications Office. See also GESIS Data Archive, Cologne, ZA7491 Data file Version 1.0.0, doi:10.4232/1.13264.

They feel similarly about racism in general, and indeed, intolerance towards Muslims. Many see antisemitism in the media, in political life and on the street, and almost all see it online and on social media – it is in these contexts that most consider it to be an existing and growing problem.

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Moreover, young Jewish Europeans are considerably more likely than either of the other two older cohorts to experience antisemitism. Remarkably, close to half of our sample of young Jewish Europeans said they had experienced at least one antisemitic incident in the previous twelve months. While most of these incidents involved harassment rather than violence, the figures paint a portrait of a community living in a context imbued with regular doses of antisemitic hostility. On occasion, this hostility spills over into violence: 4% of our sample experienced a physical antisemitic attack in the previous year, and about half of these incidents were not reported to the police or any other authority.

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Many of these incidents were perpetrated by a ‘teenager or group of teenagers,’ or a ‘colleague from work or school/ college’. This raises a question about the extent to which this is happening within the university sector – 56% of the young Jewish Europeans in this sample were students in the year prior to the survey. In many cases, antisemitism has a distinctly religious or ideological flavour: young Jews report that one third of all cases of antisemitic harassment, and over half of the cases of antisemitic violence they have experienced in the past year, were perpetrated by ‘someone with a Muslim extremist view’. About one in five point to ‘someone with a left-wing political view’, and about one in seven to ‘someone with a ‘right-wing political view’. Elevated levels of antisemitic sentiment among Muslims, the far-left and far-right have been found in existing research, and whilst much antisemitic sentiment exists elsewhere in society, these forms of antisemitism are of greatest concern.²

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The place of Israel within antisemitism is often contested, particularly concerning where the line should be drawn between reasonable and legitimate criticism of its government, and clear and indisputable antisemitic prejudice. Yet taken as a whole, young Jews are clear on this: most reject the notion that general criticism of Israel is antisemitic and, indeed, are more likely to do so than the older two cohorts. But sizeable majorities clearly believe it becomes so when manifested in particular ways – for example, in boycotts of Israel or Israelis and, even more so, in drawing comparisons between Israelis and Nazis.

² See, for example, Staetsky, L. D. (2017), *Antisemitism in contemporary Great Britain. A study of attitudes towards Jews and Israel*, London: Institute for Jewish Policy Research and Community Security Trust.

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More generally, the Arab-Israel conflict clearly affects their feelings of safety as Jews. Nine in ten of the young Jewish Europeans in the sample report that it affects their feelings of security to some degree at least. Close to four in ten say it does ‘a great deal’. Four in five say that people in their countries accuse or blame them for anything done by the Israeli government, at least occasionally; for a quarter of young Jewish Europeans, this happens ‘all the time’. This is a phenomenon affecting Jews of all ages, but again, younger Jews are found to be most likely to experience it.

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Understanding Jewish sensitivities to these issues is essential to combating antisemitism today. Israel matters to many young Jewish Europeans. Nine in ten have been there, and three quarters have family or relatives living there. Close to 20% have lived there for at least a year of their lives or were born there. But the connection runs much deeper. For three-quarters of those in our sample, Israel constitutes an important part of their Jewish identities – it is part of what they understand their Jewishness to be about. Thus, attacks on Israel – certainly particularly hostile ones with clear resonances of antisemitic canards – feel personal and prejudicial. In Jewish terms, Israel is the cradle of Jewish civilisation, the place from which Jews were expelled two thousand years ago and yearned to return to throughout the following centuries until the establishment of the modern State of Israel in 1948. That story of dispersal and return, especially

bearing in mind the long history of prejudice, discrimination and genocide Jews experienced in the interim, particularly in Europe, has a significant bearing on Jewish self-understanding today.

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Given this reality, alongside their perceptions and experiences of antisemitism today, it is unsurprising to find evidence of anxiety among young Jewish Europeans. While they are more likely than the older two cohorts to wear, carry or display items that indicate that they are Jewish, they are also more likely than them to refrain from doing so. This seeming paradox indicates two elements of contemporary Europe. On the one hand, the efforts that have been made in many Member States to protect the fundamental rights of minorities appears to have given some young Jews the confidence to express their Jewishness in public. On the other hand, the tensions that exist around minority rights, immigration, and particularly the Arab-Israel conflict, sometimes create a context in which significant proportions of young Jews feel compelled to hide their Jewishness out of fears for their safety.

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At present, the numbers of Jewish Europeans emigrating from Europe because they feel unsafe in their countries are fairly low and stable – with the most obvious exception of France, where recent counts have been much higher than average, although significant increases can also be seen among Jews from Belgium and Italy. As is the case with migration in general, it tends to be younger people who take this step than older ones. And strikingly, four in ten of the young Jewish Europeans in this sample say they have considered emigrating from the countries in which they live because of their fears for their safety as Jews. Of these, a third say they have made active plans to do so – most to Israel. While actual migration figures suggest that only some of these will act on these plans, these data are clearly indicative of the levels of concern, or perhaps resignation, felt by many young Jews in Europe today. Few feel enough is being done by their governments to combat antisemitism effectively, although they are more generous in their acknowledgements of the efforts their governments

have made to respond to the security needs of Jewish communities.

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The findings in our work ought to give pause for thought for policymakers across the EU and provide them with evidence to refine existing, or devise new, courses of action to prevent and counter antisemitism. The results are also relevant to civil society organisations concerned with ensuring the security of Jewish communities or with preventing and fighting antisemitism, as well as those working towards supporting fair and just societies.

The **Institute for Jewish Policy Research** is a London-based research organisation, consultancy and think-tank. It aims to advance the prospects of Jewish communities in the United Kingdom and across Europe by conducting research and informing policy development in dialogue with those best-placed to positively influence Jewish life.



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