PEACE- VERSUS CONFLICT-JOURNALISM IN POLAND

Representation of Islam, Muslims and refugees by progressive and right-wing Polish media

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Introduction

The core of the chapter is the discussion of journalistic coverage of the Independence March, an annual event organized by far-right organizations in Poland which has been normalized in the Polish civic sphere with all its attendant ideologies of white supremacy, nationalism and xenophobia under the guise of patriotism. Adapting some elements of peace journalism theory, I discern journalistic strategies employed by progressive media to counter the far-right discourse regarding Islam, Muslims and refugees. For the purpose of this chapter, I focus on the sociological understanding of religion. Sociologists think of religion as social act and rather than focusing on the substance of religion, they are interested in how religion is performed socially, in a group (Davie 2007). When considering its links with journalism, it is useful to think of religion as a social practice that is always constructed, reproduced, and mediated. After the end of the Cold War, religious identity joined a host of other identities: national, linguistic, cultural and many others – as a common marker delineating Us and Them. This demarcation line has become particularly strong in Poland since 2015.

The scarce extant research on the intersections of religion, dialogue and peacebuilding and the press in Europe highlights the fundamental role the media play in both facilitating and thwarting peacebuilding. For example, Mårtensson (2014) observes that the private media (both printed and broadcast) shape the public discourse about Islam in Norway. She further notes that Muslims receive the most media coverage in Norway (except the prime minister) and that this coverage is almost exclusively negative. Merdjanova and Brodeur (2011) in their case study of the role of the media in religious peacebuilding in the Balkans suggest that religious media have a particularly promising potential in creating bridges across communities as they are especially well placed to present balanced information about other faith communities to their readers. Merdjanova and Brodeur (2011) suggest that in order to improve the situation, training be provided for two groups: religion training for media professionals, especially editors and journalists, as well as media training for religious professionals who will then be more adept at engaging with the public on a wider scale.
The role of journalism in covering minority religions

This chapter looks at the ways in which mediation of religion shapes its representations and how such representations may in turn affect other social practices and beliefs. Indeed, Borden (2013, 51) argues that people are “dependent on the media to orient themselves to their communities.” She further posits that in order to be a virtuous practice, journalism must inform citizens well so that they can participate in civic life. This highlights the evolution of reporting from a mechanical job to an intellectual and ethical practice (Borden 2013). The latter is highlighted by Peleg (2006) who argues that journalism “becomes a crucial determinant in conflict and conflict resolution: it creates consciousness of, and attentiveness to, the other.” However, the increasingly important role of journalism in liberal democracies does not come without its risks for the profession and its impact. Peleg (2006, 2) points out that conflict journalism “promotes noises, distortions, interruptions, deceptions, ploys, and false clues, promotes and expedites conflict.” In contrast, peace journalism “relies on honesty, open channels and the effort to align the sent message with the received one” (Peleg 2006, 2). According to Bratic and Schirch (2007, 9), there are several functions of journalism which suggest that it may play a positive role during conflict. First, the journalist acts as information provider and interpreter. This means the coverage presents both facts and commentary (opinions) which should be fair and balanced. Next, a journalist can be a watchdog, uncovering events and stories for the general public, for example, through investigative journalism. Journalistic media as a gatekeeper can bring marginalized voices to the fore and filter out hate speech. Finally, media as peace promoter and bridge builder can promote positive relationships between groups, particularly in ethnic and religious conflict. This can be achieved in the following ways: by showing the Other in a similar light to self, thus engendering empathy; depicting members of different groups with similar types of problems, depicting members of different groups with shared positions and interests and condemning violence.

It is argued that journalism usually plays a greater role in fueling conflict rather than peacebuilding (Wolfsfeld 2004). This is because values that underpin modern reporting and guide journalists in what events to cover are not well aligned with dealing with the nature of peacebuilding. These values include immediacy, drama, simplicity and ethnocentrism (Wolfsfeld 2004). Immediacy means that the media are more likely to focus on specific, discrete actions and events, rather than long-term processes and policies that are inherent to peacebuilding, dialogue and mediation. Drama means that media is interested in covering violence, crisis, conflict, extremist behaviors and other outrageous acts. Again, moderate individuals and groups keen to participate in dialogue are less appealing. These two values, simplicity and drama, illustrate poignantly why religiously motivated terrorist attacks are given much more air time and column space than interfaith or educational initiatives. Simplicity means that coverage favors clear-cut opinions, images, strong personalities and two-sided conflicts. Complex opinions and explanations and multi-sided conflicts do not attract audiences. Finally, media ethnocentrism tends to present our beliefs, myths, symbols and suffering as valid. Their beliefs, myths, symbols and suffering are less welcome as subjects of reporting. It is always the Other that is the brutal agent: we do not commit brutality against others.

