

Islamophobia, Antisemitism, and Populism: Not Only in Eastern Europe

von Ivan Kalmar

Zusammenfassung

It is often asserted that Islamophobia is more common in Eastern than in Western Europe, with the reason given for this alleged Islamophobia being that Eastern Europe has a long tradition of intolerance (and particularly of antisemitism) and too short a history of coming to terms with this tradition. This article argues that this is a myth. Islamophobia in Eastern Europe is qualitatively the same as in Western Europe, but is quantitatively greater in many Eastern European countries than in many but not all Western European countries. The one striking difference is that Islamophobia has been more politically successful in the East of Europe than the West, at least initially – but this gap has perhaps been closed recently by the rise to power of unabashedly Islamophobic politicians in Austria and Italy (as in America). To understand the difference, we must focus on recent political relations between Western and Eastern Europe. Much of East European frustration is due to the way that communist rule was followed not by a meeting of East and West as equals, but by a Western political and economic takeover, including the largest transfer of public capital to private hands in history, which was applauded in the West. Too much emphasis on the past can serve to obscure this very contemporary fact.

Ivan Kalmar (University of Toronto, Canada)

Many East Europeans are dissatisfied. And there is a common conviction that they are dissatisfied because they do not understand liberal democracy; because they have not been able to shake off their dark authoritarian heritage. In this heritage, nothing is darker than the heavy baggage of antisemitism. The Islamophobia of East Europeans is – so the story goes – the result of their ancient, and continuing, antisemitism.

But attributing Islamophobia to culturally ingrained antisemitism is in effect to depoliticize the issue. It takes us away from understand-

ing that the political advancement of Islamophobia is everywhere part and parcel of an illiberal, populist revolution: a revolt against the long advancement of neoliberal forms of globalism. „Washington“ in America, „Brussels“ in Europe; there are many differences but throughout the Euro-Atlantic world many ordinary people have turned away from their political, as well as their economic and cultural, elites, whom they now see as their oppressors. Eastern Europe is like everybody else, only more so. It behoves us to study why it is more so, without denying that it is also like everybody else.

I have written extensively in the past about the joint history of the Western Christian image of Muslims and Jews, and about Islamophobia and antisemitism. Since its appearance, Islam has been compared to Judaism, and Muslims have been compared to Jews. But the exact form taken by Islamophobia, antisemitism, as well as the relationship between the two, has varied greatly through various periods and sociopolitical contexts. The long *durée* trajectory has been outlined in such works as *Orientalism and the Jews*, which I co-edited with Derek Penslar, and more recently *Antisemitism and Islamophobia*, edited by James Renton and Ben Gidley. The question that I would like to address here, however, concerns our contemporary situation: „Is there a variant of the relationship between hatred for Muslims and hatred for Jews today, such that it distinctively characterizes Eastern Europe“?

The 2015-16 migrant crisis, which brought hundreds of thousands of new Muslim migrants to Europe, reinforced the perception that this is so. Hungary, applauded by its erstwhile socialist neighbours, erected a wire fence to keep even more migrants from entering the European Union. „Have East Europeans no shame?“ asked the prominent Princeton historian, Jan Gross. Perhaps more than anyone else, Gross has made the world familiar with the anti-Jewish atrocities committed by some Poles during and even after World War II.¹ With that

¹Jan Tomasz Gross, *Fear: Anti-Semitism in Poland after Auschwitz: An Essay in Historical Interpretation*, New York 2006; Jan Tomasz Gross / Irena Grudzińska-Gross, *Golden Harvest: Events at the Periphery of the Holocaust*, New York 2012; Joanna Tokarska-Bakir, *The Polish Underground Organization Wolność I Niezawisłość* and

in mind, he continues, „[w]hen the war ended, Germany – because of the victors’ denazification policies and its responsibility for instigating and carrying out the Holocaust – had no choice but to „work through“ its murderous past. This was a long, difficult process; but German society, mindful of its historical misdeeds, has become capable of confronting moral and political challenges of the type posed by the influx of refugees today. And Chancellor Angela Merkel has set an example of leadership on migrants that puts all of Eastern Europe’s leaders to shame. Eastern Europe, by contrast, has yet to come to terms with its murderous past. Only when it does will its people be able to recognize their obligation to save those fleeing in the face of evil.“²

