

Growing Antisemitism in Western Europe, heyday in Hungary

30th of March 2023

Executive summary:

The largest Jewish community per capita in the EU lives in France, followed by Hungary. The subjective and the objective measures regarding the safety and wellbeing of the Jewish community show very different trends in these two countries. Antisemitism is increasing in countries with a relatively small Jewish population. Perceptions of antisemitic feelings point out that individuals from France, Belgium, Sweden and Germany are particularly concerned about the increasing animosity. In France, Sweden and Germany the number of antisemitic incidents show an increasing trend, while in Hungary it has been decreasing in the past years.

Most cases of antisemitic incidents are linked to extremist Muslims or left-wing political views. Not surprisingly, most individuals who chose to emigrate to Israel are from France, while the smallest immigrant community stems from Hungary.

Hungary and the Hungarian government have been accused of antisemitism for several years now, mostly by the press¹ and in the so called Sargentini Report.² However, the latest infamous accusation was made by the US Ambassador to the United Nations, when she mistakenly stated that “a Holocaust memorial was vandalised in Hungary” and built a case rightly condemning countries where “hatred is fuelled not only by extremist groups, but also by mainstream political leaders, popular celebrities and people in positions of power.³ The incident, in fact, took place in another European country, thousands of miles away from Hungary – in Sweden, where the Raoul Wallenberg memorial was defaced in Stockholm. Still, official apologies were not offered to Hungary.

¹ Philip Stephens: “Viktor Orban’s Hungary crosses to Europe’s dark side. The campaign against George Soros digs up the demons of anti-Semitism” *Financial Times*. 13. 07. 2017 Online: <https://www.ft.com/content/2032f1c2-66e5-11e7-8526-7b38dcaef614>

² Judith Sargentini: Report (2017/2131(INL)). *European Parliament A8-0250/2018*. 04.07.2018. https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-8-2018-0250_EN.pdf

³ Márton Losonczi: “US Ambassador Mistakenly Accuses Hungary of Antisemitism in Embarrassing UN Debacle”. *Hungarian Conservative*. 15.02.2023. Online: https://www.hungarianconservative.com/articles/current/us_ambassador_un_hungary_jewish_mistake_debacle/

The intentions of the speaker were praiseworthy – antisemitism should not be tolerated, and measures need to be introduced against any of its manifestations. However, in Hungary, it is predominantly present in extremist groups⁴, and the number of antisemitic incidents is decreasing. Moreover, according to the Israeli ambassador to Hungary, Hungary is one of the safest countries for Jews in the EU.⁵ However, antisemitism in Western Europe is alarmingly increasing. The aim of this paper is to examine the major trends of antisemitism in selected European countries with large Jewish populations.

Perceptions of growing antisemitic feelings in the European Union

Years after the Charlie Hebdo massacre and the killings of kosher supermarket customers in Paris in January 2015, there is an increased sense of threat among the Western European Jews. In 2018, a survey regarding perceived antisemitism was conducted by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) in twelve EU countries (Austria, Belgium, Germany, Denmark, Spain, France, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, the Netherlands, Poland, Sweden) and the United Kingdom. These countries are the home for over 90 percent of the European Jewish population. The study concluded that more than one in three European Jews have considered emigrating over the past five years because they no longer feel safe amid rising anti-semitism.⁶ The sense of insecurity was particularly acute among Jews in France, Belgium and Germany. According to the survey, in average, 63 percent of respondents considered that in the past five years antisemitism has increased greatly: the greatest increase was measured in France (77 percent) while the lowest was in Hungary (31 percent).

