

# Inventing the Muslim Other in Poland (and Why Does it Differ from Western Europe)

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**Abstract:** The aim of this paper is to discuss how the Muslim Other has been invented and still is in contemporary Poland. We argue that it is framed into a different narrative and ‘logic’ than in the case of many Western European countries. While Poles also need their Muslim ‘enemy’, they use him or her not only to strengthen their national identity, but also to oppose the very idea of Europe from within.

**Keywords:** Poland, Central and Eastern Europe, Western Europe, islamophobia, otherness, Other, Muslim

## Introduction

Late in the evening, on 14 July 2016 – during the celebration of the French National Day in Nice, a cargo truck drove into a crowd of civilians on the Promenade des Anglais, killing 86 people and wounding over 450 further. The driver – Mohamed Lahouaiej Bouhlel – a Tunisian living in France, planned the attack for several months. While it is believed that terrorist self-radicalized with the use of Internet resources, the so-called Islamic State (IS) claimed responsibility for this attack (The Counter Extremism Project). Following these dramatic developments, the French President, François Hollande, extended the state of emergency, deployed extra military staff and intensified airstrikes against IS positions in Iraq and Syria. All accomplices of the Tunisian driver have been sentenced to prison for terrorism-related activities.

Only a day after the attack, the Polish minister of the Interior and Administration Mariusz Błaszczak, referred to the Nice tragedy with following words: “What

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conclusions were drawn after the terrorist attacks in Paris? Marches were organized, flowers on sidewalks were painted in different colours with crayons in colours of the whole rainbow. For me it is a very clear link to LGBT” (Gazeta, 2016). In her book on British Islamophobia Leonie Jackson (2018) studied how Muslim Other had been invented in Western Europe and used in political narratives as antithetical to European national identities. By analysing case studies from Switzerland, France, Denmark and the Netherlands she pointed that Islam was perceived as an opposition to the fundamental values of modern progressive Europe. By asking for a referendum on minaret building the Swiss were afraid of loosing freedom and power, by drawing Muhammad cartoons the Danes protected their freedom of expression, by ostracising a local imam the Dutch fought for gay rights, and by banning religious symbols (including *hijāb*) the French wanted to maintain equality of male and female citizens (Jackson, 2018: p. 138). Comparing these two cases, namely Polish reaction to jihadi terrorism in France and narratives from Western European countries<sup>3</sup>, one can easily see a striking difference. West Europeans juxtapose Islam against liberal and progressive Europe. On the other hand, the Polish minister not only blamed the French for improper reaction but linked it to LGBT issues. It is true that one of the cases (the Dutch one) studied by Jackson also relates to LGBT, but Islam was portrayed as being against it. However, the Polish minister somehow managed to lump Islamist terrorism and LGBT together.

The aim of this paper is to discuss how the Muslim Other has been invented and still is in contemporary Poland. We argue that it is framed into a different narrative and ‘logic’ than in the case of many Western European countries. While Poles also need their Muslim ‘enemy’, they use him or her to not only to strengthen their national identity, but also to oppose the very idea of Europe from within.

## Transplanting the discourse

Not a single word about Poland is mentioned in a book edited by Nilüfer Göle “Islam and Public Controversy in Europe” (2013). This is not an omission, nor a result of limiting the book just to the Western part of Europe (as it often

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<sup>3</sup> The scientific literature and various international organizations offer different ways of dividing Europe into sub-regions with their corresponding countries. For the purpose of this chapter we assume that Poland can be considered a country of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE region) or Easter European country if we refer – in the latter – to a basic division of Europe into the West and the East, coinciding with the division of the continent into two blocks from the Cold War era.

happens in studies on Islam in Europe). Simply, there was hardly any controversy related to Muslims in Poland except for one related to building a new mosque in Warsaw. Polish Muslims do not cause controversies related to veiling (including *niqāb*), praying publicly, or making their religion visible in public spaces, they cannot be claimed to cling to social security system, nor contribute to raising unemployment; finally, out of 39 terrorist incidents which happened in Poland between 1970 and 2017 none was attributed to Islamist radicals, according to the Global Terrorism Database (University of Maryland). Obviously, another issue is the fact that the perpetrator group in over 70% of cases is unknown (see Table 1).

