

# The Mainstreaming of Islamophobia in the Czech Republic



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Like in other Central European states, the migration crisis has dominated the Czech media space since 2015. Unlike any time before, xenophobic and Islamophobic attitudes have left the margins and have literally flooded the Czech public space. Public figures as well as mainstream media outlets have created and spread a strongly negative image of Islam and Muslims, actively nurtured fear of migrants and prevented a rational debate about the various levels of the crisis. In analyzing the obvious spread of a general phenomenon of Islamophobia, it is important to discern its three components: Islamophobic attitudes, anti-Islamist ideology and the spread of negative stereotypes in the public sphere.

Islamophobic attitudes have been present in the Czech public sphere for more than a decade. Since 2015, three processes took place: previous marginal attitudes became mainstream and they have even been sanctioned by the highest political figures; a deliberate campaigning spread a new, an aggressive form of anti-Islamism during the migration crisis and stereotypes became political currency.

### THREE ASPECTS OF ISLAMOPHOBIA

Islamophobia covers a wide spectrum of manifestations of prejudices, discrimination and hatred against Muslims. Like anti-Semitism, homophobia and antiziganism, Islamophobia is a manifestation of a feeling of superiority over a specific group. It leads to the degradation of this entire group of people based on perceived religious, national or ethnic identity, associated with a certain idea of Islam. The British Runnymede Trust defined Islamophobia as “an outlook or worldview involving an un-

founded dread and dislike of Muslims, which results in practices of exclusion and discrimination”<sup>1</sup>.

The very fear and a criticism of Islam are not Islamophobic *per se*. Islamophobia arises when a negative attitude to Islam is motivated by hostility towards Islam and by the intention to conquer or “to fight against Islam”<sup>2</sup>. In a historical perspective, Islamophobia is a critical term depicting a deliberate misrepresentation of Islam within the colonial context. An early usage of the word is to be found in a book written by a French convert to Islam and an Algerian intellectual, both active in the sphere of experts within the context of colonial administration. Their notion of Islamophobia equals a criticism of a long-standing con-

<sup>1</sup> “Islamophobia: A Challenge for us all”, Available [online]: <http://www.runnymedetrust.org/publications/17/32.html>; p. 5.

<sup>2</sup> É. Dinet, S. Ben Ibrahim (1925) *L'Orient vu de l'Occident: Essai Critique*, Paris: H. Piazza, pp. 176-183, quoted by Bridge Initiative Team in: Define “Islamophobia:” The Right Word for a Real Problem. Available [online]: <http://bridge.georgetown.edu/islamophobia-the-right-word-for-a-real-problem/>



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flictual relationship between Europe and the Muslim Near East, of its colonial supremacist ideology and more particularly of deliberate distortions of the image of Islam by Western academics and Christian missionaries<sup>3</sup>.

The modern concept of Islamophobia designs a negative and condescending perception of Islam not only by colonial state administrations but by the public at large. A criticism of the implication of colonialism into the discourse on Islam was introduced into academic circles by the critical studies of European colonialism and Orientalism in the 1970s by Edward Said. Concomitantly, a Persian version was used as a criticism of Western imperialism by Iranian Shia revolutionaries<sup>4</sup>.

In Western Europe, negative attitudes towards Muslims as such have proliferated in the last 15 years. Migrant workers from Muslim countries began to be perceived under the sole prism of their religious affiliation mainly due to the so-called "war on terror" and the rise of Islamic fundamentalism. Gradually, the perception of Arab, Turkish and South-Asian minorities shifted from their status of "guest workers" to "permanent migrants" and finally to "Muslims" in the wake of 2001. Moreover, a number of social problems related to the integration of certain groups of migrants (housing, access to labor market etc.) were interpreted as a question about their non-European "culture" and their lack of integration potential as Muslims and not for example just Arabs or Turks. Muslims generally became the internal "others" in relation to a supposedly homogeneous and original Euro-

<sup>3</sup> "Islamophobie " : une invention française, *Divergences*, 8. 7. 2012, Available [online]: <http://divergences.be/spip.php?article3159>

<sup>4</sup> " Islamophobie " : une invention française, *Divergences*, 8. 7. 2012, Available [online]: <http://divergences.be/spip.php?article3159>

pean or Western culture. In the last decade, the attacks in Europe in 2004 in Madrid, in 2007 in London and in 2015 in Paris, the anti-Western ideology and recruitment activities of global jihadism continue to lend to this perception an entire series of arguments.