One of the most glaring examples of this problematic relationship between religion and journalism is the contemporary reporting on Islam. The role of the media has been long discussed as key to securing popular support for controversial political strategies and engagements. Edward Said, in his classic work Covering Islam, analyzed the American media coverage of the first two months of the Iranian hostage crisis, demonstrating how knowledge
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of Islam “gets produced” (Said 1981, 167). In 2012, Karim observed that in the intervening three decades, a new set of journalistic narratives had emerged – one that positions Muslims as terrorists and Islam as a religion of violence. These concepts have been crucial in the construction of the ideological foundations for neo-colonialism, in particular the Afghanistan and Iraq invasions by the USA and its allies. During these invasions, an unprecedented number of journalists were embedded in military units, providing curated reports from the battlefield (Tumber and Palmer 2004). These representations of Islamic cultures as barbarous and requiring a civilizing influence of the Western military are served in another form that is equally noxious. It hijacks the notion of defending Muslim women’s rights without any regard for these women’s own struggles and voices. It operates both within and outside the West and it is seen by these very women as a form of neo-colonial violence. Abu-Lughod (2002) denounces the idea of saving Muslim women, put forth by the Bush administration, as an excuse for the invasion of Afghanistan, while controversies regarding the Islamic women’s dress-code rage on Western soil, with several European countries banning the facial coverings in an insincere attempt to bring gender equality to Muslim communities in the West (Brems 2014).

Journalism bears responsibility for mediating religion and believers in a fair and balanced manner. Hence, there is a need for peace journalism in religion reporting; this is particularly important in environments where there is religious tension. I would argue that such tension in Poland is inevitable, given the dominant position of Roman Catholic Church (RCC) and its multifaceted influence on all spheres of public life. In a religiously and culturally homogenous country like Poland, journalists bear the responsibility of shaping attitudes to minorities (Pędziwiatr 2015). Yet, only two religious minorities other than Islam exist in the Polish media landscape and social consciousness, Orthodox Christianity and Protestantism (Bruncz 2015). Mędzelowski writes:

The Polish society is not familiar with religious minorities in Poland. The common belief is that in Poland, there are only a few religious traditions. The media does not provide information on the variety of religious beliefs or advocate tolerance towards them. (Mędzelowski 2015, 7)

The scarcity of media coverage parallels the gap in the academic literature on religious minorities in Poland. National, cultural and linguistic minorities get some attention in Polish media, but religious diversity seems secondary. Polish Jews are discussed in the media mostly in the historical context, but representations of modern-day Jews are usually negative. Where charges of anti-Semitism are levelled, they are fervently denied (Haraszkiewicz-Niewczas 2007). Polish Protestantism and Orthodox Christianity are largely invisible in the media (Bruncz 2015). However, in the recent years, sensationalized news stories about Islam have gained ground, especially ones to do with terrorism and refugees, two groups seen as a security and economic threat to the Polish society (Piela and Łukjanowicz 2018). In the light of the previous section that references peace and conflict journalism, two questions arise: How is this religious tension addressed across the Polish media? How could it be reported in order to foster peace and dialogue?

Responses to the refugee crisis in Poland

Until 9/11, there was no wider public interest in the Islamic world in Poland despite the Polish military involvement in the invasions in Afghanistan and Iraq (Mello 2014, Doeser and Eidenfalk 2019). Polish scholarship on Islam remained the exclusive domain of academia,
while the mainstream reporting reflected typical anti-Islamic biases related to presumed hostility to Christianity or abusive treatment of women (Nalborczyk 2004). Notably, Nalborczyk (2004) observed that journalistic writing often contained bizarre factual errors about Islam. More sophisticated and nuanced accounts of a variety of places in the Islamic world by respected reporters such as Kapuściński (1985) or Jagielski (2011a, 2011b) never affected the mainstream imaginary.

In October 2015, the parliamentary elections in Poland were won by the staunchly Catholic, right wing Law and Justice (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość, henceforth PiS) party. This formation builds its strategy on so-called Catholic values that reflect the insular character of the Polish society and indeed the Roman Catholic Church in Poland. Many key PiS politicians choose to unapologetically accumulate political capital by fomenting the fear of the Other, limiting reproductive rights of women and challenging the rule of law (Adekoya 2016). Their populist manifesto resonates, in particular, with older, less-educated and more religious Poles in small towns and more economically deprived regions of Poland (Orłowski 2017). These populations are more likely to build their identities around their religious belonging in an ethnically and culturally homogenous environment. This, coupled with a lack of politically effective, strong progressive political formations (with the main opposition party, the Civic Platform (Platforma Obywatelska, or PO), considered widely a failed proposition) creates a climate in which Islamophobia and racism more widely, thrive almost unchecked.