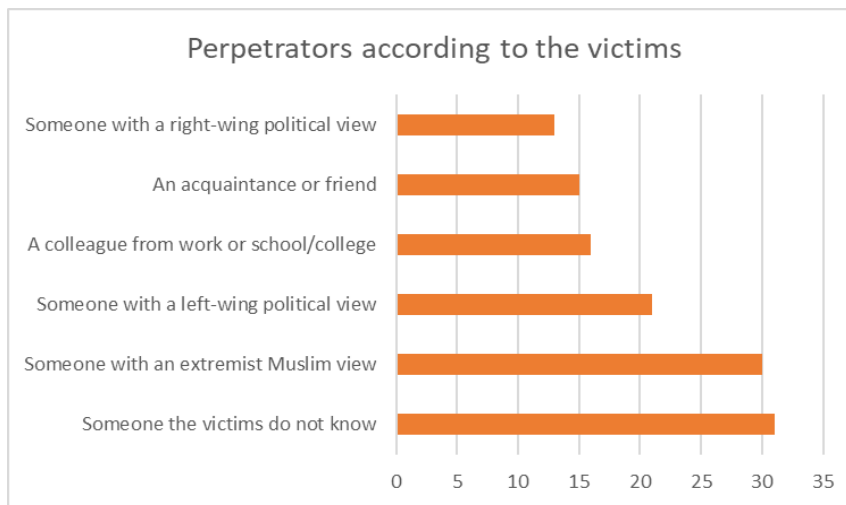
Although in the past century the root cause of antisemitism was extreme nationalism, it seems that the newly increasing antisemitic sentiments in Europe are growing among extremist Muslims (30 percent) and the political left (21 percent). Recently, the least amount of incidents has been perpetrated by someone with a right-wing political view (13 percent). For more details, see Figure 1 below.

⁴ Kovács, András. "Antisemitic prejudice and political antisemitism in present-day Hungary." *Journal for the Study of Antisemitism* 4.2 (2012): 443-467.

⁵ Danube Institute: *Hungary is one of the safest countries for the Jewish community in Europe*. 2023.02.28. Online: <https://danubeinstitute.hu/hu/media-megjelenesek/hungary-is-one-of-the-safest-countries-for-the-jewish-community-in-europe>

⁶ European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights: *Experiences and Perceptions of Antisemitism. Second Survey on Discrimination and Hate Crime against Jews in the EU*. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2018, doi:10.2811/696582 Online: http://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/fra-2018-experiences-and-perceptions-of-antisemitism-survey-summary_en.pdf

1Figure 1: Perpetrators of most antisemitic incidents, according to victims, expressed in percentages



Source: European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA), own editing.

The same year, in 2018, a special Eurobarometer was carried out on perceptions on antisemitism in all EU countries.⁷ The findings show that there is a relevant difference on perceptions on antisemitism in Western, and Central and Eastern European Members States. More specifically, in six countries, the majority of the population believes that antisemitism has increased in their country: in Sweden (73 percent), Germany (61 percent), the Netherlands (55 percent), France (51 percent), Denmark (50 percent vs 34 percent “stayed the same”).

As opposed to this, one fifth of the EU respondents believe that antisemitism has decreased in their country over the past five years. These responses came from Romania (29 percent), Hungary (22 percent), Lithuania (21 percent) and Latvia (20 percent). However, awareness on antisemitism is very low in certain countries: at least a quarter of respondents answered that they “don’t know” in five countries: Bulgaria (50 percent), Cyprus (32 percent), Estonia (26 percent), or Romania and Portugal (25 percent in both countries).⁸

Hostility and antisemitic incidents against European Jews

The same report does not limit itself to examining perceptions on antisemitism, it also addressed the expressions of hostility and threats towards Jewish people. Antisemitism on the Internet, including online social networks is perceived as a problem by most respondents from Sweden (78 percent), France (74 percent), Germany (67 percent), the Netherlands (66 percent), and Belgium (61 percent).⁹ This is in line with one of the responses found in the earlier mentioned survey of the FRA where a respondent stated that in France such expressions were disturbingly normalized:

⁷ Special Eurobarometer 484 – Wave EB90.4 – Kantar Public Brussels

⁸ Special Eurobarometer 484 p. 12.

⁹ Special Eurobarometer 484 p. 18.