Today's Islamophobia has left the realm of culturally condescending policies of colonial administration and uncritical academia to enter Europe's very debate on social cohesion and cultural identity. Now it is rather a discriminatory attitude of a racist type targeting entire ethnic and religious groups; it is a tendency to perceive negatively, with hostility and generalize prejudices, nationalities, and individuals related to Islam. Just like racism and xenophobia, "Islamophobia" is not just a concept but also a negative label, used by opposing opinion makers to dismiss others, or sometimes to boast. The concept of Islamophobia therefore lost its critical dimension and became a rhetoric weapon all too often, a syndrome of feeling threatened, or a name of a certain illiberal identity.

It is therefore useful to discern between its various dimensions: *Islamophobic utterances and attitudes* of individuals and groups; *anti-Islamic ideology* legitimizing those utterances and attitudes, and *negative stereotypes* within the public space.

**Islamophobic attitudes** transport fear and hostility that crystallized around a certain negative image of Islam as an anti-Western, aggressive and culturally inferior religious identity; those having Islamophobic attitudes do not differentiate between Muslims; induce fear, portraying Islam as a threat, and our societies as threatened by an expansion of a hostile Islam; encourage a feeling of an urgent threat that must be aggressively responded to. Islamophobic

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ANTI-ISLAMISTS PERCEIVE ISLAM AS A MONOLITHIC, STATIC AND UNCHANGING SET OF DOGMAS AND ATTITUDES, AS INFERIOR TO "THE WEST" BECAUSE INHERENTLY ARCHAIC, MISOGYNISTIC, VIOLENT AND POLITICAL

utterances are characterized by a larger conspiracy thinking, e.g. a project of the deliberate Islamization of the West.

Islamophobic attitudes mostly refer to a sophisticated, yet fact-proof **ideology of anti-Islamism**. An anti-Islamist ideology, like any racism, is based on picking up a series of concrete negative characteristics (violent nature, misogyny, irrationality), ascribing them to an entire group of people (all Muslims) and subsequently explaining any negative fact (attacks, veiling) by the purported nature of the group as a whole. Anti-Islamism promotes an ideological



## ANTI-ISLAMISM IS ONE OF THE DIMENSIONS OF A NEW, ILLIBERAL, NATIONALIST GROUP IDENTITY

construct with the following features: It creates an artificial image of Islam; it gives its own definition of Islam, with no substantial reference to complex, various, real forms of Islam and any individual Muslims and their self-understanding.

Anti-Islamists perceive Islam as a monolithic, static and unchanging set of dogmas and attitudes, as inferior to “the West” because inherently archaic, misogynistic, violent and political. They deny its inner pluralism and development, as well as the ability to adapt to the modern world and liberal democracy and thus perceive Islam as essentially a dogmatic ideology. Anti-Islamist’s Islam is a “strawman”: a fictional image of Islam onto which anti-Islamists hang a series of negative properties, e.g. quotations from the Quran taken out of context, negative social and political facts from the Muslim world. Then they ascribe those facts to the very “essence” of Islam, i.e. to their image of Islam. The anti-Islamic ideology is therefore irrefutable by rational arguments, because any facts about Islam, its various forms, and Muslims’ forms of self-understanding have little to do with the anti-Islamist boogeyman. Anti-Islamists are not interested in reality but rather in a confirmation of their own attitudes. Anti-Islamism is finally one of the dimensions of a new, illiberal, nationalist group identity.

