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THE ROLE OF PUBLIC DISCOURSE IN THREAT FRAMING: THE CASE OF ISLAMOPHOBIA IN CZECH REPUBLIC

Donatella BONANSINGA*

Abstract: *Perception and interpretation of risks do not always come from a direct experience but are filtered by the mass media and political discourse. The message they spread and the interpretations of reality they suggest have a profound impact on the (mis)perceptions developed by citizens. Currently all over the European Union the Islamic threat, as linked to terrorism, is conceived and perceived as a fundamental threat to security. But is there a real threat? By means of a discursive analysis, this paper aims at exploring the dynamics of threat construction as related to the framing of Islam as an issue of security concern, by focusing on the role of public discourse and by providing some insights from Czech Republic (CZ). Czech Republic is an interesting case to study misperceptions, insecurity complexes and the manipulation of public discourse, as the percentage of Muslim population in the country is tantamount to zero but Islamophobic feelings are gathering momentum and rising consistently. The fundamental question driving the research aims at explaining why a country with a numerically negligible Muslim minority is experiencing growing public hostility, manifested through the raising mobilization of citizens against Islam. The hypothesis suggests that the exposure of public opinion to specific media representations and political rhetoric may induce misperception and the development of Islamophobic sentiments. The paper will firstly go through an overview of the literature on the topic; it will then analyze the general trends in Islamophobic discourse in CZ, through the lens of the securitization theory.*

Keywords: security; threat construction; Muslims; political discourse; islamophobia

Introduction

Growing public hostility and Islamophobic sentiments are spreading in the European continent. Following recent events, such as the attack to Charlie Hebdo, the shootings in Belgium and Denmark, we are witnessing a revival of societal tensions in many member states, manifested by the organization of public protests against Islam and Muslim minorities.

Overall, since the 9/11 terrorist attacks, xenophobe and right-wing movements have gained renewed attention by the public opinion, as they inflate threats and consequently exploit and articulate people's irrational fears towards Muslims. With the outbreak of the financial crisis then, these movements have continued to thrive, since security is always a prime argument to be used for propaganda and gaining support, in a time of pessimism and uncertainty. By depicting apocalyptic scenarios of an imminent clash of civilizations and an Islamized European continent, Islamophobes elude rational arguments and stick to widespread cliché, incite to intolerance and foment hatred.

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Public discourse, as incarnated by media and politicians, is of paramount importance when it comes to address security issues. Perception and interpretation of risks, in fact, do not always come from a direct experience but are filtered by the mass media and political discourse. In the last decade, Islam has clearly been framed as a security threat. Since securitization is by definition a matter of language, what has been the role played by such two actors? I will try to address this question by focusing on the empirical case of Czech Republic, which seems to be an interesting case to study misperceptions, insecurity complexes and the manipulation of public discourse, as the percentage of Muslim population in the country is tantamount to zero but Islamophobic feelings are gathering momentum and rising consistently.

There are no shared and unanimous data accounting for the precise determination of the Muslim population in such country. Vladimír Sánka, representative of the Center of Muslim Religious Communities and director of the Islamic Centre in Prague, estimates the whole number of Muslims in the Czech Republic at 10000 persons, but as he stressed no way how to verify this number is available (Ostřanský, 2010). The U.S. Department of State (2013) also suggests a similar estimate. However, in a country where the total population is estimated at more than 10 million, one would easily convene that such a minority is by all means negligible, or, as it has been called by Martina Krizkova, invisible (Krizkova in Ostřanský, 2010). Nevertheless, Czechs have shown no exception in conforming themselves to the general trends of Islamophobia currently in act in western societies.

The fundamental question driving the research aims at explaining why a country with a numerically negligible Muslim minority is experiencing growing public hostility, manifested through the raising mobilization of citizens against Islam. By means of a discursive analysis, this paper aims at exploring the dynamics of threat construction as related to the framing of Islam as an issue of security concern, by focusing on the role of public discourse and by providing some insights from Czech Republic (CZ). The paper will firstly go through the definition of concepts and an overview of the literature on the topic; it will then analyze the general trends in Islamophobic discourse in CZ, through the lens of the securitization theory.

