

# Submission relating to growing and unresolved antisemitism in Belgium

## Summary:

- Belgium is subject to an increasing level of antisemitism, causing alarm and distress to the minority Jewish community
- A specific and infamous example is repeated manifestations of antisemitism at the annual Aalst carnival
- The antisemitic stereotypes of Jews have been condemned internationally but not by the former Belgian justice minister or the federal equalities body (UNIA) whose remit includes fighting antisemitism
- UNESCO made unequivocal criticism of the Aalst carnival when it removed the carnival from its list of intangible cultural heritage in December 2019
- UNIA is failing in its duty to fight antisemitism in Belgium, thus placing the Jewish community at further risk
- There are anxieties about the new Belgian justice minister, who himself used an antisemitic trope whilst defending the Aalst carnival in February 2020

## Rising antisemitism in Belgium

The annual Kantor Centre report (cited for example in this report in [The Guardian](#)) on global antisemitism (2019) concluded that, apart from France, “Jews do not experience anywhere [else] in the EU as much hostility on the streets as they do in Belgium”. Organisations monitoring anti-Jewish hate in Belgium report a steady increase in antisemitic incidents, such as vandalism, Holocaust denial and verbal abuse, as well as a rise in conspiracy theories and Nazi rhetoric. Some 39% of Belgian respondents said they had experienced antisemitic harassment in the last year.

## The Aalst carnival

### 2013

In 2013 the carnival had a float depicting a cattle truck guarded by people in SS uniforms carrying cans of Zyklon B gas. The carnival takes place a few kilometres from where tens of thousands of Belgian Jews were deported during the second world war and sent to their deaths, gassed, in the Nazi extermination camps.



A complaint was raised to UNESCO, who criticised the float. The mayor of Aalst defended it, saying that people did not understand carnival culture, which “mocks everything”. The feelings and concerns of the Jewish community were treated as of little importance, despite there being people still living who witnessed their families being rounded up and sent to their deaths by Nazis and their collaborators.

## 2019

What is now an infamous float depicted Jews as greedy, avaricious, money-hoarding, money-controlling, sitting on safes full of gold, surrounded by rats. There was near universal condemnation of this as being virulently antisemitic, repeating and amplifying a medieval stereotype.



Click [here](#) for video.

A typical press report, from the [New York Times](#), quoted UNESCO assistant director general Ernesto Ottone Ramirez as saying ““The satirical spirit of the Aalst carnival and freedom of expression cannot serve as a screen for such manifestations of hatred.” He continued “these indecent caricatures go against the values of respect and dignity embodied by UNESCO and are counter to the principles that underpin the intangible heritage of humanity.” Mr Ottone has called on the Belgian authorities to react to the recent transgressions.

The Belgian authority with responsibility for countering antisemitism is UNIA. We wrote to UNIA asking what they were going to do. Their response was that, since in their view the antisemitic float had not broken any Belgian law, they would do nothing, not even issue a moral warning or condemnation.

## UNIA report

In October 2019 UNIA published their [report](#) into the 2019 Aalst carnival. IMPAC believes that it is seriously defective. In response we wrote to the co-chairs of UNIA’s board explaining in detail why this report fails utterly to address the antisemitism at Aalst carnivals ([Appendix 1](#)). Our specific concerns were:

- Unia’s failure to provide a balanced analysis of antisemitism
- Unia’s failure to criticise antisemitism
- Unia’s failure to condemn antisemitism
- Unia’s failure to protect the victims of antisemitism, particularly the Jewish community in Belgium
- Unia’s failure to recognise requisite limits to freedom of speech

- Unia's failure to ensure transparency
- Unia's failure to operate a complaints procedure
- Unia's failure to include *any* recommendations that refer to, address or help to combat antisemitism in Belgium

In our view, the UNIA report reads more like a brochure commending carnival culture than a serious analysis of the “everyday antisemitism” that UNIA is meant to combat. There are 331 mentions of the word ‘carnival’, for example, but only 35 or either ‘antisemitic’ or ‘antisemitism’.

In calling for “dialogue between the two sides” UNIA is equating victim and perpetrator. UNIA therefore appears to see itself as having a role as a conciliation service rather than being the genuine anti-racist body it is meant to be. The result of Unia's failure to defend a vulnerable minority is to leave them unprotected and hence more vulnerable.