2015 was also a year when unprecedented numbers of refugees started arriving in Europe from the war-torn countries such as Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan. This became known as the refugee crisis, mediated through images of overloaded boats arriving in Greece and Italy and thousands of people losing their lives during the dangerous passage across the Mediterranean (Greene 2016). In September 2015 (before the Polish October elections), EU countries agreed on a relocation program with quotas of refugees for each of them; Poland agreed to receive 7,000. However, the new PiS government has refused to honor this commitment and, as of November 2017, only a small number of Syrian Christians have been received in Poland. In 2020, Poland, along with Hungary and the Czech Republic, was found guilty in the European Court of Justice of failing to comply with European law (Sandford 2020). Why would these countries take such a rigid position in a conflict that, after all, is based on making limited provisions for a small number of refugees, especially that the European Commission assigned approx. 6,000–7,000 Euros worth of subsidy per relocated person? In the cases of Poland and Hungary, the right-wing ruling parties are bolstered by Euroscepticism and xenophobia and the refugees, primarily from Muslim-majority regions, presented with a perfect opportunity to demonstrate resistance against a shared European migration policy and construct an imagined threat of the Other. Anti-Muslim prejudice has been spewed through both state-controlled and privately owned right-wing media. That, in turn, mobilizes political support needed for the 2018 and 2019 elections in Hungary and Poland, respectively.

Pope Francis’ repeated appeals for welcoming migrants and against exploiting the refugee crisis for political gain, the most recent one issued for the World Peace Day (1 January 2018) (Wooden 2017) fall on deaf ears in Poland, exposing a deep rift between the Vatican and the Polish Catholic Church. Instead of following the ecumenical path of interfaith dialogue, the Polish RCC hierarchy, together with the government, continue to construct the position of Poland in the EU as a bulwark of Christianity.

In the next section, I develop an analysis of journalistic reporting of the Independence March, an annual event with strong right wing, nationalist, xenophobic and Islamophobic undercurrents. I also analyze responses to these events from anti-discrimination actors, Polish
Muslim organizations, progressive NGOs, and the public. They are considered through the prism of the peace/conflict journalism theory (Peleg 2006) and the concepts of peacebuilding and dialogue as necessary strategies for achieving social cohesion in deeply divided societies (Cox and Sisk 2017). To illustrate the progressive perspective, I have used materials published by Oko Press (an investigative journalism organization), the daily Gazeta Wyborcza and the weekly Newsweek Poland. The right-wing perspective is exemplified by the state-controlled Telewizja Polska (TVP), which according to the Polish, law is supposed to be neutral, but since 2015 has been taken over by the ruling party Law and Justice, who appointed the broadcasting regulator, the National Board of Radio, and Television and replaced the existing TVP journalists with those aligned with the government (Gazeta Wyborcza 2016).

In this chapter, I draw from the principles of critical discourse analysis (CDA), an approach pioneered by Norman Fairclough (1995) and Ruth Wodak (2001). Its usefulness is based on the systematic connection that it makes between discourse and the socio-political context. To be more precise, the chapter looks at how discourse reproduces and resists socio-political inequality and abuse of power. Discourse is key in enactment, representation, legitimation, denial, mitigation or concealment of dominance (Van Dijk 1993). Here, my focus is specifically on how dominant groups – in this case, the Polish government and its supporters – enact and legitimate their dominance over others, including political opposition, immigrants, refugees and Muslims. Critical discourse analysis, after all, targets “power elites that enact, sustain, legitimate, condone, or ignore social inequality and injustice” (Van Dijk 1993, 252). In the course of my analysis, I traced, on the one hand, instances of how current Polish power elites’ hegemonic discourse is cemented through an appropriation of historical and patriotic symbols by the far right, denial of a pluralism of perspectives by the state media and officials, biased representations and misappropriations of symbols related to Islam. I also examined attempts by progressive media and civil society actors to challenge the dominant discourse by fact-checking and dispelling myths about Muslims and refugees. Finally, I highlighted a diversity of voices engaging these issues in the Polish public sphere.