1. First Part

Definition of Concepts and Literature Overview

In the international relations literature, a threat is defined as a situation in which one agent or group has either the capability or intention to inflict a negative consequence on another agent or group (Davis, 2000 in Rousseau and Garcia-Retamero, 2007, p. 745).

Realists (e.g., Waltz, 1979; Grieco, 1988) explain threats as functions of power asymmetries. When power among the groups is unevenly distributed, the argument runs, both parties in the asymmetric relationship may have cause for alarm, especially the weaker side, as it may fear exploitation. The stronger side is not exempted by fear either: while the weaker side experiences a short-run fear, due to its position of inferiority, the stronger counterpart fears an inevitable shift in the balance of power in the long run and a challenge to the status quo (Rousseau and Garcia-Retamero, 2007). Proponents of realism in international relations thus predict that asymmetries in power will automatically trigger perceptions of threat and intergroup conflict.

Social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner, 1979 in Rousseau and Garcia-Retamero, 2007), instead, explains the origin and perception of threat as a consequence of self-categorization and thus emphasizes the role played by identity construction. As this theory puts it, individuals automatically place themselves into social categories; such placement immediately creates an “other” and overall the categorization process will lead to the emergence of prejudicial attitudes toward the out-group and a feeling of threatening.

Interestingly, Rousseau and Garcia-Retamero (2007) have proved the fundamental role played by *both* approaches. According to the model developed by these two scholars, it is the interaction between power *and* sense of identity that influences threat perceptions. When the other is completely different from the self, the balance of power between them will be a good predictor of threat perception. On the other hand, the higher the sense of shared identity, the greater the feeling of attachment to the “other” and eventually the less threatening both the ingroup and the outgroup will feel.

Perception of security/insecurity plays thus a prominent role. But when is a threat actually threatening? What is it that turns a phenomenon into a collective risk for societies and states? How does the transformation from a social matter to a political and security issue occur? According to the securitization theory, a phenomenon is a threat to security when it is framed as such; or as Wæver (2004, p. 13) puts it, “It is by labelling something a security issue that it becomes one”. To present an issue as an existential threat is to say that: “If we do not tackle this problem, everything else will be irrelevant (because we will not be here or will not be free to deal with it in our own way)” (Buzan *et al.* 1998, p. 24). When the securitizing actors adopt the rhetoric of security to convince the audience of the existential nature of the threat, we have what has been defined a securitizing move. It is only when the audience accepts it that we can talk of a successful securitization. In other words, the issue of securitization is one of language and the perception of security is a matter of social construction. The securitization of an issue is then strictly related to the political agenda. Once an issue has gained

the status of security threat, it automatically enters the policy agenda, as collective concerns legitimize the endorsement of state actions. The dynamics of threat construction by decision-makers have also great implications on the security context. In fact, according priority to an issue rather than to another eventually results in changes of policies and approaches, redistribution of resources and a downgrading of other issues on the political agenda.

We can also think at securitization as a particular form of framing which relies on a shared perception of risk. To frame, in fact, “is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described” (Entman, 1993, p. 52).

Nonetheless, perception and interpretation of risks do not always come from a direct experience but are filtered by the mass media and political discourse. The message they spread and the interpretations of reality they suggest have a profound impact on the (mis)perceptions developed by citizens. The media have been described as a “major power broker”, which exerts unprecedented power over the dissemination of news (West, 2001 in Conway, 2008). It is for such reason that both media and politics are strictly linked to securitization processes, as they represent key-actors in presenting and articulating the security threats to the public. They represent the lens through which the vast majority of public opinion sees an issue of public concern. Cohen’s assertion is to this regard timeless: “The world looks different to different people, depending not only on their personal interests but also on the map that is drawn for them by the writers, editors and publishers of the papers they read” (1963, p. 13).