Two reasons seem to explain this phenomenon. Firstly, except for centres of the biggest Polish cities Muslims are hardly visible in public spaces. While there are different estimates, they rather do not exceed the number of 40.000–45.000 Muslims in Poland, what makes around 0,1% of the whole population. According to the survey conducted by the Centre for Public Opinion Research (2015: p. 1–2), only 12% of Poles declared to know a Muslim in person. In other words, 88% of Poles have never met a Muslim – neither in Poland, nor abroad. Secondly, those who live in Poland are in most cases well integrated or even assimilated to the Polish mainstream culture. A lot of the first-generation migrants from Muslim majority countries had come to Poland in the socialist era, received their education, settled down and founded families – not rarely with Polish wives. Many Muslims arriving in Poland before 1989 came from Arab states. Those who decided to stay formed the Arab diaspora during the times of the Polish People's Republic. In this way Muslim Arabs have become the first immigrant Muslim community in Poland, and thus, they joined the Muslim diaspora which had been created for centuries by Polish Tatars. In this context, Mustafa Switat identified the old Arabic diaspora in Poland before 1989 and the new one after 1989 (2017: p. 218). According to his research nowadays, the majority of the representatives of the Arab community in Poland (old and new diasporas considered together) are Muslims (Switat, 2017: p. 336–337).

Despite the marginal number of Muslims Polish society was still able to reproduce some stereotypes of Islam and its adherents. These were predominantly Orientalist clichés with essentialist flavour, but Muslims have not occupied a lot of attention. After 9/11 terrorist attacks Poles adopted the notion of the 'clash of civilisation' and the divide between Islam and the West, even though one could not be sure back then, if Poland belonged to the latter. After having joined the EU a new element started to emerge in discourse about Muslims, namely related to their presence in Western Europe. All this time the discourse has been transplanted – due to the lack of own Muslims, Poles used the narratives related to Islam from elsewhere

Table 1. Terrorist events in Poland (1970-2017) and their typology

Date	City	Perpetrator group	Fatalities	Injured	Target type	Attack type
2017-02-15	Klodawa	Unknown	0	0	Police	Bombing/Explosion
2016-05-23	Warsaw	Anarchists	0	0	Police	Bombing/Explosion
2016-05-19	Wroclaw	Anti-Immigrant extremists (suspected)	0	1	Transportation	Bombing/Explosion
2010-10-19	Lodz	Anti-Government extremists	1	1	Government (General)	Armed Assault
2001-08-19	Koszelowka	Unknown	0	4	Business, Tourists	Unarmed Assault, Facility/Infrastructure Attack
1998-08-19	Gdansk	Unknown	0	0	Business	Bombing/Explosion
1998-08-11	Bialystok	Unknown	0	0	Government (General)	Facility/Infrastructure Attack
1997-07-21	Warsaw	Unknown	1	1	Private Citizens & Property	Bombing/Explosion
1997-05-08	Rudna	Unknown	1	4	Private Citizens & Property	Bombing/Explosion
1997-02-26	Warsaw	Unknown	0	0	Religious Figures/Institutions	Facility/Infrastructure Attack
1996-11-21	Warsaw	Unknown	0	7	Private Citizens & Property	Bombing/Explosion
1996-10-02	Cieladz	Unknown	0	0	Business	Bombing/Explosion
1996-06-04	Warsaw	Unknown	0	0	Business	Bombing/Explosion
1996-04-24	Warsaw	GN-95	1	0	Business	Bombing/Explosion
1996-03-29	Warsaw	Unknown	0	0	Business	Bombing/Explosion
1996-03-02	Warsaw	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown	Journalists & Media	Armed Assault
1995-06-12	Miedzdroje	Unknown	0	0	Business	Bombing/Explosion
1995-05-22	Krakow	Unknown	0	0	Government (Diplomatic)	Unarmed Assault
1995-03-24	Warsaw	Unknown	0	1	Private Citizens & Property	Bombing/Explosion
1995-02-20	Warsaw	Unknown	0	0	Unknown	Bombing/Explosion
1994-12-12	Warsaw	Unknown	0	0	Business	Bombing/Explosion