### **Negative stereotypes concerning Islam and Muslims**

are subtle, but no less dangerous effects of Islamophobic attitudes and anti-Islamist ideology. Media spread around stereotypes, allow for imbalanced reporting and overuse sensationalism. Negative stereotypes within the political discourse are the fruit of oversimplification, lack of knowledge, conceptual confusion and sometimes bias. Those negative stereotypes are perhaps the most serious effect of Islamophobia. Negative, alarmist attitudes and at least some of the positions of anti-Islamism make it to the mainstream by channels that cannot be easily criticized for active Islamophobia.

### **THE MAINSTREAMING OF ISLAMOPHOBIC ATTITUDES IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC**

Both within the political sphere and in the media, Islamophobia was a present, distinct, but a marginal phenomenon since the 2000s. Islamophobic attitudes have been a European mainstay since the 1990s with regular peaks following violence related to Muslims in Europe or outside. Czech right extremist parties such as Národní Strana (National Party; NS) and Dělnická Strana (Workers’ Party; DSSS), as well as groups such as Národní Odpor (National Resistance) regularly target Muslims: they demonstrate in front of prayer rooms, sometimes attack them directly;<sup>5</sup> protest against building a mosque (in Teplice in 2004, in Hradec Králové in 2010, Brno and Karlovy Vary in 2013), they participate in anti-Islam meetings of European extreme right and make rejection of migration the topic of their electoral campaign<sup>6</sup>. Yet anti-

<sup>5</sup> “In 2009, a pig’s head was placed on fence outside the Prague mosque with the words ‘Stop Islam’ written on the fence”, Islam In The Czech & Slovak Republics: An Invisible Minority Becomes Visible, Dr. Emily Jane O’Dell, Scholar Research Brief, IREX, available at: <https://www.irex.org/sites/default/files/ODell%20Scholar%20Research%20Brief%202010-2011.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> “Imigrace jako ultrapravicové téma ve volbách do Evropského parlamentu”, Migrace Online, 21. 10. 2009,



Islamism is but an added dimension to existing nationalist and racist and often anti-Semitic agenda.

In the Czech media sphere, systematic Islamophobic attitudes have largely been a matter of the margins and of internet magazines. Eurabia.cz, The "Truth about Islam" (pravdaoislamu.cz) and "Media about Islam" (mediaoislamu.cz) have focused on Islam and a purported Islamization of Europe since 2005. The right-wing populist server eurabia.cz has, on the one hand, denied being Islamophobic and points to its "balanced" publication about any topic related to Islam, including articles by mainstream authors and academics. Yet it also gathers the largest number of dedicated right wing anti-Islamic writers since 2005<sup>7</sup>.

The first wave of Islamophobic or at least Islam-obsessed online publications dealt with the purported dangers of multiculturalism, a hot topic of the 2000s, following jihadi attacks in Europe. Notions of Islam and multiculturalism were clearly borrowed from West European media where those questions were intensely discussed. These were locally adapted for the Czech Republic where Muslims are low in numbers and virtually invisible.

The Arab spring marked a second wave of Islamophobia, putting questions of Islam and democracy in the center of public attention. Since 2011, a specialized, local anti-Islamist movement has started to appear on social networks and generally in the internet. Public online debates on news servers, blogs on main news servers and

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Available [online]: <http://migraceonline.cz/cz/e-knihovna/imigrace-jako-ultrapravicove-tema-ve-volbach-do-evropskeho-parlamentu>

<sup>7</sup> "Strukturální a obsahová analýza serveru Eurabia.cz", Migrace Online 27. 06. 2007, Available [online]: <http://www.migraceonline.cz/cz/e-knihovna/strukturalni-a-obsahova-analyza-serveru-eurabia-cz>

YouTube channels have become sources of opinion making and community building for overtly and primarily anti-Islamist individuals. Led by a biology teacher, Martin Konvička, a number of online-discussants developed a systematically hostile discourse in internet discussions under any articles that were not dismissive of Arabs and Islam in general. By 2013, they built up into an active Facebook group called *Islám v České republice nechceme* (IVČRN – We do not want Islam in the Czech Republic) with approximately 60,000 members. The Facebook group was shut down by Facebook but it reappeared and doubled its membership to 140,000 members<sup>8</sup> before being closed down by Facebook once again in 2015. Those loose groups have slowly started developing formal structures.