Understanding and assessing the contribution of media and political actors to the construction of a threat is no easy task, due to the complex processes involved. Nonetheless it is possible to affirm that political communication shapes both the information available and the way individuals use it to conceptualize reality and that public discourse has been highly successful in speaking the alleged Islamic threat into existence. If one would like to discuss the reasons why securitization occurs, overall it seems that political actors benefit from the politics of insecurity. By creating a climate of insecurity, they may enhance the chance to see a specific problem entering the policy agenda or even directly climbing at the top of it. Such chances seem higher when the threat infrastructure is more episodic than structural, and it is capable of drawing great and obsessive attention from the public (Béland, 2007). The first and main consequence of depicting an issue of public concern as a fundamental threat to the survival of the state or of its culture and values is the gain of public consent to use extraordinary measures to combat that threat. Moreover, being the state the one and only

legitimate provider of protection, by providing what the public opinion trusts to be adequate policy responses to the issue under discussion, politicians may boost their support and eventually succeed in their ultimate goal, that is to say, seeking re-election.

Through a securitization process, Islam has reached a paramount level of salience in the public debate, along with the two most controversial issues associated with it, that is to say terrorism and migration. Islam is framed as a double threat. It is first of all depicted as an extremist ideology promoting violence, representing the ideological ground for terroristic acts. Furthermore, it is described as an all-encompassing, intolerant and totalizing religion, ruling every aspect of private, social and political life; as a consequent of this universalistic tendency, the arguments runs, Europe should protect itself from Muslim migration if it does not want to surrender to an Islamization of its society.

Through a closer look at media and political discourse, one may convene that the distinguishing features of the rhetoric used by public discourse are the dynamics us/them, a negativization process and the clash argument. The dynamic of group differentiation is achieved through the negative representation of Muslims and Islam; such circumstance eventually enhances the identity of the majority group, as it encourages a positive conception of its membership. The rhetorical strategy therefore used is based on two steps: firstly, through a process of hyper simplification, Muslims are depicted as a homogenous entity; secondly, rigid and impermeable boundaries are constructed between the majority and minority groups. As Jaspal and Cinnirella (2010) noted in their study on media representation of British Muslims, the constant use of the expression “the Muslim world” by media and newspapers is a clear exemplification of such dynamic. Islam and Muslim are first of all grouped into one single concept, which is then presented in antithesis with “the West”. In such a way, a sense of group differentiation is established and maintained.

Muslims tend also to be discussed extensively in term of negative representations: some traits which are specific to the Islamic culture are over-emphasized in a negative fashion, producing a confrontation of values between the majority and minority groups and a final rejection. An example of this dynamic is the focus on the Islamic veil, which has been represented as a symbol of a patriarchal and oppressive Islam, depriving women of their freedom.

This process of negativization leads then to the clash of civilizations argument. The us/them dynamic, in fact, not only produces group polarization but also envisages an inevitable clash of civilization, since Muslims are trying to destroy “us”, both in realistic and symbolic terms: because of their support to terrorism, Muslims pose a real threat to the very existence of Western states; in

addition, their extremism and universalistic tendency to Islamize Europe constitutes a symbolic threat to the Western system of values.

One final theoretical discussion should concern the term Islamophobia. The use of such term remains a highly contested issue, as many tend to criticize its general definition and widespread use. Since social science has not developed a common definition, policies and actions to combat it are undertaken within the wider and universally recognized term “racism” (EUMC, 2006). One of the first attempts to contribute to the specification of the concept came from the Runnymede Trust. In its 1997 report, this UK-based NGO analyzed in a comprehensive way how Islam is seen by Islamophobes, that is to say as a static bloc, unresponsive to change; a political ideology, used for political or military purposes; a barbaric, primitive, violent and sexist religion, supportive of terrorism and engaged in a clash of civilizations (Runnymede Trust, 1997).