Given Gross’ casual attitude to Eastern Europe, it is not surprising that when he says „Germany“ he clearly means West Germany. Now one would certainly think that the many years of intense *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* in Germany must have had some effect. This process whereby government, academia, and civil society examined their racist crimes was much more intense in West Germany than in Austria, France, the Netherlands, Italy, Greece, and East Central Europe. This may well have had an effect on Islamophobia in these areas today. And, incidentally, one must include the former East Germany here, too. The general contours of the claim, and of the facts that underlie the claim, that Islamophobia is stronger in Eastern Europe also characterizes the situation within Germany, where it is more pronounced in the East than in the West. Islamophobia, like all social phenomena, is overdetermined everywhere. One reason, albeit one that is very difficult to define, may perhaps be the weight of the past during the Nazi period that has not yet been examined fully.

Nevertheless, too much emphasis on the distant past may obscure the role of the more recent past, which I would argue is stronger. The former foreign minister of Germany, Joschka Fischer, claims that there

Anti-Jewish Pogroms, 1945–6, in: *Patterns of Prejudice* 51, no. 2 (2017): p.111–136.

²Jan Tomasz Gross / Eastern Europe’s Crisis of Shame / <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/eastern-europe-refugee-crisis-xenophobia-by-jan-gross-2015-09> (28.11.2018).

is a direct link between the Nazis and today’s *Alternative für Deutschland* party, whose success in the 2017 parliamentary elections shocked the country and the world.³ This is quite an astonishing claim coming from a former government minister who joined the German cabinet nine years after unification. Fischer mentions no responsibility for the frustration that has led to the rise and popularity of the AfD, which remains more popular in the East. Like Gross, Fischer completely evades the question as to whether the behaviour of the West after it won the Cold War might possibly have anything to do with the level and expression of hatred today. This is the effect of positing not just some correlation between current Islamophobia and past antisemitism in Eastern Europe, but an uninterrupted continuity.

Let us pause briefly here to discuss some relevant facts. Are East Europeans more antisemitic and Islamophobic than West Europeans? As a whole, perhaps. However, Fig. 1 shows that this is not necessarily the case for every country. For example, Hungary and Poland are at much the same level as Italy and Greece, according to data provided by the Pew Research Center from 201*.

Unfavorable view of	Czech*	Italy	Poland	Hung.	Greece	Spain	Netherl.	France	Germ.	UK
Jews	17%	55%	55%	24%	24%	21%	16%	10%	5%	7%
Muslims	75%	69%	66%	66%	65%	50%	43%	29%	29%	28%

Fig. 1: Percentage of Europeans who have an unfavourable view of Muslims and Jews (Spring 2016).

³Früherer Außenminister: Joschka Fischer Sieht AfD in Der Tradition Der NSDAP, in: *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, <http://www.faz.net/1.5255410>, (29.11.2018).

Source: Pew Research Center⁴. The Czech statistics are by the Czech Centre for the Study of Public Opinion (2017), and compared 'Jews' and 'Arabs' (not 'Muslims').

The Czech data are even more damaging to the old-antisemitism-to-new-Islamophobia thesis. For Czechs are more Islamophobic than Poles, it seems, and yet the level of antisemitism observed in the Czech population is low. That the Czech Republic is barely more antisemitic than a typical Western country was also confirmed in a 2015 opinion survey by the Anti-Defamation League, which found that antisemitic opinions were held by 13 percent of Czechs, compared to 14 percent of Canadians.⁵ The negative correlation here of antisemitism with a high level of Islamophobia is reminiscent less of the „Eastern European“ stereotype than of the United States.