The Independence Day march – a case study

The Independence March is a demonstration, which takes place annually in Warsaw on 11 November, the anniversary of the day Poland had its independence reinstated in 1918, after 125 years of partitioning by the Prussian, Russian and Austrian-Hungarian empires. The idea for the march came from the nationalist organizations: the All-Polish Youth and the Nationalist-Radical Camp. Members of these two organizations have founded the Independence March Foundation, the official organizer of the march since 2011. Other groups that participate in the march include a medley of far right and white supremacist organizations, Polish football hooligans, Catholic clergy, and members of the public. Every year the march is met by protesters representing a coalition of progressive groups including the LGBTQ organization Campaign Against Homophobia, the anti-fascist Never Again Association and, most recently, the Women’s Strike and the Citizens of Republic of Poland initiatives. Since 2011, march participants have engaged in acts of violence against the protesters, police, journalists and the city itself. For example, in 2012 a reporter and a camera operator were physically attacked during a riot that was incited by march participants (Noch 2012). In 2013, during similar riots in which 19 people were injured, the march participants burned down an art installation titled “Rainbow” which was interpreted as a symbol of homosexuality and therefore targeted (Wybieralski and Gawlik 2013). Each year, the march is assigned a theme; in 2015, the theme was “Poland for Poles, Poles for Poland”; in 2016, it was “Poland, the bastion
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of Europe” and in 2017, “We want God.” These three slogans illustrate the degree to which xenophobia, white supremacy and nativist interpretations of Christianity are merging in the march organizers’ rhetoric. Recognizing the potential for violence, administrators issued a warning to stay away from the event in a Facebook group for foreigners living in Warsaw. In particular, it was emphasized that people of color were at risk of abuse (Matzke 2017). Five days after the 2017 march, attended by 60,000 people, the European Parliament adopted a resolution calling on Polish authorities to condemn the “xenophobic and fascist” march (European Parliament 2017), to which the Polish president Andrzej Duda and prime minister Beata Szydło responded in the spirit of outraged denial. Mrs Szydło said: “Poland is a country free of anti-Semitism and racism” (Wprost 2017). Immediately after the 2017 march, 45 counter-demonstrators were arrested but, strikingly, none of the violent march participants were. The Polish government or the state-controlled media did not address the violent actions committed by the latter (several women who carried anti-racist banners were physically attacked; subsequently, the investigation was discontinued). Instead, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs praised the march organizers for “uniting the nation around Polish values” (Nałęcz 2017) and bringing together Polish families in a patriotic celebration of an important historic anniversary. Their refusal to outright condemn the white supremacist, far-right violence is reminiscent of Donald Trump’s stubborn insistence that “both sides” (Shear and Haberman 2017) were responsible for the violence during the 2017 Charlottesville demonstrations.

As of March 2018, the Prosecutor General of Poland was investigating whether march participants broke the Polish criminal law (which prohibits inciting racial, ethnic and religious hate and public propagation of fascism in article 256 of the Polish Criminal Code) (Gazeta Prawna 2018). The investigation involves an assessment of the march slogans and symbols displayed on banners by a historian. Examples of these, cited in Gazeta Prawna (2018), include “Europe will be white or deserted,” “We’re all diverse, we’re all white” and “Europe for whites only.” There were reports of chanting Nazi slogans such as “Sieg Heil” and “Jude Raus.” The investigation was discontinued and not a single individual was charged with hate crime (Sejm RP 2020). In the remainder of this chapter, I focus on the anti-Islam narrative at the 2016 and 2017 Independence Day marches, how it was countered by the anti-fascist protesters and how the marches were reported in different media outlets.

Right-wing Independence Day march narratives and progressive responses

In 2016, the chairman of the right-wing organization All-Polish Youth and the MP Robert Winnicki made an announcement. In an interview for Radio Maryja, a conservative Catholic radio station, he said: “Due to colonisation of Europe by Islam, and our historical references, this year’s Independence Day March will opened by a re-enactment of the cavalry of the winged hussars” (Leszczyński 2016). The hussars were an elite Polish cavalry in the golden age of Polish military who were considered almost invincible on the battlefield. They are a potent patriotic symbol in the Polish imaginary, clad in evocative armor adorned with large wings. They fought in many battles from which Poland emerged victorious, including the Battle of Vienna where they fought against the Ottomans (Brzezinski 2006). The involvement of re-enactment groups no doubt is meant to send a message that just as in the 17th century, Poland will stop the Islamic deluge (no matter how incongruous the comparison is between the Ottoman military campaign and the refugees fleeing conflict in the Middle East). This reference is a part of a larger trend. The Polish sociologist Rafal Pankowski observes that far-right groups are increasingly working to reappropriate dates meaningful to
Poland in order to gain support of the wider public (Klauziński 2017). Apart from the Independence Day, the far-right group the Radical National Camp organized a riotous march on 1 August, the date of the 1944 Warsaw Uprising (Nazaruk et al. 2017). As recently as on 3 May 2018, the same group participated openly in the Constitution Day celebrations, with many of the members wearing T-shirts with anti-Muslim slogans emblazoned on them and exposed bullet cartridges (Gazeta Wyborcza 2018).

Winnicki’s statement was quickly addressed by progressive media. Oko Press’s commentator Adam Leszczyński, an academic historian, decisively debunked the former’s claims in a fact-checking mission. He said: “This is false. There’s no colonization whatsoever” (Leszczyński 2016), citing Pew Research Center statistics on Muslims living in Europe. He also points out that the strongest anti-Muslim prejudice is present in the countries with the smallest numbers of Muslims – Poland and Hungary. In addition to disputing the metaphor of colonization, Leszczyński challenges the idea of an inherently homogenous, Christian, ahistorical Europe. He references pre-Christian history of the continent and the Muslim presence here from the 8th century onwards. He concludes by saying: “If we can talk about a historically-derived right to live in Europe, Muslims have as much right to living here as Polish Catholics” (Leszczyński 2016).

