

Understanding and Explaining Islamophobia in Eastern Europe by Alexander Yendell

Abstract

Connection is pleased to publish the first special issue of the Leibniz ScienceCampus „Eastern Europe – Global Area“ (EEGA). Edited by Alexander Yendell (Leipzig University) it focusses on Islamophobia and anti-Muslim sentiments in a range of Eastern European countries. The articles will be published consecutively in the following weeks and offer theoretical, cross-national and comparative perspectives as well as case-specific views. We invite you cordially to follow this multidisciplinary discussion by authors using theories developed in sociology, social psychology, political science anthropology and history.

Alexander Yendell (Leipzig University): Understanding and Explaining Islamophobia in Eastern Europe - Introduction to the Special Issue

The so-called „refugee crisis“ has made clear that negative attitudes towards Islam and Muslims are very common in some Eastern European countries and even lead to political demands that are incompatible with the democratic requirement of religious freedom and with EU anti-discrimination laws. With the increasing number of Muslims migrating against the background of globalization and conflicts in the Middle East, and the threat perceived by the Christian or non-religious majority population, the peaceful coexistence of people of different cultures and religions is under threat. This is particularly evident in the rise of right-wing populist movements and parties in Western and European democracies over the past few years, which have openly expressed their Islamophobic attitudes in their political programmes and speeches.

There are quite a few examples that show the extent of Islamophobia in Eastern European countries. In Hungary, the rejection of Islam and Muslim immigrants is expressed loudly. The Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán is against having people from different cultures in his country and obviously means Muslims. The Czech President

Miloš Zeman is even clearer, saying that he does not want Muslims to migrate to his country. Poland only wants to accept Christian refugees into the country; in addition, there are reports of attacks on Islamic institutions. Furthermore, the far-right Polish party PiS is accused of uniting with right-wing extremist groups and highly-ranked representatives of the Catholic Church to demonstrate against Muslims. The extent of Islamophobia in Eastern Europe is also illustrated by population surveys. The results of some quantitative surveys on attitudes towards Islam and Muslims (even before the so-called refugee crisis) show that Islamophobia is widespread among the population of some Eastern European countries¹, even though the proportion of Muslims in the population is significantly lower than in Western European countries.

A look at social media such as Facebook reveals that anti-Islamic sites are very popular in Eastern European countries. That is why it is no surprise that not only right-wing extremist parties, but also other nationalist and openly Islamophobic movements are experiencing a boom through the perceived threat of Islam, both in their core programme and as part of their general xenophobic orientation.² Although there have been many media reports on Islamophobia in Eastern Europe, we actually do not know much about the manifestations of Islamophobia in the population of Eastern European countries. There is still a considerable research gap in terms both of our knowledge of universal theories and of empirically robust material from quantitative and qualitative social research.

¹E.g. Enes Bayrakli, Farid Hafez, European Islamophobia Report 2017, Ankara 2018, URL: http://www.islamophobiaeurope.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/EIR_2017.pdf; Alexander Yendell, Welche individuellen und kontextuellen Faktoren beeinflussen die Haltungen gegenüber Muslimen in ausgewählten europäischen Ländern?, in: Ahmet Cavuldak, Oliver Hidalgo, Philipp W. Hildmann und Holger Zapf (Hrsg.): Demokratie und Islam. Theoretische und empirische Studien, Wiesbaden 2014, S. 461–487; Andreas Zick, Beate Küpper, Andreas Hövermann, Die Abwertung der Anderen. Eine europäische Zustandsbeschreibung zu Intoleranz, Vorurteilen und Diskriminierung, Berlin 2011, URL: <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/do/07905-20110311.pdf>.

²E.g. in Poland, PEGIDA Poland, Polish Defence League, ONR; in the Czech Republic, Úsvit; in Romania, Noua Dreapta; in Croatia, Ustaše, etc.

The explanations of Islamophobia and anti-Muslim sentiment often refer to socio-psychological theories which already have a long tradition in prejudice research and a relatively high level of explanatory power. One prominent theory is, for example, the deprivation thesis, which sees a connection between objective or subjectively perceived economic disadvantage and the devaluation of strangers. This devaluation of strangers comes to the fore particularly in times of economic recession or financial crises. Most scholars following the deprivation thesis argue that, in the battle for scarce resources, members of the majority society tend to derogate competing immigrants.³ It seems plausible in this context that people in East European countries with a socialist history are dissatisfied with the economic situation especially in the aftermath of the financial crisis. The crisis had a massive impact on Eastern and South East European economies, which were not prepared for a recession or credit shortage, and it seems plausible that, in this context, there has been a rise in the level of anxiety that people feel with regard to potential migrants and competitors on the job market.

