

The Victim Becomes the Perpetrator:

Polish Anti-Terrorism Legislation - an Indicator of Increasing Islamophobia

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By the end of 2015, Europe had seen an influx of 1 million refugees and migrants, which has posed a significant challenge to the internal security of the European Union (EU) (UNHCR/IOM, 2015). 2015 was marked by 221 terrorist acts in EU member states - the highest on record since 2006 (Record, 2016). These attacks have caused the hardest-hit EU member states to introduce harsh measures to increase their national safety and also have “led to local and European-wide accelerations of already deeply rooted racism” (Bayraklı & Hafez, 2018, p. 254). For example, following this crisis, Poland decided to introduce a harsh anti-terrorism law in 2016, which seems to be rooted in islamophobic rhetoric that runs rampant in Poland. Under this bill, the Polish Internal Security Agency (ISA), a domestic counterintelligence agency, is privileged with the ability to extensively surveil the Polish population and their data, arrest without trial, extradite foreign citizens, ban public gatherings or mass events and expand pre-charge detention (Niemitz, 2016). Unfortunately, the law provides a vague definition of the term “terrorism” and thus can be subjected to many misinterpretations and abuses. This paper will discuss the implications of such a harsh law, arguing that the motivation behind it stems from an underlying islamophobic bias in Poland and its church. This thesis is supported by analysing relevant statistical data that indicates the government’s overestimation of the danger posed by terrorism to Poland, and an overview of islamophobic rhetoric espoused by the Catholic church in Poland.

According to Polish demographic data and considering the minimal number of terrorist acts committed in Poland during the refugee crisis, the government has clearly implemented far harsher anti-terrorism measures than warranted. Out of the 211 terrorist acts committed in EU member states, a total of 0 took place in Poland in 2015 (*211 Terrorist Attacks*, 2016; *Poland*, n.d.). Moreover, migrants from the Middle East are often considered to be the main contributors to the increase in terrorist attacks, however, with 600,000 migrants arriving mostly from the Middle East, Poland has accepted a mere 6,800 of them, or 1.1% of all migrant applicants (Ojewska, 2015). Additionally, many of the refugees arriving in Poland did not even seek to

remain there, but instead used the Republic as a point of transition to wealthier Western European states (Ojewska, 2015). Indeed, out of the total incoming 150 refugees from Syria, less than half remained in Poland (Ojewska, 2015). Considering that there have been no significant terrorist attacks in Poland, and very few Muslim migrants, Poland's harsh anti-terrorist measures are hard to justify. These measures enable potential bans on peaceful assemblies against unfair government policies, for instance, related to refugees. On the other hand, the Polish government has failed to put a ban on truly potentially dangerous movements such as the Independence March organized by nationalistic groups carrying xenophobic, homophobic, and racist slogans. Since data doesn't provide a substantive reason to consider terrorist attacks an imminent threat to Polish stability, there has to be some other justification behind the harsh anti-terrorism laws. I argue that islamophobia is the strongest explanation, based on discriminatory rhetoric espoused by the Polish Catholic church that actually runs counter to true Catholic values.

The Polish government's measures to combat terrorism have been inconsistent with true Christian Catholic values. However, according to Pędziwiatr, "the Polish Church... [is] being in the forefront of the battle [...] specifically the Muslims" (Pędziwiatr, 2018, p. 476). The Polish Church criticises Muslims via newspapers and through priests' rhetoric, despite the fact that "Pope Francis called on European Catholics to engage more actively in helping the refugees" (Pędziwiatr, 2018, p. 461). As 95% of the Polish population is Catholic, Polish politics and culture are deeply rooted in the Catholic faith and religious institutions—and tolerance of other religions and helping those in need are basic Catholic values (Pędziwiatr, 2018, p. 463). Considering this, it remains a curiosity why Poles and Polish Catholic priests tend to discriminate against the Islamic community through their words and behaviour. Research demonstrates that many "church figures have played an important role in the significant rise of Islamophobic sentiments" and that "Islam has been presented in this scenario as the most important enemy and a key threat to the nation" (Pędziwiatr, 2018, p. 462). The discrimination against Muslims might have been forced by the government to fulfill their right-wing populist agenda, while ignoring the Catholic faith's fundamental value of equality and respect among all human beings. One of the regulations in the anti-terrorism law expands on methods to recognize a suspected person's involvement in an "act of terrorist nature" and states that an Islamic cleric or representative of a Muslim faith-related organization visiting a prison or detention facility might be suspicious (Pers, 2016). Therefore, the Polish Church institution's active role in the

politicized expansion of Islamophobia in the nation possibly also influenced the government's decision to implement a harsher, discriminatory anti-terrorism Law.

In conclusion, considering the fact that zero terrorist attacks have occurred in Poland and the Islamophobic rhetoric spread by Polish Church authorities, Islamophobia seems to be one of the primary reasons for the implementation of the harsh Anti-Terrorism Law in 2016. This raises important concerns over increasing xenophobic sentiments in Poland and in potentially all EU member states. Moreover, it is important to remember that implementing harsher anti-refugee measures negatively affects the perception of refugees - people who are in the most difficult situations and are truly in need of support and protection. People trust their authorities to act in their best interests and follow what the authorities say and do, especially in a time of crisis and thus, authorities need to be equal, fair and responsible enough to take care of all the citizens, regardless of their faith.

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