Oko Press continued with the fact checking in 2017, when the right-wing commentator Tomasz Łysiak challenged a Daily Mail Online article about “tens of thousands of fascists and far-right extremists” (Tahir 2017) who attended the march. Łysiak reacted by saying:


(Lysiak 2017)

In order to address Łysiak’s emotional renunciation, Bianka Mikołajewska, an investigative journalist and deputy editor of Oko Press, reviewed photographic evidence from the march and concluded that several symbols used on the banners were indeed fascist ones (Mikołajewska 2017). She observed that the Celtic cross, widely employed during the march, had been adopted by white supremacists and neo-fascists. It is used as a replacement of the swastika and has been banned in Germany and France, but in Poland, courts generally accept the far-right’s excuse that the Celtic cross is purely a Christian symbol. Mikołajewska supplies photographic evidence of march participants mixing it in with other symbols from across the ideological spectrum, including the Nazi flag and the Polish eagle. She also discusses Islamophobic banners used at the march, for example, one which reads “Islam=Terror.” Importantly, at the end of the article, Mikołajewska encourages citizenship journalism – she asks the readers to send photographs or videos of violent acts they witnessed during the march in order to report the breaking of the law to the authorities. These two instances of debunking far-right propaganda regarding Islam by the Oko Press team suggest an affinity with peace journalism. According to Peleg (2006), while conflict journalism will sometimes distribute propaganda messages, especially if they are catchy and therefore newsworthy, peace journalism strives to debunk myths and paint a balanced picture, avoiding the us versus them approach.

Polish Islamophobia became more volatile and consciously mobilized in 2015. Since September 2015, different far-right factions have competed with each other in their efforts to ramp up anti-Muslim, anti-refugee and anti-immigrant prejudice. An intra-far-right race was in full swing in April 2018, with four different factions building local structures and attracting supporters. It was termed the “hottest political contest in Poland.
The Independence Day march 2017: the refugees as the Trojan Horse

Robert Bąkiewicz, the chairman of the Independence March Association, stated that the 2017 theme “We Want God” is meant to counter the godless European Union and the “invasion of the so-called refugees” (Gądek 2017). However, different factions within the Polish far-right movement display a varied degree of openness about their prejudice. Overt, vulgar racism is openly expressed on its fringes, although it often comes through in the narratives of its public-facing representatives. TVP Info related the controversy around a tweet issued by Mateusz Plawski, the spokesperson of All-Polish Youth who tweeted that “A black person cannot be Polish” (TVP Info 2017b). In their article titled “Leaders of the National Movement: Racism is foreign to us, and the resistance to immigration is a sentiment we hold dear” (TVP Info 2017b), leaders of various far-right groups, including the National Movement chairperson and the National-Radical Camp, adamantly argued that they could not be racists, because “the nation is a cultural construct, not a blood brotherhood” (TVP Info 2017b). Claiming to be inspired by moral teachings of the RCC, they were keen to emphasize that contrary to the tweet, a black person could be a Pole. They did say, however, that they did not like immigrants, thus stereotypically conflating the concepts of a refugee and an immigrant. The article is illustrated by a photograph of a banner prominent during the Independence March (Falęckı 2017) which depicts the following scene: In the background there is a stronghold labelled “Europe.” The foreground is dominated by a wooden Trojan horse labelled “Islam,” with a window in which a male figure is sitting, holding a placard “I’m refugee” [sic]. The male is drawn in a farcical way—reminiscent of the 2006 Muhammad caricatures and anti-Semitic drawings of Jews—sporting a very prominent nose, a beard and a turban. He appears to be wearing a suicide belt. Contrasting with that, to the left of the picture there is a hooded, masked individual waving a Polish flag and throwing a flare. The literal meaning of the picture is clear: The march participants are defending not just Poland but entire Europe from insidious Islam. The figure of the Muslim refugee suggests that he is on a secret mission to destroy Europe akin to the Greek razing of the city of Troy, described in the Odyssey and the Eneid. In this sense, he is not a refugee at all, he is a terrorist in disguise. TVP Info used the photograph of the banner as proof that the Polish far-right was not racist, because the prejudice was directed against believers of Islam who universally subscribe to extremist and violent ideologies and not against some generic (and harmless) black people. Irony escapes the writers of the article, however. First, the type of depiction of the Muslim refugee/terrorist on the banner is highly racialized (Gottschalk and Greenberg 2011) and routinely used in cartoons about Arabs. This picture mobilizes the argument that
hatred of Islam is not racism, because Islam is an ideology, not a biological characteristic of Muslim bodies. However, this racialized depiction of an Arab Muslim man lays bare the falsity of that argument. Here, Islam is just proxy for a variety of brown and black bodies (including both Muslims and non-Muslims such as Arab and African Christians, Hindus or Sikhs) that become the target of Islamophobic abuse – as Islamophobia includes acts against individuals perceived to be Muslim, even if they are not. In other words, the racist intention (to harm brown bodies) is concealed by an argument that poses to be anti-ideological, while remaining fundamentally, if not explicitly, biological. Simply, while overt anti-black racism is superficially shunned by the far-right leaders, anti-brown racism is acceptable to them.