Another relevant issue is that of „Islamophobia without Muslims“. It is frequently observed that, while Islamophobia is high in Eastern Europe, „there are no Muslims there“. The absence of Muslims is in fact an example of hyperbole that the thousands of Muslims who live in every East Central European country might not take kindly to. However, the so-called „contact hypothesis“ has quite a lot of evidence supporting its claim that people who have more contact with Muslims are less Islamophobic. The situation in much of Eastern Europe may be an exact illustration of this. However, the predictions of the contact hypothesis are also valid for Western Europe and America. It is well-known that Islamophobic sentiment is stronger in rural parts of the West, where there are relatively few Muslims, than in the big cities, where there are many. „Islamophobia without Muslims“ turns out to be not an insight into a specifically East European racism, but rather into a context of racism that exists in both the East and the West. Its

⁴Pew Research Center, Europeans Fear Wave of Refugees Will Mean More Terrorism, Fewer Jobs, <http://assets.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2016/07/14095942/Pew-Research-Center-EU-Refugees-and-National-Identity-Report-FINAL-July-11-2016.pdf>, 39-40 (07.06.2017).

⁵Anti Defamation League, ADL global 100, <http://global100.adl.org/public/ADL-Global-100-Executive-Summary2015.pdf>, (07.06.2017).

attribution to the East is an artificial consequence of a methodology that assumes a priori that the units for comparison must be East and West (when in fact that comparison is secondary to the one between province and metropolis).

In the end, the contact hypothesis demonstrates that Islamophobia is caused not by real but by imaginary Muslims. And there is a tradition in Europe (East and West) and its transplants overseas that views Muslims as the enemy, and imagines Islam as an authoritarian religion that denies both a loving God and political liberty.⁶ Islamophobic expression has a long tradition.

Nevertheless, the facts are clear. Farid Hafez's collaborators in the comprehensive *Islamophobia Reports* describe, for all of Eastern Europe except perhaps the Balkans, the relative dormancy of Islamophobic expression until the 2015-16 migration crisis, when Islamophobia quite suddenly erupted and moved to the centre of political discourse.⁷ The most significant watershed was when the ex-communist countries pulled together to oppose the migrant quotas imposed by the European Union. It is not a continuing tradition of antisemitism and Islamophobia that most provoked the political successes of populism, but an unpopular policy from „Brussels“ that reinforced the perception that the Eastern members of the Union are talked at but not listened to. Some now even say that „Brussels“ has replaced „Moscow“ as the new oppressor of their nation. To them, the „Muslim invasion“ (a term first used by the French Front National) is simply a creation of „Brussels“. But let us stay with Gross' accusation that East European intolerance is due to an undigested past of intolerance. Gross' approach is based on three assumptions or suggestions, two of which are quite obvious and the other, more subtle. The first is that the antisemitism of the past is connected to the Islamophobia of today. I myself have written several articles supporting this point.

⁶For the long history of this imaginative complex, see Ivan Kalmar, *Early Orientalism: Imagined Islam and the Notion of Sublime Power*, London and New York 2014.

⁷Farid Hafez, Enes Bayraklı, *European Islamophobia Report 2015*, Ankara 2016; Farid Hafez / Enes Bayraklı, *European Islamophobia Report 2016*, Ankara 2017.

The second suggestion consists of two parts: one, that East European socialism failed to address an antisemitic impulse of the past that specifically characterizes Eastern Europe; and, two, that the post-socialist societies have continued to ignore it as well. It is certainly true that, in spite of some mostly rhetorical opposition to antisemitism, most communist regimes were guilty of antisemitism themselves. It may also be that many or all of the post-socialist governments also failed to address antisemitism and its past crimes adequately. However, the pertinent question is one of causation. Is Islamophobia in Eastern Europe today caused by an active volcanic core of hatred that burns only under the post-communist ground, and so erupts in Islamophobia there but not elsewhere? I do not think so.