1994-09-03	Krakow	Unknown		0	0	Government (General)	Bombing/Explosion
1994-09-01	Krakow	Unknown		0	0	Transportation	Bombing/Explosion
1994-03-16	Zgorzelec	Unknown		0	0	Police	Bombing/Explosion
1992-11-17	Lubon	Neo-Nazi extremists		0	0	Government (Diplomatic)	Bombing/Explosion
1992-10-01	Krakow	Polish Skinheads		1	2	Business	Assassination
1992-09-29	Warsaw	Unknown		0	0	Government (Diplomatic)	Facility/Infrastructure Attack
1992-09-01	Warsaw	Unknown		2	0	Government (General)	Assassination
1992-05-13	Warsaw	Unknown		1	3	Business	Assassination
1990-10-05	Warsaw	Unknown		0	0	Business, Business	Bombing/Explosion
1990-10-01	Gdansk	Unknown		0	1	Private Citizens & Property	Bombing/Explosion
1990-06-07	Gdansk	December 13 Independent Group		0	0	Journalists & Media	Bombing/Explosion
1990-06-07	Gdansk	December 13 Independent Group		0	0	Airports and Aircraft	Bombing/Explosion
1990-06-07	Gdansk	December 13 Independent Group		0	0	Government (General)	Bombing/Explosion
1990-04-22	Warsaw	Unknown		1	0	Journalists & Media	Assassination
1990-01-10	Warsaw	Unknown		0	0	Business, Business	Bombing/Explosion
1981-08-01	Warsaw	Unknown		0	1	Violent Political Party	Assassination
1979-04-17	Krakow	Unknown		0	5	Private Citizens & Property	Bombing/Explosion
1971-10-06	Opole	Anti-Communist extremists		0	0	Educational Institution	Bombing/Explosion

Source: (University of Maryland).

(Górak-Sosnowska, 2007): firstly these were Oriental impressions, later the notion of the clash of civilisations and finally challenges related to the presence of Muslims in Western European countries. What was clearly missing from this picture are ways to juxtapose these narratives but local Muslim communities. Most Poles knew only the so called 'global Muslim' – to use the notion developed by Allen (2007: p. 98) – which bore no relevance to their local, Polish context.

## Getting back to ethnicity

Enemies are often not real but invented in order to highlight our uniqueness and provide a challenge to fight against. According to Eco (2012) it is the difference between us and them that becomes a symbol for what we consider threatening. Fighting the imagined enemy cannot only prove our superiority, but also serves as a means to mobilise our resources. A perfect example here is the category of the nation.

Both 'society' and 'nation' are macrostructures, but only the latter is linked to emotions and perceived as an autotelic value. While many are willing to die for their nation, most probably no one would sacrifice his or her life for the sake of society (Szacka, 2003: p. 240). Due to lack of an objective set of criteria the idea of nation is constructed, even if its members consider it real and authentic. According to Goździak and Márton (2018) the answer to the emergence of negative sentiments against Muslims (and Others) lies in the way Polish national identity has been (re)constructed.

For many years Poland has been a monolith in ethnic and religious terms with the vast majority of society being Catholic and ethnic Polish. In the recent Pew Research Center opinion poll (2018: p. 8–26), 64% of Poles indicated that religion is a key component of national identity, 82% said that birth ancestry is important to national identity and 55% claimed that Polish culture is superior to other ones. One should stress that focus on ethnicity and religion in way how national identity is constructed is not unique to Poland, but in fact shared across Central and Eastern Europe.

There are several other studies concerning Polish identity and Polishness that are worth recalling here. According to the public opinion survey conducted on behalf of the Center for Insights in Survey Research by GfK Polonia (2017), 54% of respondents agreed that Polish identity is defined by being Roman Catholic. Among those who somewhat or strongly disagreed with this statement (40%), 67% indicated that being born in Poland is the main feature that makes someone

Polish, while 62% opted for residence in Poland and paying taxes in this country as this feature, 32% mentioned speaking fluent Polish and 17% raised Slavic descent. Only 28% of Poles were somewhat or strongly convinced that Polish identity is under threat today, and among them 23% identified immigrants/foreigners as the main threat and 14% – Islam; to compare Russia was indicated by 7%, the EU by 6% and terrorism (like the church) by 2%. At the same time 31% of Poles strongly agreed that Islam is a direct threat to European values, while 40% somewhat agreed. Only 24% of respondents expressed disagreement (Center for Insights in Survey Research, 2017).