"At work, in the media and social media, antisemitism is a daily and unrepressed occurrence." (Woman, 40–44 years old, France)¹⁰

Antisemitic graffiti or vandalism of Jewish buildings and institutions is perceived as the biggest challenge in France, where 80 percent of the respondents report it as a problem. However, the majority of respondents in Sweden (78 percent), the Netherlands (65 percent), Germany (62 percent), and Italy (60 percent) consider this as a problem in their own country as well.¹¹

Expressions of hostility and threats towards Jewish people conveyed in the street or other public places are, however, even more to be condemned. The majority of respondents from France (80 percent), Sweden (75 percent), Germany (64 percent), Italy, the Netherlands (both 61 percent), and Belgium (59 percent) believe that this is a major issue in their country.¹²

Widespread antisemitism in Western Europe does not stop at vandalism and hostility. Years after the mentioned massacres, physical attacks against Jewish people are still a problem in the Member States where vandalism and online attack are frequent. Respondents from France (83 percent), Sweden (73 percent), Germany (64 percent), Italy (60 percent), and Belgium (56 percent) consider physical attacks being a problem in their country. All these have an impact on the everyday decisions that European Jews have to make. For example, a woman from Belgium does not feel safe to send her children to Jewish school:

"I am really scared about the safety of my child who goes to a Jewish school. Every day I ask myself if I should send him to school somewhere else." (Woman, 30–34 years old, Belgium)¹³

Basically, Jews are hurt or can get killed because of their ethnic background in countries where antisemitism was not a problem a few years ago. As an interviewee of the European Agency for the Fundamental Rights stated, there is a worrying trend:

"I think that Sweden was not antisemitic at all before, that has changed, it's that which feels so difficult. Before, I wasn't at all afraid to say that I was Jewish; my children even thought it was interesting when they were teenagers and they wanted to be special. Nowadays, I'm more reluctant to talk about my background. I am concerned about the future." (Woman, 70–79 years old, Sweden)¹⁴

It is worth mentioning that the above-mentioned Member States do have strategies and action plans in place to combat antisemitism – yet they seem to be too weak to impose them. Since 2018, the year when the surveys on antisemitic sentiments were taken, the number of incidents has not decreased significantly. In 2022, the FRA published its latest report on antisemitism.¹⁵ Accordingly, France does have a national strategy that uses the

¹⁰ FRA: Experiences and Perceptions of Antisemitism. p. 2.

¹¹ Special Eurobarometer 484 p. 19.

¹² Special Eurobarometer 484 p. 20.

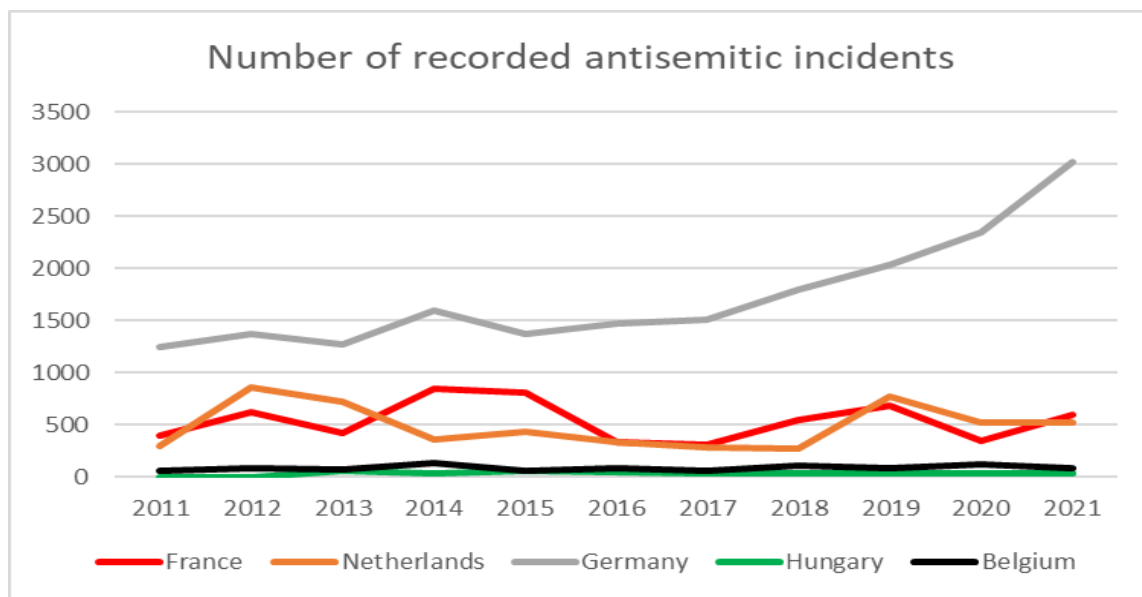
¹³ FRA: Experiences and Perceptions of Antisemitism. p. 5.