Another relevant theory is the contact hypothesis, which claims that individual personal contact with members of an outgroup may reduce stereotypes.⁴ A few studies on Islamophobia show that contacts with Muslims reduce negative attitudes towards them.⁵ The classical contact hypothesis is broadened by the parasocial contact hypothesis⁶, which postulates that mass media such as radio, television and films

³Susanne Rippl, Dirk Baier, Das Deprivationskonzept in der Rechtsextremismusforschung. Eine vergleichende Analyse, in: Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie 57 (2005) 4, S. 644–666.

⁴See Gordon W. Allport, *The Nature of Prejudice*, Cambridge, Mass. 1954; Thomas F. Pettigrew, Linda R. Tropp, A Meta-Analytic Test of Intergroup Contact Theory, in: *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 90 (2006) 5, S. 751–783.

⁵Gert Pickel, Alexander Yendell, Islam als Bedrohung? Beschreibung und Erklärung von Einstellungen zum Islam im Ländervergleich, in: *Zeitschrift für Vergleichende Politikwissenschaft* 10 (2016) 3–4, S. 273–309 (DOI: 10.1007/s12286-016-0309-6); Detlef Pollack, Olaf Müller, Gergely Rosta, Nils Friedrichs, Alexander Yendell, *Grenzen der Toleranz. Wahrnehmung und Akzeptanz religiöser Vielfalt in Europa*, Wiesbaden 2014.

⁶Donald Horton, Richard R. Wohl, Mass communication and para-social interaction: Observations on intimacy at a distance, in: *Psychiatry* 19 (1956) 3, S. 215–229.

can create the illusion in people that they have direct contact, and can therefore influence the attitudes that people have towards a social group that is perceived as foreign or strange. There is a strong „bad news“ bias especially regarding Islam, as the media concentrates on reports of terrorist attacks by Islamists.⁷ Indirect contacts with Islam are assumed to be mainly negative and they can lead to stereotyping, especially if direct contacts with Muslims are infrequent. In contrast, direct contacts with Muslims could mitigate the negative bias against Islam and Muslims. One explanation for Islamophobia in Eastern Europe could therefore also be the lack of contact with Muslims. In most Eastern European countries, the number of Muslims is negligible. Many Eastern Europeans probably do not know Muslims personally, and instead base their opinion on news of Islamist terrorism.

The concept of the authoritarian personality⁸ is also often used to explain Islamophobia. The authoritarian personality is believed to be a state of mind or attitude in which a person shows absolute obedience or submission to authority, while oppressing his or her subordinates. It usually applies to individuals who are known or viewed as having an authoritative, strict, or oppressive personality towards subordinates. The authoritarian person cannot live his or her own life, and therefore hates the lives of others.⁹ It is conceivable that, since authoritarian structures played an important role before the fall of communism, Eastern Europe is now a breeding-ground for right-wing extremism and xenophobia.

⁷Sabine Schiffer, Der Islam in deutschen Medien, in: *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte* 55 (2005) 20, S. 23–30, URL: <http://www.bpb.de/files/UUJUJ0.pdf>; Kai Hafez, Mediengesellschaft – Wissensgesellschaft? Gesellschaftliche Entstehungsbedingungen des Islambildes deutscher Medien, in: Thorsten Gerald Schneiders (Hrsg.), *Islamfeindlichkeit. Wenn die Grenzen der Kritik verschwimmen. 2., aktualisierte und erweiterte Auflage*, Wiesbaden 2010, S. 101–119.

⁸Theodor W. Adorno, Else Frenkel-Brunswick, Daniel J. Levinson, R. Nevitt Sanford, *The Authoritarian Personality*, New York 1950.

⁹Oliver Decker, Elmar Brähler, *Autoritäre Dynamiken: Ergebnisse der bisherigen »Mitte«-Studien und Fragestellung*, in: ders., Johannes Kiess, ders. (Hrsg.): *Die enthemmte Mitte. Autoritäre und rechtsextreme Einstellung in Deutschland*, Gießen 2016, S. 11–22.