Noteworthy is also the study “Social criteria of Polishness” conducted by Kantar Polska (2018), in which the question about the criteria of Polishness was taken from the survey from 1988 on national identity of Poles and their attitude to other nations. The same question “If we were to recognize someone as a Pole, what would be important and less important in your opinion?” was asked every 10 years, in 1998, 2008, and finally 2018. As of 2018, the list of the aforementioned criteria, starting from the most important ones, was as follows: knowledge of the Polish language (important for 92% of respondents), feeling of being a Pole (91%), knowledge of Polish culture and history (88%), possession of Polish citizenship (87%), observing Polish customs (87%), having at least one parent of Polish nationality (84%), living permanently in Poland (75%), being born in Poland (74%), special merits for Poland (60%) and Catholic faith (58%). The lowest position of religion is particularly surprising. However, if we treat the results from 2008 as the base, it will turn out that the importance (answers: very important and rather important considered together) of three social criteria has increased the most in one decade – by 15 percentage points in each case – for: being born in Poland, special merits for Poland and Catholic faith. The only drop – by 3 percentage points – was recorded for both 2018-top criteria: knowledge of the Polish language and feeling of being a Pole. In 1988 the highest position among the criteria of Polishness was attributed to feeling of being a Pole (95%), while the religion was the last one (45%) (Kantar Polska, 2018). It undermines the stereotype of a Catholic-Pole and the Catholic faith as the cornerstone of Polish identity.

Poland never had any colonies, in fact only regained her independence in 1918. After the second World War together with other Central and Eastern European countries it found itself behind the iron curtain, which had limited migration flows from Muslim majority countries (with a small exception of socialist countries). After the borders were finally opened in 1990, Poland was unattractive for possible economic migrants – as the market economy had only started to emerge, and even

after joining the EU until nowadays Poland has not been able to catch up with the so-called old EU member states. Thus, instead of attracting migrants, Poland has rather been a net exporter of labour, while those who decided to come usually arrived from across Eastern border.

Polish ethnic and religious homogeneity stayed in tune with the way national belonging was constructed. Polish national identity has been built on common cultural, religious and ethnic norms and values. Thus, Poles are a typical example of so-called old nations based on common ethnicity and history. In early 1990s the idea of nation has slightly shifted to a political concept based on common citizenship and values. Poles had the chance to look beyond their Western border, experience the flow of goods, services, but also people and feel more European or cosmopolitan.

While the Poles still belong to the greatest EU enthusiasts, it seems that the first, old ethnic type of nation started to become dominant in political narratives got stronger leading to fetishization of Polish nation on the expense of Muslim Other (Goździak and Márton, 2018: p. 4). In fact, Muslim migrants 'flooding' fortress Europe became the new enemy one ought to fight against. "Stop Islamization of Europe", "No to Islam in Poland", "Welcome in hell stray lambs – John III Sobieski", "Free Poland without Islam" were the most balanced slogans one could spot at recent marches of independence organised on 11<sup>th</sup> November. Interestingly enough, Poland was never meant to be Islamised (whatever that means), as there are hardly any Muslims and chances that they will become a visible minority are rather limited. Despite that Poles generally tend to overestimate the actual number of Muslims in their country. According to a 2016 Ipsos study, Poles estimated the number of Muslims in Poland at 7%, i.e. 70 times higher than the actual proportion. Moreover, according to the Polish public in four years the number of Muslims in the society is going to reach 13% of the population (Ipsos 2016: p. 4–6). Once awakened, these fears are hard to soothe, even if they do not bear any link to reality. No wonder Polish nationalists and politicians prefer to fuel them for the sake of their political goals.

## From longing to rebellion

One of the most elaborated slogans presented during the march of independence referred to the Polish king, John III Sobieski, who got famous for expelling the Turks from Vienna in 1683. Bringing up this reference perfectly illustrates the underlying Islamophobic narrative used in Polish context: firstly, the Poles are

strong enough to oppose possible Muslim invasion, secondly, (Western) Europe needs Poland in order to fight Islamisation – just as in the case of Sobieski's help to Habsburg Monarchy. Taking into account that actually no Muslims from the migration and refugee crisis were permitted to Poland, one can add a third factor: Poles are clever than Western Europeans, as they did not let any Muslims in (and so do not have the problems that old EU member states have).

In another chapter we co-authored recently, we indicate that Polish Islamophobia is strongly rooted in how European identity is constructed and negotiated (Górak-Sosnowska and Pachocka, 2019). After EU enlargement in 2004, which Poles welcomed as a final break from the USSR legacy and start of a better future, Islamophobic discourse was paradoxically a way of belonging to Europe. Despite joining the club of the richest and most developed countries Poland managed to occupy only a semi-peripheral position. Having hardly any Muslims and no challenges related to their presence, Poles 'borrowed' Islamophobic discourse to feel included into what was going on in the European core. Being engaged in Islamophobic discourse and sharing the problems and worries of the old EU member states (regardless if real or attributed) served as a means to feel included (Bobako 2014).

