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Enrollment in Jewish Studies programs has declined in Eastern European universities, putting the teaching of Jewish cultural practices, history, language, literature, and religion at risk of disappearing, research from the University of Wrocław in Poland presented last Thursday.

The University of Wrocław's Jewish Studies program has suffered from a lack of new student enrollment, mirroring the research Marcin Wodziński, a professor of Jewish Studies and head of the Taube Department of Jewish Studies at the University of Wrocław, conducted over the past seven years.

"Eastern Europe is experiencing a crisis of the humanities," Wodziński said. "But I am far more worried that we might not have any students to teach, especially in those small areas."

Wodziński's research, conducted with the assistance of 140 graduate students, revealed an imbalance in Jewish Studies, with most research focused on the Holocaust's impact on Jewish identities, leaving other topics underexplored.

"The Holocaust was the most important event in Jewish-Polish history," Wodziński said.

While an imbalance in topics covered is unsurprising to Wodziński, he noted that the existence of Jewish Studies programs is endangered by scholars failing to recognize the importance of other events and characteristics that shaped the Jewish Eastern European identity.

The Jewish Studies program at the University of Wrocław requires students to take courses on history, literature, and culture studies, covering the period from biblical times to modern Israel. Students in the program commit to learning four languages, including modern Hebrew, Yiddish, biblical Hebrew, and Ladino.

Despite the wide range of topics in university curricula, Wodziński said Jewish Studies often focus too much on nationalism, prioritizing the history of individual Eastern European

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countries and locating Jewish people in this context, rather than studying Jewish culture and experiences as playing an integral role in shaping these countries.

The University of Wrocław aimed to stabilize student enrollment in the Jewish Studies program by diversifying the topics covered, but Wodziński noted the ongoing conflict between Gaza and Israel has undermined the program's success in the past few years.

"The picture of Israel and anything Jewish - or the picture of something dominant and colonialist - contributes to students steering away from the program on campus," Wodziński said.

Ideological shifts on campus, along with neo-authoritarian regimes and right-wing populism rising, have limited open discussion of Poland's role in Jewish history. This includes the 2018 Polish law that criminalized those who openly blamed Poland for complicity in the Holocaust.

"I was worried about the effects of the 2018 law and what it meant for academics in Jewish Studies," Nancy Harrowitz, the Head of the Italian Section and Professor of Italian & Jewish Studies at Boston University, said in a question and answer portion of Wodziński's presentation.

Wodziński said the 2018 law, now partly repealed, did not affect scholars' abilities to draw their own conclusions openly on the Polish government's role in the Holocaust.

As these external factors threaten Jewish Studies in Eastern Europe, Wodziński stressed the importance of maintaining these programs in universities to ensure this knowledge is preserved and passed on to future generations.

"There is no history of Poland without the history of the Jews," Wodziński said.