COMMENTARY

Islamophobia in Europe: The Radical Right and the Mainstream

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ABSTRACT *The surge of Islamophobia in Europe has been linked with the growing popularity and agenda-setting power of the radical right. However, attributing the rise of Islamophobia to the radical right-wing parties is all too comforting at a time when the dominant, 'mainstream' culture has increasingly embraced positions openly hostile and often discriminatory to Islam and Muslim communities. The fight against Islamophobia begins with the realization that Islamophobia is a 'mainstream' problem for European societies, which now need more than ever a positive vision for a diverse, inclusive, and open post-crisis Europe.*

The radical right has been flashing brighter and brighter on the international political radar. As a party family, it is enjoying impressive electoral success in a wide range of countries well beyond its traditional strongholds. In some cases, its parties have managed to become coalition partners or brokers, not only gaining access to power but also exerting influence on state policy. Elsewhere, the radical right remains a potent repository for the growing wave of protest voting even when (and perhaps also because) mainstream political forces have categorically ruled out any prospect of cooperating with them. Beyond organized parties, movements with a populist, hyper-nationalist, nativist ideological profile have become more active in recent years, both on the streets and on the internet, mobilizing support for their divisive and exclusionary political agendas.

The ideology of the international radical right may be extremely hard to pin down and classify, ranging from extreme social conservatism to 'soft' populism, often with liberal hues, to violent activism; and from seemingly respectable, suave agents of parliamentary democracy to groups with para-military characteristics or even clandestine terrorist links. The agents of the radical right seem to always disagree on at least as many issues

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In the 1980s and 1990s, rising stars of the radical right used the ideological trope of 'ethno-pluralism' in order to attack Islam as allegedly alien, inassimilable, and dangerous to 'European' liberal culture

and strategies as those that they profess to share. Yet, in the last decade, strong points of ideological and political convergence have started to crystallize, turning the radical right into a truly transnational European and occasionally trans-Atlantic force with an ever-stronger presence and impact. The topicality of a new range of issues, such as immigration, international terrorism, national sovereignty, globalization, and the effects of the worldwide economic crisis, have created a political milieu that has allowed the radical right not only to thrive but also to unite its otherwise disparate and fragmented forces. It is telling that, after years of trial and error, a radical right group in the European Parliament finally came into existence in the summer of 2015 - with significant absences, to be sure, but also featuring the most formidable political stars of the party.[1]

A visceral opposition to, and demonization of Islam lies at the epicenter of the contemporary radical right's ideological profile and political message.[2] It is on this issue that a sequence of the right's other political priorities intersect: these include putting a brake on growing migration inflows from north Africa and Asia, the post-9/11 paranoia about al-Qaeda and more recently ISIL (the so-called Islamic State), visceral opposition to multiculturalism, fears of (national and 'European') identity dilution, calls for a 'fortress Europe' and the scrapping of the EU's Schengen border zone, as well as concerns about unemployment and falling living standards after the 2008 financial crisis. Islamophobia, a socially constructed and reproduced prejudice against Islam as a religion, culture, and way of life, has deep roots in European societies that, in different forms, go back decades or even centuries. Such roots have also traditionally spanned national and political boundaries. What, however, had been originally linked to a form of xenophobia, racism, and primarily religious intolerance, has been transformed into a profound and acute *security* concern - fed, radicalized, diffused, and 'normalized' by a widening range of contemporary existential anxieties. The role of the European radical right in refracting public debate about 'Islam' and 'Europe' through a securitization prism is central to this discussion; however, it should not detract from the ways in which the dominant, 'mainstream' culture has increasingly embraced positions openly hostile to Islam and Muslim communities. The recent unprecedented Islamophobic outburst of the (currently) frontrunner Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump in the USA, going as far as urging a blanket ban on all Muslims who attempt to enter the country,

should serve as a stark reminder that a novel form of (in)security-obsessed Islamophobia has firmly shifted to the political and social mainstream in many western societies.[3]