Interestingly enough the bulk of this discourse related to what was going on in the biggest EU economies instead of focusing on countries on similar economic level. By stating that Poles do not want to repeat the mistakes of Germany, France or the UK in terms of letting so many Muslims settle down, Poles perceive themselves as economically attractive as those countries, to which in fact they migrate and in which they compete with other migrants (including Muslim ones) (Goździak and Márton, 2018).

The migration and refugee crisis and change on the Polish political scene maintained the direction of the discourse but changed its meaning. The EU still served as a reference to the bulk of Islamophobic narratives, but this time they were produced not in order to belong to Europe, but rather to rebel it. As Bobako (2017: p. 359–370) indicated current Islamophobia illustrates the complicated and contradictory attitude of Poland towards the EU. Economically Poles are happy to benefit from the EU, what has been reflected throughout the Eurobarometer surveys, however, despite the effort to catch up, they still lack economic capital comparing to the old EU countries. Thus, political leaders engage other types of capital – political and cultural. Politically Poland opposed any distribution key of asylum seekers from Italy and Greece to other EU members imposed by the EU under the relocation scheme, which is believed to be a fight for independence or against the EU (or German) dictate (Górak-Sosnowska and Molodikova 2018). On

a cultural level Poland's strong and unique tradition and the Catholic faith not only spare it from Islam, but also can be a remedy against the woes of Europe. This includes not only the challenge of Islamisation, but also a lot of other indicators of (Western) Europe's moral decay. It is the moral decay that finally provides the link between Islam and LGBT and explains the statement of minister Błaszczak upheld in the introduction of this chapter.

## Conclusions: Connecting the dots

In an ethnic and religious monolith as Poland Muslims could easily fit as a 'distant Other', i.e. they were perceived as exotic, Poles could not anyhow relate their culture to his one. Unlike the 'close Other', who is still different, but more familiar, in case of a distant Other culture is the dominant way to navigate and understand the Other (Górak-Sosnowska 2011). Thus the essentialist approach to Islam and Muslims.

The shift on the political scene in Poland in 2015 combined with the raise of nationalistic and populist movements across Europe opened a Pandora's Box. Through the European refugee crisis the distant Muslim got more real than ever, even if Poland was never meant to be affected by this crisis. The essentialist image of Muslims could not be verified by any real contact with local Muslim communities, as they are marginal in Poland. At the same time, the threat of Islamization became a hot issue in political campaigns. Konrad Pędzwiatr (2017: p. 414), author of Polish national report on Islamophobia, speaks in fact about banalisation of Polish Islamophobia. Not rarely were Islamophobic incidents and narratives so strong and abstract that one could hardly rationalise them. Some politicians earned their social support by willing to protect Poland from Islamization, a lady who was willing to ban Islam was number 1 on the list of one of political parties starting in the elections 2015 (which finally did not get to the Parliament only by the skin of its teeth), and a post on Facebook about a black Volga car driven by and Arab who was kidnapping Polish females was share over 14 thousand times. As a result, the number of hate crimes against Muslims is on a raise, even though it is at the same time marginal in absolute terms, due to the marginal number of possible victims.

While in the case of Western Europe Islamophobia serves as a way of getting control over Muslims which seem to be an obstacle to Western identity (Jackson, 2018: p. 145–146), in Poland it is used to strengthen Polish national identity, which does not necessarily belong to the European one. What is more, it seems

that Polish national identity is actually juxtaposed against the European one and Islamophobia serves as one of ways to do it. While Islamic culture is perceived as inferior to Polish one, the latter is not characterised by Western values such as freedom, equality or liberalism. Actually, if one takes a closer look at the dichotomy developed by Jackson (2018: p. 149), Polish values could be easily related to those of essentialised Muslims (submission to God, clinging to pre-modern traditions and values).

This is reflected in the Pew Research Center data (2018): just as many other Central and Eastern Europeans, Poles are more unfavourable than the Westerners to accept a Muslim into their family (33%), oppose gay marriage (59%), believe that abortion should be illegal in most cases (52%). This way Polish Islamophobia becomes just one manifestation of a wider reluctance to Western liberalism and a cultural divergence between the Eastern and Western part of EU.

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