¹⁴ FRA: Experiences and Perceptions of Antisemitism p. 3.

¹⁵ European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights: *Overview of Antisemitic Incidents Recorded in the European Union 2011–2021*, Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2022. doi:10.2811/666327

definition of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) and it does consult with the Jewish communities in its fight against antisemitism. However, the number of recorded antisemitic incidents did not decrease in the past ten years. Similarly, in the Netherlands and Germany, reported incidents are on the rise, as shown in Figure 2.

2. Figure: Recorded antisemitic incidents in selected countries



Source: FRA: Overview Of Antisemitic Incidents Recorded in the European Union. 2011–2021.

Unfortunately, Sweden did not provide data on annual antisemitic incidents, therefore it was not included into the above diagram. According to the FRA report, in Sweden, antisemitic incidents were on the rise from a total of 194 in 2011 to a total of 277 in 2015. Since then, data has not been recorded on a yearly basis, and the number of incidents varies between 278 cases in 2018 and 170 incidents in 2020. In other words, there is no clear downward trend in antisemitic incidents in Sweden.

It is extremely concerning that Western European Jews have experienced a drop in antisemitic incidents only during the period of lockdowns due to the COVID pandemic. In 2020, after the first few waves of the pandemic, with the relaxation of the regulations limiting social contacts, the number of incidents started to rise again. The only country with a decreasing trend is Hungary: the highest number of incidents was recorded in 2013 when 61 incidents happened. In 2020 and 2021 there were 30 and 37 incidents recorded in the country respectively.

The number of antisemitic incidents in Western Europe is especially alarming when considered the ratio of the Jewish population to the rest of the population.¹⁶ According to Jewish Virtual Library, the largest Jewish community (when compared to the total

¹⁶ Jewish Virtual Library: Vital Statistics: Jewish Population of the World. Europe. Online: <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jewish-population-of-the-world#europe>

population) lives in France and Hungary, followed by Latvia, and the Netherlands. Countries with a high proportion of ethnic, religious and cultural diversity tend to be the ground of more tension stemming from these differences.

1. Table: Jewish population as percentage of total population in given countries

Country	Total population	Jewish population: number	Jewish population: percentage of total population
France	65 300 000	442 000	0,68
Hungary	9 700 000	46 500	0,48
Belgium	11 500 000	28 800	0,25
Netherlands	17 500 000	29 700	0,17
Sweden	10 400 000	14 900	0,14
Germany	83 100 000	118 000	0,14
Denmark	5 800 000	6 400	0,11
Italy	59 000 000	27 000	0,05

Source: Jewish Virtual Library, own editing

Hostility, threats and physical attacks against Jewish people seem to be most prevalent in France, which has the largest Jewish community per capita in Europe. However, the second most unsafe place for Jewish people is Sweden, where only a fraction of the population has Jewish heritage. As opposed to this, the size of the Jewish community per capita in Hungary is almost three times larger, yet the number of recorded incidents is five to eight times lower in Hungary when compared to Sweden. In other words, the large number of antisemitic incidents in France cannot be explained simply by the fact that it has a large Jewish population.

Immigration to Israel: is this the solution?

After the tragic incidents in 2015, Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, encouraged French Jews to emigrate to Israel, and many did so.¹⁷ The Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS) provides data regarding immigration to Israel¹⁸ from all continents, without data at country or EU-level. It does, however, publish data from selected European countries, such as France, Germany, Hungary, the Netherlands, and Spain, from different time periods. Based on publicly available data provided by CBS, it is clear that immigration from France to Israel has always been high. However, between 2014-2015 there was a surge in emigration. In these two years more than 13100 individuals left the country and moved to Israel. and approximately one quarter of all