In 2000 the Council of Europe’s European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI, 2000) produced the General Policy Recommendation No.5 on combating intolerance and discrimination against Muslims, acknowledging that Muslim communities are subject to prejudice, which “may manifest itself in different guises, in particular through negative general attitudes but also to varying degrees, through discriminatory acts and through violence and harassment”, thus leading the way for a more precise account of the term. In 2005 another Council of Europe publication ‘Islamophobia and its consequences on Young People’ referred to Islamophobia as “the fear of or prejudiced viewpoint towards Islam, Muslims and matters pertaining to them. Whether it takes the shape of daily forms of racism and discrimination or more violent forms, Islamophobia is a violation of human rights and a threat to social cohesion”. (Ramberg, 2005, p. 6)

It seems to me that, when referring to the issue of societal tensions in Europe as they are currently occurring and in order to better understand reality and address it, a further specification is needed. Islamophobia in Europe should not be intended simply as any manifestation of hostility, resistance, fear and occasionally violence towards people professing the Islamic religion, as a particular attention should be devoted to the Middle East and North Africa region. Arab people in fact represent the main target of such manifestation of hostility; therefore I believe that a geographical connotation should be taken into account when discussing Islamophobia in our continent, as it opens up a broad set of new perspectives that allow us to also discuss misinformation and its relations with the raising of Islamophobia.

2. Second Part

Raising Islamophobia in Czech Republic

As mentioned earlier, in the 9/11 aftermath the idea of the clash of civilization with Islam has reinforced its grasp on the Western public opinions. Therefore it can be argued that the events of 9/11 have in a certain sense legitimized the strength of skeptical visions. In Europe, the media and political discourse have been increasingly radicalized, especially after the Madrid and London bombings, and revitalized after the Charlie Hebdo attack. By functioning as an catalyst of group polarization, the economic crisis has further worsen the situation and favored growing intolerance, as the public opinion is much more vulnerable to the populist rhetoric, which consequently grasps and exploits this occasion for increasing overall influence. Be it about the construction of mosques or the possibility to wear the veil in public spaces, many Europeans have demonstrated their intolerance towards the people professing the Islamic religion and an irrational and indiscriminate fear against them.

Czech Republic has historically barely any experience with Islam, compared to other European countries; social and ethnic tensions began to increase only with the increase in immigration from Arab countries. Initially dominated by a border-closure policy throughout the communist regime, Czech Republic started to be exposed to cultural and religious diversity during the 1990s, when Muslims from the Balkans and the Caucasus region settled in the country. Nonetheless, these new immigrants were regarded as similar in terms of ethnicity and public debate was not particularly heated. Islamophobia is thus a relatively new phenomenon, mainly born in association with Arab Muslim immigrants in the aftermath of 9/11 and the spread of the terrorist threat in the EU.

Overall Czech Republic already has a significant history of cultural polarization and discrimination. Many times Amnesty International has expressed deep concern in its reports about the exclusionary policies endorsed and implemented towards the Roma minority by the Czech governments over the years (Amnesty International, 2014). Roma people rights are often violated, their children experience systemic segregation in schools and in general they face constant prejudice and hatred. In 2007, the European Court of Human Rights ruled that the placement of Romani children into the "special schools" (schools for the learning disabled) was occurring in a discriminatory fashion, whereas in 2015 the EU Commission has initiated an infringement procedure against the country for the same reason (Foy and Robinson, 2015).

What it is interesting to notice is that in a recent survey investigating the attitudes of Czechs towards national groups living in the country, the Public Opinion Research Centre shows how the historically marginalized Roma minority maintains the primacy for the worst relation, while Arabs

hold the second position (CVVM, 2015a). Nevertheless, these social trends are relatively new. The Arab ethnicity, in fact, was not listed in the 2013 and 2014 surveys (CVVM, 2013a; 2014a), thus showing how the public opinion has considerably radicalized its views only recently. The perception of security threats among the Czech public has changed over the years as well. Whereas terrorism is confirmed as one of the most dangerous threats to the country, according to the opinion of its citizens, radical religious movements have come to be appreciated as such only in the 2014 and 2015 surveys (CVVM, 2014b; 2015b); Czech citizens, in fact, did not include these movements among the threats to security they were asked to identify in 2012 and 2013 (CVVM, 2012; 2013b).