The third, more hidden assumption, is that whatever happens in one East European country is an instance that can be generalized to them all. It is to Gross' great credit that he discovered and publicized the fact that post-Holocaust pogroms have occurred in Poland. They have also occurred in other East European countries, but not in all of them. None are known to have occurred in what is today the Czech Republic, Estonia, or Bulgaria. Yet no one seems to think that there is a problem with describing what happened in Poland as „East European“. This is because observers bring to their analysis a pre-existing notion of Eastern Europe as a unified, single area. If something happens in one place in Eastern Europe, then it is true of all of Eastern Europe. Of course, most observers will say upon reflection that they are fully aware of differences within Eastern Europe. The problem, which I call „Eastern Europeanism“, occurs unreflectedly. An essentialized view of Eastern Europe is the beginning, not the end, of most Western scholarly, journalistic, and popular analysis of the area.

How old is this notion that there are two different Europes, one in the East and the other in the West? According to Peter Wolff, this ontological difference goes back to Enlightenment thought if not before. But much of Wolff's conclusion is based on his practice of forcing an East Europeanist interpretation on anything that happens in Eastern

Europe. Mozart's remark, „my people of Prague understand me“, for example, is typically interpreted by Wolff as an ironic comment about a linguistically and culturally different Czech audience, when it was actually a straightforward statement of cultural affinity rather than difference, between a German-speaking composer and what was then a mostly German-speaking audience. In reality, the term „Eastern Europe“, with two capital Es, was barely used in English before World War II. In German, the concept may owe much to the best-selling series of novels by Emil Franzos, beginning in 1876 with *Aus Halb-Asien* (or *Out of Half-Asia*).⁸ These were literary ethnographies of Galicia and Bukovina, the eastern provinces of Austria. Halb-Asien as a concept appeared in opposition to a growing pan-Slavic consciousness, and among other things became a contemptuous Nazi epithet for Russians. The actual term Osteuropa seems to have appeared in scholarship only with the founding of the *Osteuropainstitut* in Breslau (Wrocław) in 1922, which was occasioned by a desire to study the newly-formed states that replaced Austria-Hungary after World War I.

But it was really only after World War II that terms like Eastern Europe, *Osteuropa*, and *Europe de l'Est* gained currency. Wolff suggested that the border between East and West was along the Iron Curtain long before Churchill's famous 1946 speech on the subject. But this is not so. There was no ontological border to speak of before the Soviet domination of Eastern Europe. It was during Soviet rule and/or domination that the region became meaningfully distinct from the West. The bleak apartment blocks that are a distinguishing characteristic of the architectural landscape throughout the area were erected along with an almost equally uniform set of institutions and cultural policies. The ideology of building socialism was much the same. Between roughly 1946 and roughly 1989, Eastern Europe did exist as a recognizably distinct part of the continent and of the world.

But not before and, I would argue, not after. After the fall of the So-

⁸Fred Sommer, „Halb-Asien“: German Nationalism and the Eastern European Works of Emil Franzos, in: *Stuttgarter Arbeiten Zur Germanistik*, Vol. Nr. 145 (1984).

viet Empire, the experience of Russia of wild capitalism under Yeltsin was only partially matched by the more disciplined transition and relatively solid democratic structures of the Baltic and Central European states. The Balkan states faced different issues again, and so did in different ways different parts of the former Yugoslavia, and Romania and Bulgaria.

I am focusing on the Visegrád Four (or „V4“) countries: Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Hungary, because I know the situation there best, but also because my very argument is that there is not enough commonality in Eastern Europe to generalize about all of it.

Soviet domination was the defining feature of the post-World-War II invention of Eastern Europe, but Russia today is a completely different player from the V4. Many government and opposition leaders, it is true, have become warmer to Russia, but in most cases this is because Russia aggressively cultivates its interests within the region. According to a report on Russian disinformation tactics, the *Kremlin Playbook: Understanding Russian Influence in Central and Eastern Europe*, compiled by the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington in 2016, Russia's aim is to destabilize the Western world through online and offline sources, and it treats East Central Europe not as its own „near abroad“, but simply as a proximate part of the European Union. Russian disinformation has been flexible. For example, in Slovakia, it closely supports the extremist opposition, while in Hungary it helps the populist government. The Russian embassy in Prague has more staff than its embassy in London, which has raised concerns that the Czech capital has become a staging ground for Russian operations within the EU.