In summer 2011, the Czech branch of the anti-Islamist European Defense League registered in the Czech Republic<sup>9</sup>, as a continuation of a former group and portal opposed to building mosques in the Czech Republic, antimesita.cz (Anti-Mosque). The anti-Islamist activities were mostly limited to online campaigning against mosques, halal meat and spreading hoaxes concerning Muslims in Europe.

Even before the last crisis, the extreme right wing and anti-Islamists enlarged their focus from Muslims alone to perceived helpers of Islam and sought to increase political polarization in the Czech Republic over matters related to Islam. Alongside Muslims, anti-discrimination activists are regularly harassed on-line and lists with perceived pro-Muslim liberals, with their names and sometimes address and phone numbers,

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<sup>8</sup> For comparison, extreme right wing parties have only thousands of members at their Facebook groups.

<sup>9</sup> David Mrva, "Czech Defence League v kontextu antidžihadistického hnutí", *Rexter* 02/2012, Available [online]: [http://casopis.rexter.cz/rexter\\_02\\_2014.pdf](http://casopis.rexter.cz/rexter_02_2014.pdf)

were set up on a server called “White Media”. Anti-Islamists opposed empowering ombudsman Anna Šabatová, perceived as too liberal for her engagement in a headscarf issue<sup>10</sup>.

In 2015, anti-Islamist internet activism spilled over to the streets, to mainstream media and finally to serious public tribunes such as the Czech parliament. In the wake of the first Paris attacks, IVČRN started to hold public demonstrations in Prague, gathering several thousand people at a time<sup>11</sup>. It gained support from populist parliamentary parties, among other by Tomio Okamura from the Dawn of Direct Democracy (Úsvit Přímé Demokracie), who joined in with overtly aggressive anti-Muslim utterances<sup>12</sup>, by several of his co-partisans from the Dawn and by the senator and leader of the President Zeman’s party, Jan Veleba. The jihadi attacks in particular and the question of Islam in Europe in general were controversial from the onset. In a sensationalist move, mainstream media (including television) started inviting extremist anti-Islamist activists to their prime time shows, giving them space and public legitimacy. They left the margins and their “behind-the-veil” internet existence and became instant celebrities.

<sup>10</sup> “Islamophobia on the rise”, *Prague Post*, 31. 12. 2014, Available [online]: <http://www.praguepost.com/czech-news/43563-islamophobia-on-the-rise>

<sup>11</sup> “Czech Republic: Protests against Islam and for religious freedom in front of Prague Castle”, *Romea.cz*, 17-01-2015, Available [online]: <http://www.romea.cz/en/news/czech/czech-republic-protests-against-islam-and-for-religious-freedom-in-front-ofprague-castle>

<sup>12</sup> “Tomio Okamura, who heads the Czech opposition Dawn of Direct Democracy movement, has called on people on Facebook to bother Muslims in the Czech Republic by “walking pigs” in the vicinity of mosques, for example, which, he emphasized, is no incitement to intolerance. See: “MP urges Czechs: Walk your pigs near mosques”, 03. 01. 2015, *Islamophobia watch*, Available [online]: <http://www.islamophobiawatch.co.uk/category/czech-republic/>

Finally, in spring 2015, the migration crisis erupted and attention shifted from Islam in Europe as such to the fear of a “Muslim invasion” to Europe. The migration crisis allowed overt Islamophobic attitudes to enter the media mainstream. From April to August, Czech reporting on the quotas for refugee resettlement and on the Balkan border crisis were generally negative. The tone has somewhat changed since numerous Czech humanitarian volunteers started bringing back their own, more diversified stories and testimonials from the Balkan route where they were assisting refugees – at that point young Czechs could be depicted as agents within the larger story.<sup>13</sup>