In general, negative attitudes towards Muslims in Czech Republic seem to be usually fueled by demagogic forces in the media, where Muslims are mostly presented only in connection with terrorism. Media coverage of Muslims appears in fact rather scarce, but with a significant focus on sensationalist news that are more likely to increase readership. Both newspapers and television have dedicated a considerable amount of time in underlining the cultural difference as compared to the European traditions and in depicting the potential threats Islam allegedly poses to the old continent. Public debates and media coverage appear to be biased and in general they do not correlate with the scale of real problems, as the latter clearly tend to be overdramatized.

Internet plays a prominent role in the debate about Muslims in Czech Republic. The most famous platform is “Islam v České Republice Nechceme” (We Don’t Want Islam in the Czech Republic), whose Facebook page counts more than 100.000 followers, several times more than the actual Muslim minority settled in the country. This anti-Islamization movement, an expression of the Czech Defense League¹, fosters an internet-based debate which is usually not censored, poorly informed, dominated by ignorance, bigotry and based on emotional reasoning and aggressiveness. Overall, the internet provides an excellent platform for extremists to spread their hatred messages, as their relative anonymity enhances the chances of impunity. As the Ministry of Interior has pointed out in its report, a rising number cyber-bullying cases against those opposed to their Islamophobic visions have been registered (Ryšavý, 2015), a circumstance that has been confirmed by the chair of the Center of Muslim Communities in the Czech Republic, Muneeb Hasan Alravi, who declared that Muslims are facing threats, most often by e-mail (Czech Press Agency, 2015a).

The public debate concerning Islam both in the civic and political arena is particularly lively since many years now. A first public debate sparked on the issue of the construction of a mosque in the small touristic city of Hradec Kralove, showing how the topic of what constitutes acceptable

¹ The Czech Defense League is a far-right street protest movement, fighting Islamization and modelled on the English Defense League

expressions of religious identity have the power to deeply polarize the Czech public opinion. Petitions, street demonstrations and public hearings were organized; outbreaks of vandalism against Muslims' properties were registered. The core of that public debate was the place of Islam and in general the evolving forms of religious expression in the Czech Republic, as well as the limits of tolerance in a pluralistic society. Eventually no new project was approved, leaving Prague and Brno as the only Islamic centers for prayer in the whole country.

Other strong and rather negative reactions among the public also sparked over the controversy concerning a hijab ban in a nursing school in 2013. When two young students left the school because they were not allowed to wear hijabs during lessons, hateful and xenophobic debates appeared on social networks in connection with the case. Anna Šabatová, the ombudsman to whom the students presented their case, described the school's policy as discriminating, because "*the girls were, in effect, denied access to education*", (Fraňková, 2014) pointing out that prohibiting a head scarf as an expression of religious beliefs has no basis in the Czech legislation. Strong criticism towards Mrs. Šabatová's stand stemmed from many politicians across the political spectrum, with the president Milos Zeman himself stating that allowing hijab is the first step towards tolerating burqas (ibid.)

It is not the first time that President Zeman adds a significant amount of fuel to the fire of the growing tension, as he has repeatedly expressed his controversial opinions publicly. Besides defining Islam as a totalitarian ideology, Zeman has also contested, during what he himself defined a radical speech, the European paralysis towards the Islamic State, which he conceives as a modern appeasement policy against a new totalitarian threat (Czech Press Agency, 2015b). The rhetoric he uses is highly simplistic, stereotyping and clearly represents an incitement to hatred. In a statement in the aftermath of the attack in Brussels, the Czech president has affirmed that it is not only a small fringe of extremists which is usually behind terroristic attacks, but it is Islam to be blamed, as the "very essence" from which violence stems from (Levitt, 2014). By equating the Islamic religion to terrorism, Zeman shows a paramount degree of social irresponsibility and is disrespectful not only to Muslims, but also to all the leaders and institutions engaged in the global effort to promote tolerance and foster inter-cultural dialogue. Often praised by Islamophobes for his anti-Islam public statements, President Zeman represents a key actor in the evolving of the current situation. Czech Republic has a tradition of strong presidents, who have never accepted to be confined to the role of mere symbolic figures, as typical of parliamentary systems. On the contrary, Czech presidents have always been active, even exceeding their constitutional powers, thus playing a crucial part in Czech politics, which