The Radical Right and Islamophobia: (Some) Good and (Much) Not-so-good News

The radical right has a long history of visceral opposition to Islam and demonization of Muslims. In the 1980s and 1990s, rising stars of the radical right such as Filip Dewinter of the then Flemish Block (VNV), Jean-Marie Le Pen of the French Front National, and Pim Fortuyn in the Netherlands, used the ideological trope of 'ethno-pluralism'[4] in order to attack Islam as allegedly alien, inassimilable, and dangerous to 'European' liberal culture. The idea that cultures are geographically-bound and that citizenship should be restricted to a narrow, culturally/ethnically homogeneous group, became the bedrock of the new radical right's critique of liberal multiculturalism and immigration, with the added benefit that ethno-pluralism's emphasis on culture and identity appeared to jettison the old, discredited idea of racial inequality. In 2005, Dewinter rejected the accusation that the radical right is either racist or xenophobic, but had no problem declaring 'Islamophobia' as a legitimate ideological feature of the VNV.[5] Four years later, Dewinter again described Islamophobia as 'a duty' for European citizens, calling 'moderate' Islam 'a multicultural illusion.'[6] The Islamophobic rhetoric of radical right parties has predictably grown ever since –with every terrorist incident perpetrated in the name of Islam, with every wave of immigration, with every negative data about unemployment and pressure on social services, with every critique of multiculturalism and expression of anxiety about an allegedly diluted 'European' identity.

There is both relatively good news and not-so-good news from this front. The good news is two-fold. First, in spite of its apparent popularity and favorable political milieu, so far the radical right has not achieved anything akin to a genuine electoral breakthrough in Europe. Even in those cases where parties of the radical right have scored impressive victories or saw their support spike, the trend has lacked the characteristics of a permanent voter alignment with them, and their wins have usually been followed by significant dips in support. Second, mainstream society has shown a degree of determination to address Islamophobia, in addition to other exclusionary prejudices, in both action and language. The learning curve from the post-WWII fight against anti-Semitism and biological racism has started to inform public awareness of the danger posed by Islamophobia for the welfare of millions of communities with a Muslim background who have lived in Europe for a long time, or who have moved to Europe more recently. As the number of cases of intimidation, discrimination, and even physical attacks against Muslims in Europe are rising, even in countries with very few similar incidents in the past,[7] it is

Islamic Central Council of Switzerland member holding a press conference in Lugano, in front of a poster against an upcoming cantonal vote on September 18, 2013, regarding the banning of face-covering headgear in public places.

AFP PHOTO / FABRICE COFFRINI

at least encouraging to see that many European states have passed laws that criminalize not only the attacks themselves or any attempt at intimidation but also hate speech itself. Meanwhile, human rights groups and research centers have worked incessantly to raise public awareness of the prevalence and dangers of Islamophobia, exposing disturbing data, monitoring instances of violations, and seeking to inform policy-making through active, constructive participation.

But this is where the good news ends. The reality is that all these attempts unfold against a hostile backdrop of an increasing, multifaceted securitization of Islam that breeds ever stronger Islamophobia among mainstream society. It is the same backdrop that the radical right has been painting since 9/11, playing on old and new fears about existential, national, cultural, and economic security, a security now allegedly under unprecedented critical attack and approaching something akin to the proverbial 'tipping point' of an apocalyptic crisis. For communities with a Muslim background living in Europe this has become a desperately trying time. They have come under attack as 'alien' to Europe, as culturally incompatible (whether because they allegedly refuse to assimilate, or because they allegedly cannot do so while maintaining their religion and associated 'ways of life'). They have been portrayed as dangerous competitors for material prosperity, in terms of scarce jobs and scaled-back social benefits. They have been assumed to be exceptionally vulnerable to ideological radicalization and recruitment to terrorist causes, and de facto suspected of harboring an extremism that constantly threatens social peace. Stigmatized as either

inimical to Europe's values, or intruders through the continent's porous frontiers, Muslims remain at the very heart of the radical right's divisive, intolerant, and exclusionary political message.