The question remains, why would far-right leaders resort to such puzzling rhetorics? I would argue that they recognize that overt anti-black racism is (still) unpalatable in Polish mainstream politics which they wish to join and have already begun to infiltrate (for example, Robert Winnicki is a member of the Parliament, despite being found guilty on counts of slander and inciting racial violence (Siałkowski 2018)). They are representing a new brand of far-right, neatly suited up and with a clean haircut. In order to gain and retain political legitimacy, they have to straddle the line that divides such racism from rhetorically convoluted prejudice that lays claim to a higher (cultural) reasoning. Such a stand is, after all, necessary to pander to their hooligan supporters who do recognize this narrative as a purely superficial, racism-normalizing political device. They in turn express they feelings about the Other in an unambiguous way, as the chants during the march illustrate (“The entire Poland is singing along with us, take the refugees the f**k out”).

These words and behaviors were not covered by TVP Info. Instead, state-controlled media tend to focus on highlighting alleged problems that refugees are causing in Western Europe. A few examples of post-2015 article headlines about refugees from TVP Info: “Germans Don’t Feel At Home in Their Country Anymore,” “Refugees Banned From a Swimming Pool in Germany – Women Complaining of Harassment,” “Refugees Sent into Custody after Attempting an Illegal Border Crossing,” and, most tellingly, “Islamic State Cell Destroyed: It Was Set Up by a Refugee” (all TVP Info n.d.). This selection of headlines demonstrates journalistic framing of refugees as a threat. Other headlines frame them as victims: “Prison and Fine for Attacking a Refugee” (TVP Info n.d.). It is pertinent at this point to mention the results of a Pew Research poll, which has found that Poles, along with Hungarians, are the most Islamophobic nation in Europe while having one of the smallest Muslim populations (Westcott 2016).

**Progressive journalistic responses**

What are the progressive journalistic responses that address such xenophobic and in particular Islamophobic events? They focus on anti-fascist initiatives organized to counter the Independence March and publish coverage of real people’s experiences and refugee accounts. For several years, since obstructing the legally registered Independence March has been illegal, an umbrella of anti-fascist groups has organized an alternative march in Warsaw to make a stand. A group of left-wing, feminist, LGBTQ and socialist association leaders have been interviewed by Gazeta Wyborcza in order to ponder the extraordinary growth in the popularity of the Independence Day March and far-right more widely (Karpieszuk 2017). They stated that while far-right xenophobia and violence are becoming normalized, they represent those Poles who oppose them. While some of those interviewed argued that the ordinary people might be unaware of the fact that the march is orchestrated by the far-right, others claim that on the contrary, the far-right slogans are displayed very rambunctiously, and people embrace
them as the march is a form of belonging in a situation where other forms of community are absent. In other words, the far-right movement has managed to appropriate many followers because it is fulfilling some of the functions of the civil society (see Karpieszuk 2017). They are aided in this task by the current government and the media it controls.

For example, it is notable that 45 counter-protesters were seized and later released, three of them with charges of obstructing a legal event and, bizarrely, propagating fascism and hate speech. This was due to one of their banners showing photographs of the 1930s Nazi marches and the modern-day far-right ones, which obviously condemned fascism, side by side (RMF24 2017). Another group of protesters, all of them female, held a transparent that read “Fascism Stop” on the march route; they were kicked, spat at and beaten up by the march participants. This was reported by Gazeta Wyborcza (Wójcik 2017). Regardless of that incident, the state-controlled TVP 1 aired comments by the Warsaw Chief of Police in its 7:30 pm news program that “This year’s march was very safe and peaceful” (TVP Info 2017a). Clearly, there is a discrepancy between the image that the march organizers and the state-controlled media are attempting to create (patriotic, family-friendly, protective of traditional values, normal) and the image that is actually emerging through progressive media outlets (nationalistic, xenophobic, racist, violent, extremist). In this particular case, the progressive journalism in Poland is not aligned with the peace journalism paradigm. It does report on political dissent that arises in response to the exclusionary and violent messages and behavior of the march participants. It also covers violence that is enacted against protesters, as to ignore it would conceal the degree to which far-right in Poland has grown and jeopardized the civil society and democracy. It must be emphasized that this right-wing turn is happening with full consent of the current government and its agencies (Piela and Łukjanowicz 2018).

It should be noted that right-wing media and their readers routinely engage in hate campaigns against progressive media by denouncing their alleged otherness, usually in anti-Semitic or generally xenophobic terms. The main liberal press title, Gazeta Wyborcza (pol. Electoral Gazette) is accused of unspecified Jewishness (and called by them the Kosher Gazette, Tzadik Voice, Jerusalem Voice) and of being selective in its coverage (Gazeta Wybiórcza, pol. Selective Gazette) (see Nonsensopedia n.d.). The Polish edition of Newsweek is usually denounced as German propaganda, as it is owned by the German and Swiss publishers, Axel Springer and Ringier.