is dominated by weak governments handing power without making it to the end of their terms². In 2012, the constitution has been emended, introducing the direct election of the President and hence marking a clear shift towards a semi-presidential system. Milos Zeman is then the first Czech president whose strong and active role has been legitimated at the institutional level. Besides enjoying the traditional high prestige and influence of his figure, with an office located in the seat of Czech kings, Zeman has won his own legitimacy from the citizens themselves, and not indirectly from their representatives. Such a premise can facilitate the understanding of the overall influential power this head of state may have over his citizens.

More extreme positions come from another highly influential politician, Tomio Okamura, leader of the Czech right-wing party Dawn of Direct Democracy (Úsvit přímé demokracie), who was named in 2014 as the third most popular politicians by the STEM polling agency (Beckwith, 2014). Okamura's public discourse mainly focuses on highly simplified and widespread arguments concerning multiculturalism, supported by the rejection of all those who "do not follow our rules", the concept of "hospitality has its limits", and eventually the claim that "everyone could come back to their home countries". The EU, Brussels and the immigration policy are often blamed for imposing liberal and naïve principles that do not fit into the Czech society and only risks to destabilize it, since they allow the development of Islamic practices in Europe. His discourse and his party as well seem to function on a politicization of resentment basis, focusing the attention on the most sensitive issues and then moving the interest to another once the debate has somehow calmed down. Okamura has in many occasions fueled the debate on the Muslim minority. Recently the Tokyo-born politician has urged Czechs to oppose Islam by walking pigs and dogs near mosques and by boycotting Muslim fast-food as financing such kind of commercial activities would take them a step closer to the veil (Tharoor, 2015). Okamura is not new to such headline-grabbing remarks and actions: last year, for instance, he called for the whole Roma minority to be deported outside Czech Republic and he visited a prison convicted for racial-motivated murder (Beckwith, 2014).

The Workers Social Justice Party (Dělnická strana sociální spravedlnosti) should also be mentioned in the context of Islamophobia. By trying to channeling the hysteria after the Charlie Hebdo attacks and thus exploiting the French issue to secure support, this far-right anti-immigration movement, well-known opponent of multiculturalism policies, has taken a clear Islamophobic stand. While in the past its main claim against a multicultural Czech Republic mainly relied on the classical bigoted argument of the protection of Czechs' interests, now the new enemy is the "hateful Islamic

² From 1993, only two governments have made it to the end of their mandate, Václav Klaus (1992 – 1996) and Miloš Zeman (1998 – 2002).

ideology”, enjoying a concerning expansion all over Europe. The leader’s, Tomáš Vandas, ferocious attacks are not different from the vicious verbal expressions used by Okamura, as both far-right representatives try to appeal to the more xenophobic sections of the Czech society.

Finally, highly controversial is also the issue of religion associations. To be eligible for state subsidies, religious associations must be registered, and in order to be registered, they must gather petitions from more than 10.000 members (Schneider, 2007). This condition has rendered the registration process for the Muslim association extremely contentious, as the amount of members required account for almost the entire community present in the entire country. Despite its eventual registration in 2004, life has not been easy for the Czech Muslims Association, as already in the same year a petition from a Buddhist association was submitted, asking to reconsider the registration on the basis of Islamic incompatibility with human rights and promotion of violence. In September 2014, as Amnesty International (2014) points out in its latest report, a petition containing 25000 signatures has been addressed to the government calling on the authorities not to allow the Association of Muslim Communities to build Muslim schools and teach Islam (id.), a right that any religious organization is entitled to after being registered for longer than 10 years.

Conclusion

By means of a discursive analysis, this paper has attempted to explain the dynamics of threat construction as related to framing of Islam as an issue of security concern. The aim is to contribute to the research on the securitization of Islam, by focusing on the role played by the securitizing actors that speak the Islamic threats into existence.