Still, it is my contention that this is by no means the worst piece of news. Modern societies have always faced the challenge of extremism and there is no indication that they will ever be freed from fringe forces that preach fear or hatred against particular groups of 'others.' A resilient liberal mainstream political culture can draw lines that marginalize extreme voices, use the power of debate and persuasion to counter hate, and devise processes and rules that defend human rights and protect those vulnerable to discrimination without either giving in to moral panic or compromising freedom of expression. Yet, this is precisely where mainstream society is currently failing. Today, Islamophobia, alongside a prevalent hysteria towards migration inflows, has become largely institutionalized and normalized in public language, in mainstream party programs, and in media coverage. Distrust and lack of intimacy towards, fear of, and even hatred towards Muslims and Islam have become pervasive, while Islamophobic discourses are being reproduced with moral indifference, more and more deprived of their moral stigma and troubling implications.

What is the role of the radical right ideologies and political parties in this development? Fear of, and aversion to Islam have deep historical and cultural roots in the western dominant culture. Neither Islamophobia nor the broader anti-immigration/ anti-multiculturalist rhetoric are confined to the radical right parties and their -occasional or more permanently aligned- minority of voters. In fact, focus on election results alone obfuscates a deeper, more threatening social reality, whereby Islamophobia effortlessly spans the supposed 'mainstream-extremism' nexus of contemporary western societies. Therefore, the observation that such divisive discourses have been making significant inroads into mainstream political and social debates is not related to a kind of 'contagion' from the radical right. It is rather the outcome of a process of re-activating and legitimizing social demand that already existed, in a suppressed form, within mainstream society.

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Any social demand for more radical or transgressive ideas, whether latent or newly radicalized, needs to be "liberated" (i.e., shed its taboo stigma and

become a "legitimate" political/social discourse), ideologically framed (i.e., combined with other popular ideas and discourses into a seemingly coherent narrative), and politically expressed. Particular (effective) kinds of supply do not so much generate demand (although they may crucially enhance it in the process) as they activate, structure, and express it in political terms. Therefore, predictably, supply and demand-side explanations do intersect and continue to sustain each other in the process: more (effective) supply liberates (latent) demand, which, in turn, creates political opportunities for further (and often more extreme) supply, and so on.

This, then, is where the success of the radical right manifests itself most alarmingly in the context of Islamophobia - as breaking taboos and liberating social demand, allegedly offering a voice to 'silent majorities.' In 2010, when the Dutch Party for Freedom (PVV) made significant gains in the Dutch local elections, Geert Wilders declared that, "[t]he leftist elite still believes in multiculturalism, coddling criminals, a European super-state and high taxes. But the rest of the Netherlands thinks differently. That silent majority now has a voice."[8]

The trope of the 'silent majority,' a favorite slogan of many a radical right politician in contemporary Europe, suggests that 'mainstream' society has become less liberal on a subset of issues relating to immigration, Islam, multiculturalism and human rights. What is more, this alleged majority is no longer silent but increasingly emboldened in its anti-Islam rhetoric. Recently, the Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban, representing a mainstream Conservative party (Fidesz) with a huge share of the vote, invoked history (the long period of the Ottoman rule in the Balkans) to assert that 'we (the Hungarian state) have a right to decide that we do not want a large number of Muslim people in our country.' He also presented the inflow of refugees as an existential threat to Europe's 'Christian values.' Orban's government made headlines earlier this year with its decision to erect a barb-wire fence along its border with Serbia to stop migration into Hungary. Now, boldly claiming that 'Hungary is the defense of Europe against Islam,' he is seriously considering another wall, this time along the border with Croatia.[9]

