



European Parliament strips member's immunity

November 18, 2008

BRUSSELS (JTA) -- The European Parliament waived the parliamentary immunity of a far-right member from Belgium.

Frank Vanhecke, a Belgian member of the European Parliament for the far-right Vlaams Belang, was accused of incitement to hatred and xenophobia under Belgian law, but could not be prosecuted unless the European Parliament waived his immunity, which it did in a vote on Tuesday.

In spring 2005, a local edition of a Vlaams Belang newsletter, for which Vanhecke was the responsible publisher, printed an article accusing "foreign cultures" of the desecration of a cemetery. The newsletter said such acts are the result of "a culture which no longer has any respect for the dead and for the symbols of a different faith." The culprits turned out to be local minors.

After seeking counsel from the governmental Centre for Equal Opportunities and the Fight against Racism, the municipality in which the article was disseminated filed suit against Vanhecke for incitement. To allow for prosecution, the Belgian Justice Ministry appealed to the European Parliament to strip Vanhecke's immunity.

Tuesday's decision comes at a time when the European Union is facing a rise in extreme right politics, as evidenced by the recent electoral victory of the far right in Austria and overtures to the Danish People's Party by that country's faltering coalition.

The European Parliament's decision comes just months after a vote that tightened the conditions for creating a European political group, making it more difficult for the far right to create such a group.

Elections for the European Parliament are scheduled for June.

Robin Sclafani, the director of the Brussels-based organization Jewish Contribution to an Inclusive Europe, said "the fact that Vanhecke's immunity was waived is a clear sign that parliamentarians are not above the law, especially where racism and incitement to hatred are concerned. We hope that this is a signal that the European Union is committed to holding elections that are free from bigotry and racist rhetoric."