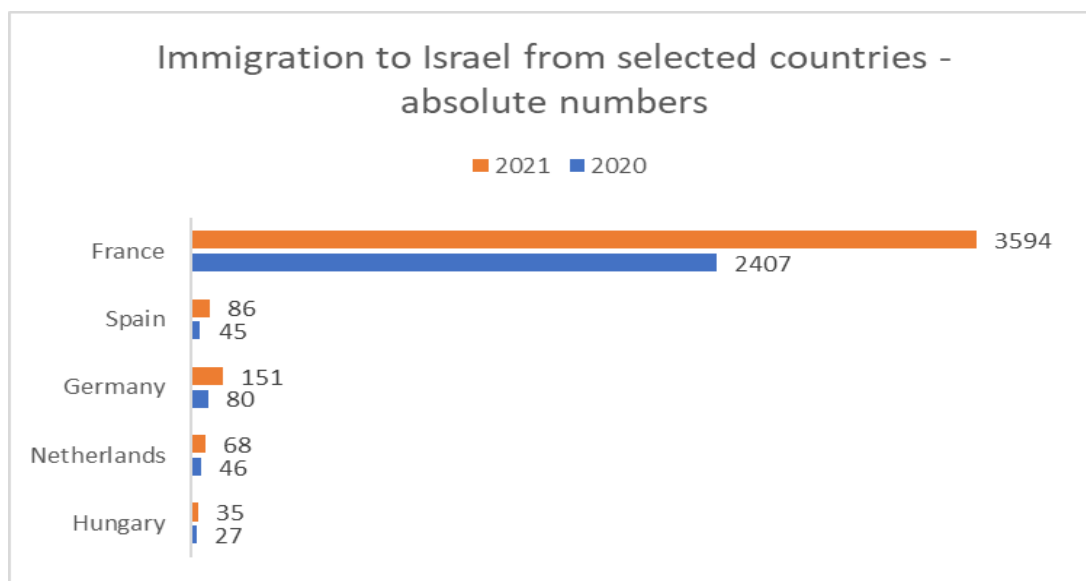
¹⁷Justin Jalil: Netanyahu to French Jews: 'Israel is your home'. The Times of Israel. 10.01. 2015. Online: <https://www.timesofisrael.com/netanyahu-to-french-jews-israel-is-your-home/>

¹⁸ Central Bureau of Statistics: Immigration and International Migration: <https://www.cbs.gov.il/en/subjects/Pages/Immigration-and-International-Migration.aspx>

immigration from all continents to Israel was made up by individuals whose last country of residence was France.

Due to lack of data for this same period we cannot make a comparison among the various countries. However, according to Figure 3, from the selected countries with available data, most European Jews who left the continent arrived from France: in 2021, more than 3500 individuals settled down in Israel. As opposed to this, only 35 people migrated to Israel from Hungary.

3. Figure: Immigration to Israel from last country of residence: absolute numbers

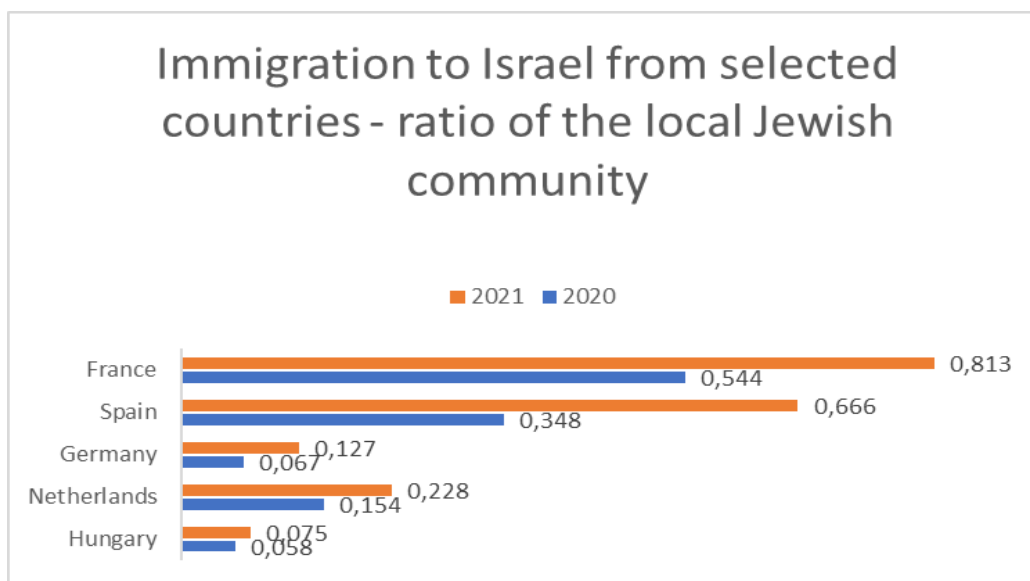


Sources: Israel Central Bureau of Statistics and Jewish Virtual Library, own editing

As we have earlier seen, the ratio of the Jewish population to the total population of a country varies greatly. When examined from this angle, the absolute numbers of antisemitic incidents, or that of the people migrating to Israel show that some countries seem to be particularly unsafe for Jewish people.