The last stage of the anti-Islamist mainstreaming was the public support given to IVČRN by President Miloš Zeman. In October 2015, IVČRN was invited by populist parties and under the auspices of the president to organize a conference on Islam in the Senate, after it held a conference in October in the Parliament<sup>14</sup>. Then the president supported their arguments, e.g. stating that a “moderate Muslim is a contradiction in terms”<sup>15</sup>, talking about a threat of a “super-holocaust” coming from the Islamic state<sup>16</sup> and stating that there was

<sup>13</sup> Some 2,000 Czechs set off once or repeatedly to the Balkans and to Lesbos island, gathering material and financial aid, brought it to crisis points. The Bapske transit point was at some point mostly organised by volunteers from the so called Czech Team. They keep supplementing state services especially in Greece as this article is being written. Volunteers from other V4 countries were also present.

<sup>14</sup> The conference was cancelled due to lacking procedure: “Konference islamofobů v Senátu nebude. A někde jinde?”, Available [online]: [http://www.tyden.cz/rubriky/domaci/politika/konference-islamofobu-v-senatu-nebude-a-nekde-jinde\\_359865.html](http://www.tyden.cz/rubriky/domaci/politika/konference-islamofobu-v-senatu-nebude-a-nekde-jinde_359865.html)

<sup>15</sup> See the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance report: “Zpráva ECRI Česká Republika”, October 2015, Available [online]: [http://www.coe.int/t/dghl/monitoring/ecri/Country-by-country/Czech\\_Republic/CZE-CbC-V-2015-035-CZE.pdf](http://www.coe.int/t/dghl/monitoring/ecri/Country-by-country/Czech_Republic/CZE-CbC-V-2015-035-CZE.pdf)

<sup>16</sup> Full text: “Zeman’s speech at Holocaust event”, *Prague Post*, 27. 01. 2015, Available [online]: <http://www.praguepost.com/czech-news/43563-islamophobia-on-the-rise>

a Muslim invasion on Europe organized by the Muslim Brotherhood. Most symbolically, Konvička and his supporters were invited to the stage together with the President on the anniversary of the 1989 revolution. At the end of 2015, IVCRN joined a political party called Blok Proti Islámu (Block Against Islam; BPI) that is poised to run in the regional elections in autumn 2016. Konvička was eventually indicted of inciting hatred and is awaiting a trial.