Breaking the Taboo of Islamophobia

That this kind of inflammatory discourse against Islam and Muslims has become so pervasive and untroubling to ever-growing segments of Europe's mainstream societies underlines how Islamophobia has ceased to be a taboo. The normalization of Islamophobia by mainstream society has its very own symbolic milestone. Few people could have predicted the profound significance of an incident that took place in Wangen bei Olten, Switzerland in 2005. A local Turkish cultural association, which two years earlier had been granted permission to use an industrial building as a cultural and worship space, applied to

the authorities for the construction of a single 'symbolic' minaret, merely six meters high. The Swiss People's Party (SVP) -a national conservative party that underwent significant transformation in a radical-populist direction in the 1990s and emerged as a major party in the following decade - took up the issue, marshaling the requisite number of signatures for a referendum (100,000). Parties of the center-left and -right, as well as the majority of Swiss religious organizations, urged voters to reject the proposal. The Swiss courts warned that approval of the measure would risk running foul of international human rights principles, damage inter-community relations, and damage Switzerland's image. Opinion polls indicated that public support for the initiative, albeit constantly rising in the months before the referendum, remained reassuringly below 40 percent. On the day of the referendum, however, on 29 November 2009, 57.5 percent of voters endorsed the measure, with the strongest support in rural cantons where the number of Muslims and immigrants in general was low.[10]

In hindsight, the 2009 Swiss referendum, along with the almost contemporary Belgian and French legal bans on female Islamic dress,[11] were disturbing milestones in the *mainstreaming* of Islamophobia in Europe. Popular support in the Swiss referendum and legislative sanction by mainstream parties in the other two cases shattered the comforting perception that Islamophobia was confined to the fringes of the political system and the far right of social attitudes. A series of opinion polls conducted in many European countries shortly after the outcome of the Swiss referendum revealed the existence of either majorities or very strong minorities in favor of similar restrictive measures against Muslim places of worship, including outright bans on the construction of further mosques. Observing the degree of popular support for this new agenda, mainstream parties across Europe have 'felt compelled or freed, depending on one's point of view, to take much tougher stands' *vis-a-vis* Islam, immigration, multiculturalism, and security.[12]

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Since then, more and more segments of the mainstream have moved closer to the idea that the policies of state multiculturalism and an allegedly tolerant approach to Islam, immigration, and integration have brought Europe to the precipice of a security crisis. Two more recent incidents highlight the extent to which Islamophobia has become 'mainstreamed' in large parts of Europe. The spectacular, if short-lived, rise of PEGIDA (Patriotic Europeans against the Islamization of the

Supporters of PEGIDA hold a banner during a rally on November 29, 2015 in Rotterdam.

AFP PHOTO / ANP / ROBIN UTRECHT

West) in Germany indicates that an openly Islamophobic popular movement does not need a strong radical right party to appear and gain public traction. What started as a fringe protest from disparate extremist forces soon recruited more broadly from within a pool of mainstream social strata, anxious about the effects of globalization, immigration, multiculturalism, and the economic crisis. PEGIDA's fortunes may have ebbed and flowed since the peak of January 2015 (where more than 25,000 protesters joined the regular rally in Dresden), but opinion polls have since revealed that a majority of the German public shared the concerns that had prompted the demonstrations, nearly a third thought they were justified, and 13 percent would actively join the protest.[13] The response from mainstream politicians was predictably mixed. While German Chancellor Angela Merkel officially accused the PEGIDA leadership of prejudice, regional and local politicians from a broad spectrum of political parties struck a more conciliatory tone, reproducing some of PEGIDA's slogans about immigration, criminality, and a perceived Muslim reluctance to 'integrate' into 'western' society.[14]

Then, in early January 2015, the murderous attack on the offices of the French weekly Charlie Hebdo prompted a fresh wave of concerns about 'radical' Islam in Europe. Once again, it was the radical right that hastened to extract as much political capital as possible out of the attack, portraying the incident as a terrible vindication of their dire warnings about the alleged danger that Islam posed for Europe. Almost immediately, the leader of UKIP, Nigel Farage, blamed state multiculturalism for

the rise of home-grown terrorism in Europe, while Geert Wilders called for an all-out 'war against the Islamization of Europe.'[15] Yet, besides the laudable rallying of mainstream forces in defense of freedom of expression and against violent terrorism, renewed statements emerged about a 'clash of civilizations', alongside sensationalist invocations of the imagery of an all-out war. Shortly after the attack, French Prime Minister Manuel Valls, by all standards a moderate and usually measured politician, refused to use the term 'Islamophobia' or to accept that it posed a serious threat to France's social cohesion - just as the number of anti-Muslim violent incidents was picking up a devastating momentum that saw the overall number of physical attacks increase five-fold in the wake of the Charlie Hebdo murders.[16]