The UNIA report was rejected by both the CCOJB (Belgian national Jewish representative body) and FJO (Flemish-speaking Belgian Jewish representative body). Yohan Benizri, president of the CCOJB, said:

“We are perplexed to learn about the contents of UNIA's latest press release. It is only in our country that one seems to be conspicuously indifferent to this issue: the European Commission and UNESCO had clearly and rightly responded to the anti-Semitic excesses of the carnival and the world press also reported on it. Is it up to UNIA to lecture UNESCO and others to portray these abuses as acceptable? Events are judged as anti-Semitic by the victims themselves.

"UNIA has no mandate whatsoever to condemn the victims of discrimination, nor to send legal and moral signals, which repeats or exacerbates an unfortunate situation. With this behaviour, and perhaps in spite of itself, this institution is intensely discredited in the eyes of certain communities whose interests UNIA wants to represent.”

The FJO said in a [statement](#) that it “rejects UNIA's conclusion that an absence of antisemitic context meant that there would not be any hatred of Jews.

## **Delisting by UNESCO**

UNESCO removed the Aalst carnival from its list of intangible cultural heritage in December 2019. IMPAC attended the UNESCO congress in Bogota, speaking with many of the ambassadors and others, who could not believe that no action had been taken by the Belgian authorities (namely the justice minister and UNIA). We delivered our 23,000 signature petition, together with comments (some from holocaust survivors) to the chair of the UNESCO meeting.

The Secretary of UNESCO, Tim Curtis, made a strong case why the repeated antisemitic infringements at several Aalst carnivals were incompatible with the values of respect and community cohesion. The Austrian ambassador spoke powerfully that the images at Aalst were “[textbook antisemitic](#)” and hence highly dangerous. All 24 member states supported the delisting.

The lack of condemnation by UNIA of what happened in 2019 gave the green light for even worse antisemitic manifestations at the 2020 Aalst carnival.

### **Lack of action by Belgian authorities**

There appears to be a widespread call upon the requisite Belgian authorities to take action to ensure that a stop is indeed put to the appalling and dangerous stereotyping of Jews at the Aalst carnival. The two main agents who are able to effect change are the justice minister and UNIA.

#### **Justice minister**

The previous justice minister, Koen Geens, was sent 5000 letters of complaint about the 2019 Aalst carnival, urging him to take decisive action. His response was to call for “dialogue”, which was bizarre, given that there is a perpetrator and a victim in all cases of antisemitism. In what other form of human rights abuse does the abused have to engage in “dialogue” with the abuser?

#### **UNIA**

UNIA’s report of October 2019 was a dereliction of responsibility. It has received complaints about the 2020 event but has limited its response to this statement on its [website](#) in February 2020: “We regret that anti-Semitic stereotypes were used again, because we know that stereotypes can lead to prejudice and discrimination. We therefore continue to insist that the local authorities seize the opportunity to work on an inclusive Aalst Carnival that brings people together. In this, the mayor has an important responsibility to depolarise and de-escalate.”

*UNIA has made no statement since.*

UNIA is absolving itself from any active role that one would expect a national equalities body to take. Instead, it is pointing the finger at the mayor of Aalst, whom UNIA defended previously

#### **2020**

IMPAC attended the 2020 event and took [videos](#) of sustained and gratuitous stereotyping and baiting of Jews:





Belgian PM Sophie Wilmès responded to the criticism [on Sunday](#), saying the government “is sensitive to the reactions to certain floats and carnival costumes” at the Aalst Carnival. “It should indeed be self-evident that such images as what we’ve seen should not parade European streets, 75 years after the Shoah,” a Commission spokesman, Adalbert Jahnz, told journalists. As far as the European Commission was concerned, Jahnz said, “we stand firmly against all forms of anti-Semitism” and view the parade’s floats as “incompatible with the values and principles in which the EU is founded”.

On Twitter, Vice-President Margaritis Schinas, who is responsible for the 'promotion of our European way of life', responded even more sharply: 'It is clear to me: Aalst Carnival is a disgrace. This has to stop.'

The recent appointment of Vincent Van Quickenborne as Minister of Justice has caused anxiety and alarm in the Jewish community; He tweeted about the Aalst carnival mentioning the “Jewish lobby”. The [Belgian League against Antisemitism](#) called this “the most used antisemitic terminology”. One of Van Quickenborne’s first acts is expected to be the removal of military security from outside synagogues.

## **Role of UNHRC**

IMPAC asks that UNHRC refers in its UPR report on Belgium to the serial antisemitic manifestations at the Aalst carnival, calls out the lack of appropriate response from the two Belgian authorities charged with opposing antisemitism, and offers assistance however it can to support the human rights of the Jewish community in Belgium.