These and other progressive media attempt to counter the constant bombardment of the anti-refugee discourse by trying to re-humanize the representations of refugees. In contrast to the right-wing media, which generally depict refugees as a dangerous, angry, faceless mass, they run stories of actual refugees, families and individuals, who live in Poland. The story of Jakub Bierzyński, a media company owner, is a good example of this genre (Gazeta.pl 2018). Gazeta.pl is Gazeta Wyborcza’s sister online media outlet. According to Gazeta.pl, Bierzyński posted on his Facebook profile:

I want to thank the right-wing citizens of Poland who advocated the idea that ‘if you want to receive refugees, do it yourself’. I was inspired by it! Amrulo, Omina, and their 4 charming kids have been here for a week. They’re political refugees from Tajikistan. I have been trying to host refugees since May but it is very difficult because the Polish authorities refuse any help organising it. But it has worked I am homing that despite everything, they will find a safe haven here. Thank you to Fundacja Ocalenie [Foundation Rescue]!

(Gazeta.pl 2018)
Gazeta.pl reports that initially Bierzyński was trying to host a Syrian family, but eventually he was assigned a Tajik Muslim family. He has volunteered to host them for two and a half years and is helping the parents to find work. In that sense, by taking the sarcastic right-wing slogan literally, he turned the tables and showed that practical help for refugees is not just possible, but emotionally fulfilling. Explaining his actions, he said:

I did it for myself. I felt soiled by the hate. I realised that only 3 years ago over 70 per cent of Poles wanted Poland to receive refugees, and at that time, this action would have passed unnoticed.

(Gazeta.pl 2018)

Other examples of progressive coverage of Muslims and/or refugees include initiatives that expose Poles to diversity in their communities. In April 2018, With Bread and Salt (the name refers to an ancient Polish custom of welcoming guests with bread and salt, still practiced at traditional weddings), a group affiliated with Association Open Poland organized a day of Polish bread baking for a diverse group of people: a gay man, a Jewish man, a Syrian male refugee, a Congolese female refugee and a Muslim man. Importantly, the TVN24 article (2018) included commentary from the protagonists of the story. For example, the Muslim man, a doctor called Salam, said: “My daughter is Polish. I would like to show her that life is wonderful” (TVN24 2018). The Congolese woman said: “In Congo, women are vulnerable at all times. In Poland, I’m protected” (TVN24 2018). The organizers of the event interviewed customers in the bakery to hear their reactions regarding the identities of the bakers. These were mostly positive; customers often referred to instances in Polish history when Poles themselves received help overseas or when the Polish state was more eager to provide such help to others. This example of Polish people’s social interaction with difference was covered by the television station TVN24 (TVN24 2018).

Discussion

As illustrated by the examples of journalistic reporting discussed here, we can see that there are several strategies employed by progressive media to counter Islamophobia and, specifically from 2015 onwards, to humanize refugees. They include fact checking, providing a platform for progressive voices absent from state-controlled media and running stories about positive interactions with refugees living in Poland. How do these strategies align with the principles of peace journalism (Peleg 2006)? Peleg argues that peace journalism becomes the third party to a conflict in its facilitation capacity, i.e., by

allowing for the rivalling sides to get to know one another, to uphold understanding and empathy, to focus on creativity and human ingenuity to resolve conflicts and to emphasize truth-oriented, people-oriented and solution-oriented journalism to expedite peace.

(Peleg 2006, 2)

Fact checking of stories run by right-wing media is undisputedly a characteristic of truth-oriented peace journalism, as it dispels stereotypes and challenges prejudice. Providing a platform for progressive voices in this instance is a function of people- and solution-oriented peace journalism. Inviting people to get to know one another is exactly the solution to the problem of xenophobia. Countering the myth of all-white, all-Catholic, monolithic Poland
helps progressive movements work toward that goal. Covering real-life stories of refugees living in Poland breaks the ice, as it portrays them as a diverse group of people who have talents, needs and desires just like anybody else. The fact that the protagonists were asked to bake bread, a powerful symbol in the Polish culture that denotes home, hospitality, community and security (Rabikowska 2010), is meaningful. Equally significant is the fact that customers were happy to eat the bread – thus, a relationship between the two groups was established. Salam’s reference to his daughter positions him as a loving father, parenthood being another universal characteristic. The mention of him being a doctor and saving lives serves as a reminder that he has talents, which he can use to enrich the host society. Rosa from Congo interprets Poland as a safe-space, despite high racism levels.

While these journalistic strategies are certainly a step in the right direction, they are by no means sufficient to fully humanize the Other. As Chouliaraki and Stolic (2017, 1172) argue, “the refugee appears in Western spaces of publicity as a deeply ambivalent figure: a body-in-need, a powerless child, a racial ‘other’, a linguistic token or a sentimental drawing.” None of the refugee representations in Western media truly afford them agency. Both positive and negative strategies analyzed in this chapter appear to align with the regimes of visibility or types of journalistic representation, discussed by Chouliaraki and Stolic (2017) such as massification, vilification, infantilization, marginalization or aestheticization. The story about a Polish businessman taking in a Muslim family presents the refugees in a non-agentic way by the mere fact of not interviewing them for the article and preventing them from presenting their own perspective. By denying them that opportunity, the journalist infantilized and marginalized them. Placing the other refugees in a Polish bakery undoubtedly mobilized a positive aesthetic to domesticate their image, but it still situated them as attempting to secure acceptance from the host society, with unclear results.