Finally, intergroup theories investigate the division between „we“ and the „others“. For example, Social Identity Theory¹⁰ proposes that people identify with groups to increase their own self-esteem. These can be nations, cultures, religious communities, or football clubs. One way for people to increase their self-esteem may be to boost the significance of their ingroup by devaluing the significance of an outgroup. Ethnic identification could play a particular role in Eastern European countries, where ethnic origin is highly significant for the question of whether to accept other people; this is in contrast to countries with a longer tradition of immigration and naturalization, and with a more civic form of national identity.¹¹ Muslims who do not belong to a person's own ethnic group are likely to be derogated as they do not have the opportunity to become fully respected members of the ingroup.

These are just a few examples of important theories that have proven to be useful in explaining Islamophobia. Statistical models that seek to verify such theories, however, show that there is usually a high level of residual variance, which means that we can actually only partially explain Islamophobic attitudes. Further explanations may then be historical, political and cultural.

Against this background, this Special Issue is designed to help answer three key research questions:

- 1) What forms and manifestations of Islamophobia are there in Eastern European countries at the level of attitudes, behaviours, the media, and political contexts?
- 2) How has Islamophobia developed historically in Eastern Europe?
- 3) Which theories at the micro, meso and macro social level can explain Islamophobia in Eastern Europe?

The articles in this Special Issue are the result of a workshop attended

¹⁰Henri Tajfel, John C. Turner, *The Social Identity Theory of Intergroup Behavior*, in: Stephen Worchel, William G. Austin (Hrsg.), *Psychology of Intergroup Relations*, 2nd Edition, Chicago 1986, S. 7–24.

¹¹Alexander Yendell, *Welche individuellen und kontextuellen Faktoren beeinflussen die Haltungen*, 2014; Cornelia Weins, *Fremdenfeindliche Vorurteile in den Staaten der EU*, Wiesbaden 2004; Mikael Hjerm, *National Identity: A Comparison of Sweden, Germany and Australia*, in: *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 24 (1998) 3, S. 451–469.

by scholars from Eastern Europe, Western Europe and North America that took place in Leipzig in November 2017.

The contributions are arranged in such a way, that a general theoretical and transnational/comparative perspective leads to a case-specific view. The first article emerged from the keynote by Ivan Kalmar, who argues that Islamophobia in Eastern Europe does not stem from a long Eastern European tradition, but qualitatively resembles Western European Islamophobia. The second article, by Farid Hafez, discusses Islamophobia in Eastern Europe as a form of racism. Hafez questions the claim that „Islamophobia without Muslims“ is specific to Eastern Europe, and suggests instead that „Islamophobia without Muslims“ reveals a fundamental essence that is present in every form of racism, and that is therefore true of Western Europe, too. Gert Pickel and Cemal Öztürk compare Islamophobic attitudes in Eastern European countries on the basis of data from population surveys, and test social-psychological theories in multivariate explanatory models. One of the most important findings of this analysis is that the lack of contacts with Muslims in Eastern Europe explains the high level of Islamophobia.

The remaining articles discuss Islamophobia in individual countries. David Herbert raises the question of whether prejudices against Muslims in the Russian Federation are based on Islamophobia or on an internalized racial hierarchy. He concludes that Muslims are not the group that suffers the highest level of prejudice in Russia, and that, in actual fact, ethnicity appears to trump religion as a marker of difference. Aaron Walter describes the situation in Slovakia and provides answers to the question as to the extent to which Islamophobia influenced the 2016 election, and to whether the level of Islamophobia in Slovakia expresses public feeling, or whether it is instead part of a larger sense of public discontentment. Walter reveals that the 2015 migration crisis influenced the Slovak parliamentary elections in 2016, and that post-truth politics in the context of Islamophobia influenced public discourse by appealing to emotions disconnected from policy details. He concludes that there are clear signs suggesting that Slo-

vak public feeling is Islamophobic. Premysl Rosulek deals with the songs of some Czech singers who are derogatory towards Muslim immigrants in their songs. He describes the different ways that feelings of threat regarding the migration crisis are manifested, such as in the image of huge crowds of immigrants entering the country, the feared Islamicization of society, the need to mobilize at the European level, and the portrayal of a Syrian man as posing a threat to women. Finally, Konrad Pedziwiatr discusses the role of the church in Poland in the context of re-Christianization and the prevention of a perceived process of Islamicization. Pedziwiatr argues that the alliance between church and state in Poland continues to sacralize nation and state, and portrays migrants from Islamic countries as a key threat.

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