Immigration to Israel, while taking into account the percentage of the total Jewish population of a given country, offers us an idea on the ratio of Jews who are leaving the country – for one reason or another. Figure 4. shows that when compared to the size of the Jewish population, immigration from France is still the highest. It is logical that the country with the highest ratio of Jewish population would be the last European residence to most Israeli immigrants. The same logic would lead us to expect that the second largest immigrant community might come from Hungary, however, just the opposite is the case. When compared to the ratio of the Jewish population, the proportion of Jews who decide to leave Hungary is the lowest from all.

4. Figure: Immigration to Israel based on last country of residence: ratio of the local Jewish community



Sources: Israel Central Bureau of Statistics and Jewish Virtual Library, own editing

As the data previously presented shows, when compared to Western European countries, or Sweden, it is clear that Hungary is a safe country for Jews. Since 2013, through its Brussels office, the Action and Protection Foundation (Tett és Védelem Alapítvány, TEV), has been collaborating with the Prime Minister’s Office in Hungary to exchange and coordinate data on antisemitism nationwide. As a result of joint efforts, Chief Rabbi Tamás Róna stated that “Jews in Hungary are currently experiencing a new heyday”.¹⁹

It seems that the majority of Jews living in Hungary do feel safe, do not fear expressing their Jewish identity, practicing their religion, and do not consider migrating to Israel on a daily basis. This cannot be said of several other European Member States where the number and gravity of antisemitic incidents are worsening, and more and more individuals are forced to leave their country. The allegations against Hungary that it is an antisemitic country where Holocaust memorials would be vandalized, hatred would be encouraged by mainstream political leaders simply does not stand their ground. However, it would be perfectly legitimate to raise concerns about antisemitism in some Western European countries.

¹⁹ Dávid Nagy: “Chief Rabbi Tamás Róna: Jews in Hungary Are Experiencing a New Heyday.” *Hungarian Conservative*. 02.02.2023. Online: https://www.hungarianconservative.com/articles/culture_society/rabbi_rona_jewish_heyday_hungary_israel/

Conclusions

- The differences regarding the percentage of Jewish population in various Member States are quite significant. The largest Jewish community (as percent of the total population) lives in France, followed by Hungary, Belgium, the Netherlands, and Sweden. Proportionally, Germany, Denmark and Italy are the home of the smallest European Jewish populations.
- Growing antisemitic feelings are prevalent in France and in European countries with a relatively smaller Jewish community, like Sweden, the Netherlands or Belgium. Harassment and antisemitic incidents are most frequent in France, and again - Sweden, Germany, the Netherlands and Belgium, countries with a relatively small Jewish population when compared to the total population.
- A large proportion of Jews who live in counties where antisemitism is normalized and harassment is growing, choose to emigrate to Israel. As opposed to this, only a minor fraction of Jews living in Hungary feel unsafe. Unlike in Western European countries, the number of antisemitic incidents in Hungary is in fact decreasing. The leaders and representatives of the Jewish community state positive opinion regarding the safety, security and prosperity of the Jewish community living in Hungary.
- The antisemitism of the twentieth century seems to have changed as right-wing nationalism is less the breeding ground of these acts. In half of the cases of harassment or incidents, the perpetrator was someone with extremist Muslim view or somebody with left-wing political views. Accordingly, countries with extreme-left wing groups, often including extremist Muslims as well, are becoming increasingly unsafe for Jews. This is also shown by the data regarding immigration to Israel. From countries previously considered safe, an unproportionate number of Jewish people are moving into Israel.
- Hungary is the home for the EU's second largest Jewish community, yet its members barely feel the urge to emigrate to Israel. The number of incidents has been decreasing in the past years, and Hungary is considered one of the safest countries for Jews.