

Opinion – The Rise of Islamophobia in Poland

Written by Tuhin Chakraborty

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TUHIN CHAKRABORTY, FEB 20 2021

A 2017 Pew Research Center study found only around 10,000 Muslims living in Poland in 2016, and less than 10,000 had applied for asylum as refugees from the Middle East. As of October 2019, Muslims made up less than 0.1% of the Polish population. However, despite Muslims comprising an infinitesimal proportion of Poland's population and immigration, the government has been outspoken in stoking Islamophobia. According to Polish MEP Dominic Tarczynski, who spoke to Aljazeera on this matter, there is a fear among Polish people that Poland could be "taken over by Muslims" in the near future. By labeling Muslims a security and cultural threat and pursuing aggressive deportation policies, the Polish government has capitalized on anti-migrant sentiment among the Polish public to fuel a xenophobic and civilizationist policy agenda that politically benefits the ruling right-wing Law and Justice Party (PiS) now, but may present problems for Poland's future.

In 2015, while the rest of the world watched in horror as ISIS and the Syrian Civil War raged across the Middle East, PiS saw what turned out to be an extremely lucrative political opportunity. The 2015 European refugee crisis was instrumental in PiS's rise to power. In May 2015, the European Commission's European Agenda on Migration instructed Poland to accept 1,000 refugees. Four months later, that number had risen to 9,000. PiS, then the opposition party, quickly exploited the rapidly rising number of refugee applicants to Poland for political gain. Heading into the October 2015 elections, future PiS Prime Minister Beata Szydlo derided Middle Eastern refugee acceptances as an attempt for Europe to "export the problems" of other countries to Poland which would threaten the country's Catholic identity and national security.

PiS has not changed its position on Muslim immigration much since, as shown by more recent rhetoric from PiS officials like Tarczynski. This is not surprising, since such an "unprecedented politicization of migration" achieved sustained success: PiS won control of Poland's parliament (the Sejm) and presidency in those 2015 elections and has retained control ever since; the aforementioned Pew study showed that 60% of Polish respondents viewed Middle Eastern and Muslim refugees as a "major threat," and a Brookings Institution survey reported that 92% of voters who voted for PiS in 2018 opposed admitting such refugees outright.

The Polish government has much done more than just verbal resistance. In 2016, shortly after PiS came to power, Prime Minister Beata Szydlo, referring to a *potential* national security threat following major terrorist attacks in Brussels in March, cancelled all of the aforementioned EU-directed Middle Eastern refugee resettlement plans stating that there was "no possibility at this time of immigrants coming to Poland." Voters strongly supported PiS on this move. A 2017 poll found that over half of its respondents (51%) would rather see Poland leave the EU than accept Muslim refugees. Since 2016, Poland has consistently continued to defy the EU by refusing to resettle refugees, which eventually led to the country being found in violation of EU law in 2020 by the European Court of Justice and being potentially liable to fines levied by the European Commission.

In addition to openly rejecting EU migrant doctrine, PiS has also passed legislation and proposed policy to build on popular Islamophobia and further Muslim exclusion. In 2016, soon after the Brussels attacks, Poland also passed an anti-terrorism law which allows the country's Internal Security Agency (ISA) to apprehend and expel any foreigner suspected (not even convicted) of engaging in terrorism or espionage. Unsurprisingly, the law's enforcement has been "especially focused on Muslim immigrants."

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In 2019, PiS released a migration policy document that labelled immigrants from Muslim countries as “prospective threats both to the security of the country and to Polish culture.” The document also stated that Muslims were “incapable of integrating” into Western society and admitting them into Poland would lead to a “civilizational war” between Christian, Western culture and “the Islamic Project” of imposing their religion on the world. Again, this narrative of competing, mutually exclusive religious systems, even if the Muslim population is negligible, resonates among the Polish public, especially the right wing.

Regardless of the government’s rhetoric and its role in mainstreaming xenophobia, Poland needs immigrants. Xenophobia in national immigration policy is by no means unique to Poland, but Poland’s special status as one of the fastest growing economies in Europe demands a flexible and dynamic population. Low birthrates and ageing population are causing a demographic crisis that is starting to constrain Poland’s economy. This is largely why the Polish government admitted over two million Christian Ukrainians; their labor in Poland’s urban areas is vital for economic growth. However, this growth has led to more capacity and vacancies that employers simply have been unable to fill, which contributed to Poland having one of the lowest unemployment rates in the EU prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Additionally, public sentiment towards immigrants of all religions appears to be changing; despite exclusionary PiS policies, data from Gallup’s Migration Acceptance Index from 2016 to 2019 show a percent increase second only to Lithuania among EU states. In other words, Poland is warming up to immigrants faster than almost any other country in the EU, although Poland is still far behind many other EU states in total index score. Perhaps the economic needs for increased immigration and changing public opinion will finally usher in some tolerance for Muslim immigrants in the near future.

About the author:

Tuhin Chakraborty is a student at the Gerald R. Ford School of Public Policy at the University of Michigan Ann Arbor. Tuhin has published in the Michigan Daily, Backbench UK, the Michigan Journal of International Affairs, The Odyssey Online, and the Michigan Foreign Policy Review.