Trilling argues that it is a myth that telling human stories is enough to change people’s minds. He explains:

if we want to understand why some people will keep moving despite the obstacles put in their way, then we need to see the whole person, rather than only the worst aspects of their situation or their most traumatic experiences. (…) It is also important to recognise that the stories we consume are, for the most part, commodities produced by profit-making companies. This can harm those at the centre of the stories, distort our understanding of a crisis and even contribute to a sense of panic.

(Trilling 2018)

Conclusion

The large body of research on Islamophobia in Europe and the role of mass media in this phenomenon is coupled with the growing recognition of religious diversity and related tensions in Eastern Europe. However, there is a telling lack of research on the topic of religious pluralism in Eastern Europe and how the media is key to laying groundwork for dialogue between believers of different faiths. The educational role of the media is particularly important in religiously homogenous countries such as Poland. It is important that the media discourse about diverse religions in Eastern Europe is documented in order to not only address Islamophobia but the civil society-driven interfaith and dialogue-oriented initiatives as well.

This study adds to the current knowledge on Islam and the media by focusing on the relatively under-researched media representations of Islam and refugees in Poland, an
Eastern European country with a small Muslim minority. It develops the understanding of the recent complicated and indeed explosive dynamics playing out between religious, civil society and political actors: the Polish RCC, the growing far-right movement, Muslim organizations, anti-fascist and civil society organizations, Catholic lay organizations, as well as academics/experts, the media and the Polish government. It documents a specific socio-political junction at a time of a global sharp right-wing turn by discussing different perspectives on the future of religious and cultural diversity in this setting.

Ethnocentrism is conducive to projecting a clash of civilizations vision of our time and right-wing media revel in contrasting the bastion of civilized Christian Europe and the barbarous (mostly Muslim and African) refugees. Georgiou and Zaborowski (2017, 3) stated diplomatically in their Council of Europe report on the European media coverage of the refugee crisis: “Media continue to face significant challenges in safeguarding the values of independent and fair journalism, while respecting freedom of expression for all and tackling hate speech in Europe.” While this may be an unfair status quo, this is simply the way media products are created to bring in maximum revenue for media organizations in the increasingly populist atmosphere of our time.

It is alarming how the Polish far-right has managed to first hijack a patriotic commemoration, re-establish it on violent and exclusionary terms and then, with assistance of current Polish authorities and state-controlled media, normalize it as an acceptable element of the Independence Day anniversary proceedings (which, until 2011, used to be very formal, traditional and celebrated across most state-run institutions, including schools at all levels). It is true that, whether unaware, indifferent or affirming in relation to the march’s provenance, many ordinary citizens do not seem to mind marching hand in hand with the far-right. This domestication of fascism, as Majmurek (2017) argues, is the sign that civic education in post-communist Poland has largely failed.

Stopping Islamisation is a sentiment shared by far-right across Europe and North America (Sundstrom 2013), but in Poland it sounds particularly hollow, as the small numbers of Muslims living in Poland can hardly justify such fears. Indeed, in an attempt to capture this absurdity, the Polish Islamophobia has been described as platonic (Pędziwiatr 2015). In a bizarre rhetorical turn, in the Polish media the word refugee has been reappropriated to mean Muslim, while the word immigrant is now used instead of refugee. Erasure of the correct meaning of the term refugee, which is meant to engender empathy and compassion for those fleeing persecution and replacing it with implication of financial greed, is no doubt intended to influence the public opinion.

Further readings


This short monograph demonstrates the interconnections between the rise of European Islamophobia, media discourses, and Muslim believers’ responses to the former produced in online spaces. It links the global with the local; it shows how international events (or their interpretations) provide a reference framework for local discussions between Polish Muslims and critics of Islam.


This is an excellent introduction into Eastern European Islam and its challenges in the 21st century. Most chapters in this collection offer a contemporary perspective with a strong focus on media discourses about Muslims and thus go beyond the ethnographical and historical tradition of studying Muslims in Central and Eastern Europe.

This article gives an overview of how similar media discourses about Islam are in Western and Eastern Europe. It further discusses this issue in the context of the scarcity of Muslims living in Poland, demonstrating the globalized character of reporting on Islam.


This chapter links mass media representations of Islam to the rise of Islamophobia. It focuses on media strategies to misrepresent Islam such as the reliance on biased ‘experts’ and selective photography. It also demonstrates the significance of media discourses in shaping attitudes toward Muslims.


This collection explores how the twin processes of secularization and religious revival shape Eastern European religious attitudes. With these as a backdrop, it explores modern themes in the sociology of religion, such as social capital, identities, and gender roles.

References


Peace- versus conflict-journalism in Poland


Anna Piela