The saliency of the topic relates to the fact that the growing number of Muslims in Europe, combined with the their increased negative visibility offered by the mass media, is challenging identities in Europe and producing cultural polarization. In particular, the construction of otherness as referred to the Muslim culture is channeling fears about an allegedly inevitable clash of civilization. In addition, problems concerning immigration to Europe have given birth to dramatic fears of an invasion, as these constant flows of people on move are perceived as a challenge and threat to both national identities and security.

Overall, the findings suggest that securitization processes may be explained only through a comprehensive look at societal and cognitive processes. As we have seen, the role played by both perception of risks and sense of identity are of great importance when discussing security threats, as

they are all matters of social construction. The findings further reveal a prominent negative hyper-visibility of Muslims in the country under examination, that is to say Czech Republic.

Demonstrating the exact role played by public discourse is difficult due to the complex processes involved. It is nonetheless possible to affirm that political communication shapes both the information available and the way individuals use it to conceptualize reality and that public discourse has been highly successful in speaking the alleged Islamic threat into existence. The frequent media association of Muslims to fundamentalism and terrorism has certainly had repercussions on the general social representation of Muslims, who have come to be perceived by many as sympathizing for the terrorist cause. Empirical cases such as Islamophobia in Czech society reveal the shortcomings of the masses and the power of those shallow populist narrations that seduce the audience. It goes without saying that the anti-Islamic rhetoric assuming that all Muslims should be held responsible for terrorism represents a shameful incitement to discrimination. Globally condemning an entire group of people for the vicious acts of a small few, just because they share the same religion, hurts all those people professing Islam peacefully and who reject the misuse of Islam as a justification for violence. Not to forget that such an approach may also undermine the fight against terrorism itself, which is identified as a priority for Western societies. As the U.S. National Counterterrorism Center points out, the promotion of inclusion and tolerance is crucial for reducing vulnerability to radicalization, while building trust in law enforcement increase the willingness to cooperate.

My conclusion is that, given the negligible size of the Muslim community in Czech Republic, it is reasonable to assume that a significant component of Czech population, indeed a vast majority, has never encountered or interacted with Muslims. As a result, the image and perceptions the population has developed are filtered by mass media and political discourse to a great extent. The paper thus suggests that the media coverage and the political rhetoric may represent a potential cause of the Islamophobic sentiments spreading all over Czech Republic, since they have encouraged negative social representations and contributed to the creation of distorted visions of the Muslim community within the Czech society and all over the world.

The clash between Muslims and Czechs is nonetheless more ideological than actual, since episodes of inter-cultural violence are rare/have not been registered as Mareš (2011) recalls. It seems that the resistance and hostility towards Muslim serve as a wide, general and symbolic framework to embed all social frustrations. Some role is certainly played by the subconscious search for someone to blame for all economic difficulties, a very common social attitude during recession times. There might also be some connection to the Communist era: the dominant mentality, which did not allow anyone to differ in any way, might have influenced the tolerance of Czechs towards differences.

Since the country may have latent problems of racism and discrimination, as proved by the Roma issue, principles of collective blame and intolerance should not be encouraged. If public discourse keeps on playing a populist role in dealing with such delicate issues, the already growing anti-Muslim mood could only intensify. Hence it is a question of social responsibility for both the mass media and the political class. In order to avoid further escalation of social tensions and citizens to succumb to far-right ideologies, these two public actors should refrain from fueling any distorted vision of Islam and Muslims, and distance themselves from any message voicing alienation and discrimination, as well as the failure of multiculturalism. Civic initiatives aimed at promoting platforms of intercultural and interreligious dialogue should be supported and promoted. Not to mention the potential of education. Since one of the problems is definitely the lack of experience with Islam, a focus on constructive discussions on cultural difference and immigration might help tear down the identity barriers, reduce marginalization, reverse the development of cliché and stereotypes and guide the new generations to develop more multicultural and tolerant mindsets.

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