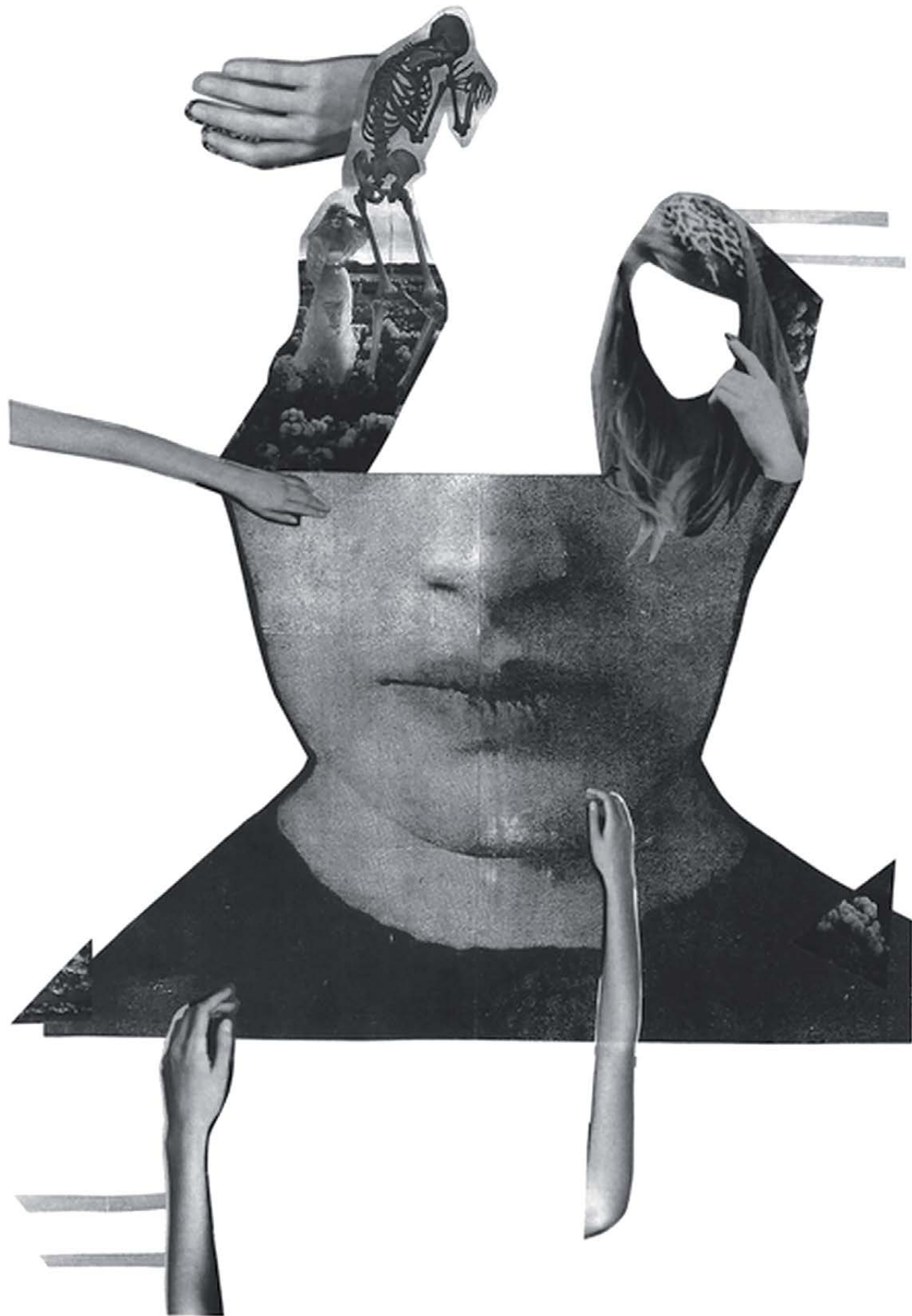
### CHANGING FORMS OF ISLAMOPHOBIA

Although generally viewed as relatively liberal and tolerant, the Czech Republic has a history of discrimination and widespread negative attitude against its Roma minority. During the last year Islamophobic attitudes – in the form of hate speech, incitement to violence on the internet, public protests – have largely surpassed previous anti-Roma expressions. The abovementioned mainstreaming of Islamophobic attitudes has home-grown and imported sources in anti-Islamic ideologies and translated into widely shared stereotypical depiction of Muslims in the public sphere. Anti-Islamism has developed in a space of latent Islamophobia into a closed ideology due to active lecturing of ex-Muslims, anti-Islamist ideologues and influential media.

In 2007, Jiří Schneider linked anti-Islamism to a wide range of attitudes and current, above all to Euro-skepticism: “The anti-Islam camp in the Czech Republic involves Eurosceptics of all sorts, evangelical Christian fundamentalists, secular liberal feminists, Roman-Catholic traditionalists, opponents of Turkish EU membership, proponents of the separation of Church and state who view Islam as a religion of

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governance<sup>17</sup>. Right wing public intellectuals such as Roman Joch have been vocal in their skepticism towards Islam. Until 2011, those attitudes could be subsumed mostly under a register of a criticism of Islam, being mostly concerned with Islamic fundamentalism.

During the present crisis, a full-blown anti-Islamist ideology had emerged, this time targeting Muslims and Islam as such. A tautological, fact-proof and rationally non-opposable kind of ideology is put forward by activists rather than academics. For them, Islam is a disease people need to be cured from; Islam is inherently violent, expansionist and political. Anyone opposing their views is labelled "naïve" (sluníčkář) or "traitor" (vlastizrádce). The positions of leading anti-Islamists are not only extreme, they are often absurd and hence in need of legitimation from foreign or somewhat authentic sources. For instance, Martin Konvička is well known for his pseudo-psychological lecture on Islam as "a psychosexual pathology"<sup>18</sup>.