The fight against Islamophobia cannot be simply understood and conducted as a campaign for the voting hearts of the electorate against the appeal of the radical right

It is evident that what may have started as a radical ideology of hatred toward Muslims from the fringes of the political system has become part of an increasingly acceptable attitude shared by ever-broader segments of mainstream European societies. This is an ominous development. The growing acceptance of Islamophobia in mainstream attitudes can only work to the long-term electoral and political benefit of the radical right. Moreover, it poses a dilemma for mainstream parties as to how to respond to the radicalization of public attitudes in relation to key concerns such as immigration and the place of Islam in Europe. So far, mainstream parties have oscillated between pandering to the populist discourse of the radical right (in the hope that they can regain voters or stop the bleeding of their electoral support towards the radical right) and criticizing the right for fanning the flames of intolerance and hatred. This strategy is evidently failing, sending out confusing signals to the public and proving unable to detract from the electoral appeal of the radical right in the longer term. Many observers noted that the 2007 presidential campaign of Nicolas Sarkozy -a campaign marked by a spectacular ratcheting of the center-right's anti-immigration tone- was successful in putting a serious dent in the power of the Front National.[17] Eight years later, however, with Marine Le Pen emerging victorious in regional elections and now widely expected to enter the second round of the forthcoming 2017 presidential elections, perhaps even to top the first round, this kind of optimism seems woefully premature and misplaced. What is more, it contains a cautionary tale about the danger facing mainstream parties that choose to contest elec-

tions partly on the ideological terrain of their radical populist right-wing rivals.

Beyond the Radical Right: Islamophobia and Europe's Mainstream

The surge of Islamophobia in recent years has not unfolded in a social, cultural, or political vacuum. In promoting a populist, anti-Islam and anti-immigration securitization agenda, the radical right has accurately sensed the profound roots of a nativist backlash that runs through mainstream society, constantly fed and reshaped by new anxieties about cultural, economic, and existential security. The current, rapidly escalating refugee crisis in Europe -and its sensationalist coverage by mainstream media- can only fan the flames of insecurity and expose Muslim minorities in Europe to new verbal and physical attacks. This is the kind of insecurity in which a normalized Islamophobia can only thrive; with the emboldened forces of the radical right only too eager to exploit it to their political and electoral advantage.

Framing the current discussion about Islamophobia in Europe as a matter of extremist ideologies and populist politics may be comforting to mainstream parties and electorates; but it shifts attention away from the very real persistence -and recent radicalization- of anti-Muslim prejudice at the very heart of mainstream society. Therefore, the fight against Islamophobia cannot be simply understood and conducted as a campaign for the voting hearts of the electorate against the appeal of the radical right. It is instead a battle that begins with the realization that Islamophobia is a mainstream problem in need of urgent, robust initiatives to regain the public discursive terrain from the populists, and the need to propose a positive vision for a plural, inclusive, and open post-crisis Europe. It is a battle for a profound paradigm shift that will refocus public debate on causes rather than outcomes, on practical solutions rather than paralyzing fears, and on the wider picture rather than the fragmented insecurities of a paralyzing siege mentality. It is a battle that involves an unwavering advocacy of human rights but also fosters the vision of an inter-cultural future for Europe against the instinctive retreat to narrow, exclusive nativism. It is, in the end, a battle for minds and hearts alike that starts with everyday language and promotes a culture of empathy towards minorities -arguing the case for the contribution that Muslims have made to European history and culture, demolishing the myth of European allegedly exclusive 'Judeo-Christian' values, resisting the manipulation of confrontational memories from the distant past, and speaking loudly and dispassionately about the positive role of Muslim in western societies.

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