All of which goes to say that Russia is a powerful outsider, but by no means a member of the club. It is inconceivable that Russia and the V4 would form an official alliance in the way that was suggested for Austria by the leader of the Freedom Party, Hanz-Christian Strache. Tellingly, the only public objection raised by the now Prime Minister, Sebastian Kurz, was that the V4 would not really want Austria to join.

If Russia cannot be painted with the same „East European“ brush as the Visegrád Four, there are major differences even within the alliance. For example, recently the Czechs and Slovaks agreed to new rules for expatriate EU workers championed by French president Macron, while Poland and Hungary opposed them.

The idea of „Eastern Europe“ does not persist because of any objective commonalities. It resembles Edward Said's famous notion of Orientalism. For Said, Orientalism drew on a centuries-long vocabulary to „produce“ in the colonial context an Orient ontologically different from the West. There is not an objectively recognizable, pre-existing East-West distinction: the Orient partly overlaps culturally and politically with the West, and variation within the Orient is too great for the Orient to be distinguished on positive grounds. If, nevertheless, an Orient is unquestioningly posited in the West, it is because „Orientalism is fundamentally a political doctrine willed over the Orient because the Orient was weaker than the West“ (204). In other words, the West invented the Orient as a concept covering a geographical area where it wished to, and did, assert its superior power. The invention of Orientalism was, according to Said, not a justification after the fact for Western imperialism, but an active ingredient of Western domination itself. It was supported by political, economic, military, and educational institutions, the latter including academic departments, which until Said's devastating critique were called departments of Oriental Studies.

Similarly, Eastern Europeanism creates and institutionalizes its own object, Eastern Europe. And in its post-Cold-War version, Eastern Europeanism is indeed a „political doctrine willed over“ Eastern Europe because Eastern Europe is weaker than the West. Ronald Reagan's call to „Mr Gorbachev“, which popular history sees as having caused the wall to fall like Joshua's trumpet, was at first celebrated as a call for East-West unity in Europe. But it soon turned out that, rather than welcoming East Europeans as equals, the West was more interested in helping Western multinationals to swallow up the faltering post-

socialist economies. The notion was quite welcome in East Central Europe and the Baltic states, whose citizens considered themselves essentially Western and looked forward to being integrated into the Western economic system, which promised them not only Western goods but also Western wages. Many individuals who had been in commanding positions under communism aided in the sell-out to the West, greatly benefiting themselves from the collaboration. In Russia, however, the same sort of people swooped down on the socialist economic carcass before the West could reach there. It is this Russian economic resistance that, in my view, has created the East Europeanist discourse, which sees the region as an ontologically different part of the continent, where progress as defined by the standards of Western liberal democracy and Western global business not only *did* not take place, but *could* not take place. It could not take place there not for contemporary political and economic reasons, as the East Europeanist says, but because of a cultural difference going back centuries. Wolff's book on the ancient pedigree of the East-West difference was an early manifestation of this new East Europeanism in academia. Popular culture references to Russian gangsters and prostitutes did the job in the everyday imagination. Contrary to early hopes of unity, an imagined wall replaced the real wall.

It is in this context that persistent antisemitism in post-socialist Eastern Europe became an issue in the West. It is part of the discourse of Eastern Europeanism, which in the name of Western liberal values devalues its object, Eastern Europe, and constructs it as an area incapable of rising above its heavy past. Now this must surely ring a bell. For, Islamophobia also constructs a rigid, backward-looking Islamic world, and also contrasts its illiberal aspects as a sign of its unchanging backwardness. Indeed, antisemitism is among the sins attributed to both East Europeans and Muslims. How ironic that an additional sin now attributed to Eastern Europe is that of Islamophobia.