For legitimation, the IVCRN often refer to ex-Muslims. They especially list a series of Czech female ex-Muslims who offer to give testimony about their experience with Islam upon invitation in schools. They usually touch upon a conversion and a marriage to a Muslim foreigner gone wrong.<sup>19</sup> A prominent ex-Muslim convert, Lukáš Lhořan, has led a campaign against the Prague Islamic community since 2010. His position is that Islam is no religion but an expansionist political ideology. In 2014, he was instrumental in indicting the community of spreading hatred which led to a me-

<sup>17</sup> "Muslim Minorities and Czech Society," Jiří Schneider, in: *Islam and Tolerance in Wider Europe*, ed. By y Pamela Kilpadi, Open Society Institute, Budapest 2007.

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MBFORFXRgXg>

<sup>19</sup> See <http://exmuslimove.cz/skoly/>



## ACCORDING TO THE CZECH INTERIOR MINISTRY, FRONT NATIONAL IS A DIRECT INSPIRATION FOR CZECH ANTI-ISLAMISTS

dialized police raid of the main Prague mosque on the outskirts of the capital city. After having enjoyed trust as a representative of Czech Muslims (for example being invited by the US Embassy to their interreligious gatherings), Lhořan turned against his earlier coreligionists with vehemence and gained followers in the anti-Islamist camp<sup>20</sup>. A more trusted source of anti-Islamism is another ex-Muslim, Salman Hasan, an Iraqi Muslim converted to Christianity and a preacher against the "dangers of Islam". Unlike Lhořan and Konvička, Hasan has the aura of authentic experience (he lost members of his family to extremists in Iraq) and good intention (he engages in Christian missionary and charity work). Salman Hasan tours the Czech Republic, especially the periphery, with his message; unlike the activists in IVCRN he acceded to mainstream media without a need for previous controversy and unlike aggressive anti-Islamists he easily gains confidence even in educated, well

<sup>20</sup> "The only reliable Muslim is an ex-Muslim", web of the anti-Islamist IVCRN: "Jediný skutečně spolehlivý muslim je exmuslim", available at: <http://www.ivcrn.cz/jediny-skutecne-spolehlivy-muslim-je-exmuslim/>

off circles. Apart from the domestic supply of anti-Islamists, the ideology draws on foreign sources for inspiration and support. According to the Czech Interior Ministry, Front National is a direct inspiration for Czech Anti-Islamists<sup>21</sup>. IVČRN cooperates with the German Pegida. Apart from extreme right movements, IVČRN calls upon Western anti-Islam resources, like political entrepreneur Bill Warner. The former physicist and professional anti-Islam activist founded the Center for the Study of Political Islam in the Czech Republic<sup>22</sup>. He holds lectures about “Why people fear Islam?”, offers online courses on Islam and sells his numerous publications, among others, “Sharia for non-Muslims”. He is linked to larger anti-Islam opinion hubs like the Gates of Vienna website and the Counter Jihad Report. He presents himself as a knower and student of Islam, he owns the website [politicalislam.com](http://politicalislam.com) and sells Czech translations of his books to seemingly avid Czech audience (for example to activist atheists).

Anti-Islamism and alarmism related to the migration crisis are most probably spread deliberately also by influence-seeking media of suspected Russian origin. The Czech Ministry of Interior quotes the Russian influence medias (Sputnik and Aeronet) as sources of deliberately alarming news about dangers related to Muslim immigration to Europe: they present distorted statistics and focus on the inability of Europe to counter the migration crisis<sup>23</sup>. Other, less visible source of panic around Islam are

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online TVs, where videos are widely circulating for example through emails among retired Czechs who are not on the usual social media. One of them is the purportedly Catholic Gloria.tv, spreading news about the War in Europe in several languages (German speaker, Slovak subtitles). Interestingly enough, the siege of Gloria TV is in Moscow<sup>24</sup>. Senator Jan Veleba, who is also a well-known supporter of Vladimir Putin is among the Czech politicians who support the anti-Islamist cause.

<sup>21</sup> Extremismus Souhrnná situační zpráva 1. čtvrtletí roku 2015, Available [online]: [mvcz.cz](http://mvcz.cz)

<sup>22</sup> More concretely in Lidická 700, Brno, according to its Facebook page.

<sup>23</sup> “Ministerstvo vnitra: Islamofobní a protimigrantské nálady jsou hlavním tématem extremistů”, 21. 10. 2015, [manipulatori.cz](http://manipulatori.cz); available at: <http://manipulatori.cz/ministerstvo-vnitra-islamofobni-a-protimigrantske-nalady-jsou-hlavnim-tematem-extremistu/>

<sup>24</sup> See <https://gloria.tv/imprint/>



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### CONCLUSIONS: ANTI-MUSLIM STEREOTYPES AS POLITICAL CURRENCY

In 2015, Islamophobic attitudes left their virtual margins and entered the public mainstream. It became acceptable to present far-fetched anti-Muslim opinions and borderline racist attitudes. The mainstreaming of Islamophobic attitudes and the spread of anti-Islamist beliefs may well play into the hands of populist parties in future elections, leading perhaps to more anti-Islamists presence in representative bodies. Yet the most serious consequence of the rise of the Islamophobia phenomenon in 2015 is the spread of negative stereotypes into mainstream media and political discourse, and the polarization of public opinion.

Even after some improvement of reporting, media do not shun generalizations and simplification. It became acceptable even for journalists of public media outlets to work in a non-objective and suggestive manner, when the talk is about Islam. The confusion between “Islam” and “Islamism” became a matter of opinion, not of facts, as a prominent radio journalist has shown, by pushing a rare voice of reason, Professor Tomáš Halík, into a conclusion he did not want to make about Islam being inherently fundamentalist<sup>25</sup>. A logic of suspicion became current: Muslims are talked about as if having shared essential characteristics (like resistance to modernity and to integration to a European political model, as having a general tendency to radicalization).

The stereotypization of Muslims entered the political discourse of mainstream parties as well. Petr Fiala, leader of the right wing Civic Democratic Party (ODS),

<sup>25</sup> [http://media.rozhlas.cz/\\_audio/03534913.mp3](http://media.rozhlas.cz/_audio/03534913.mp3)

has made the otherness of Islam and the purported impossible integration of Muslims into one of his main topics. Finance Minister, Andrej Babiš, who will be campaigning for premiership next year, has (after some hesitation), chosen to also pick up the migration issue. Even if the political mainstream stays short of overt Islamophobic attitudes, the usage of stereotypes by main political leaders may actually confirm suspicions among the general public rather than reassure them against purported dangers. A spiral of polarization and populist radicalization may well unfold in the coming year.

Yet, as this short study shows, anti-Islamism is far from being a simple default position of some inherently Islamophobic public opinion. It is actively created and spread around by a number of ideologues and ex-Muslims, not unlike the way the ideology of anti-Islamism it is being promoted in the US. Recently, the Center for American Progress in the United States has identified a network of foundations and “disinformation experts” connected to the American religious right and political foundations who specialize in promoting anti-Islamic attitudes<sup>26</sup>. It also feeds on a fractured media landscape: as two out of four main dailies are owned by the finance minister and other mainstream media by a few magnates, the center loses credibility and the scissors between liberal and <sup>27</sup>xenophobic opinion open, leaving the space to sensationalist, biased or foreign influenced news channels. An example for all: the eurabia.cz server was recently incorporated into more seriously looking Parliamentarian News (eurabia.parlamentnilisty.cz), co-owned by a major lottery entrepreneur.

After the loss of Václav Havel, the Czech Republic generally lacks a moral authority figure. The recent eruption of all sorts of public debates about Islam, a strong civil society mobilization in favor of more solidarity with war victims and the development of independent online media may just slow down the descent into populism. The polarization of other Visegrad Group public debates may well be the last warning against the rationality of radical political games. ●

<sup>26</sup> Report Center for American Progress, Available [online]: <https://www.americanprogress.org/.../fear-inc-2-0>

<sup>27</sup> Mladá Fronta and Lidové Noviny.



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