Islamophobia and the quest for European identity in Poland

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Introduction

For over a decade Poland has been one of the biggest euro-enthusiasts, after having joined the EU in 2004. However, after 13 years something has changed dramatically. According to one of the recent opinion polls provided by the Institute for Market and Social Research (IBRIS), over a half of Polish population (56.5%) declared that Poland should refuse to accept refugees from Islamic countries, even if it meant a cut (or even loss) of EU funding. Moreover, every second Pole (51.2%) would still insist on not accepting any refugees from Islamic countries, even if that meant leaving the EU (IBRIS 2017). Similar attitudes are also reflected in the research of the Public Opinion Research Center (CBOS) from December 2017, which indicates that hypothetical punishment in the form of losing money from EU funds by Poland does not significantly affect opinions on admission of Muslim refugees under the EU relocation programme: 74% of respondents (4 percentage points more than in May 2017) believe that Poland should not accept refugees from Islamic countries, and only 15% (a decrease of 10 percentage points) take the opposite position (CBOS 2017, p. 4). Hence, a couple of thousands of Muslim asylum seekers – as Poland has never agreed to accept more – in a country of 38 million became a significant reason to opt for a Polexit.

The narratives around the refugee crisis – its causes, scale and consequences – very soon started to have a life of their own. As the flow of people from the Middle East and North Africa to Europe was on the rise, the crisis became political, with the EU member states trying to agree on a joint response. The crisis was also used in internal political games by the countries, which were not affected by this influx of migrants (e.g. Pachocka 2016, 2017). In Poland, since 2008, when the EU started to collect comparative statistics on international migration and asylum from its member states, the number of asylum seekers was the highest in 2013 (more than 15,000) and not in 2015–2016, the peak years of the refugee crisis, but it was still marginal when compared to key EU receiving countries. There were just more than 8,500 asylum applicants in 2008, and more than 12,000 in 2015–2016 (Eurostat 2017). Even the national composition of asylum applicants indicates that Poland differs from the countries that are in the focus of the European refugee crisis, as most applicants come from Russia (Chechnya Republic), Ukraine, Tajikistan and Armenia (Office for Foreigners 2016; Klaus et al. 2018; Szulecka et al. 2018).

Combining all these factors – a history of euro-enthusiasm, strong anti-Muslim sentiments and
lack of any significant Muslim population (neither autochthonous nor refugee or immigrant) – paints a puzzling picture, even poses a paradox. Out of a variety of possible explanations, this chapter focuses on just one, but a crucial dimension, i.e. the European context. It argues that Polish Islamophobic discourse is strongly linked to the way the idea of the Polish national identity is managed vis-à-vis the European one.

To set the scene, two final remarks need to be made. The first one is about the wider internal political context and the other about the authors’ stance. Disturbing changes have been taking place in Poland since the late 2015, when it started to isolate itself from the EU and shifted its position from the ‘decision-making centre’ of Europe to a rebellious periphery. Nowadays, more than 25 years after the fall of communism, Poland, until recently considered an Eastern European systematic transformation success story, seems to be at the crossroads. The 2015 general elections gave power to the populist Law and Justice party (Polish: ‘Prawo i Sprawiedliwość’, PiS), which immediately embarked on an ambitious project to completely transform Poland’s foreign and domestic policy (Misiuni and Pachońka 2017). While PiS scored the majority in the parliament and won the presidential elections, Polish society is far from unified. On the contrary, it is becoming more and more divided in terms of its beliefs and political preferences. The divisions observed are no longer a simple expression of diversity and pluralism in the society, but they lead to open political conflicts and discussion about the foundations of democracy. This has been more and more apparent in Poland in recent months and it reached its peak in July 2017 when national mass demonstrations, protests, marches and rallies were held in many cities to express the opposition of Poles to the planned reform of the national judiciary considered antidemocratic and undermining the separation of powers. On the one hand, we observe the development of anti-democratic tendencies and populism in Poland combined with the crisis of democracy and the rule of law. On the other hand, it serves to revive bottom-up pro-democratic tendencies in the country and mobilize civil society.

This is the wider context in which any Islam- or refugee-related narrative (as they both overlap in public discourse) should be positioned in. While it is hard to say whether Islamophobia or other negative sentiments related to ethnic or religious Others had always been present in the Polish society, but latent, or maybe they are new, and grew out of contemporary political climate, two things can be taken for granted: one is that Islamophobia is a part of a wider mainstream Polish quest for strengthening its national identity (understood in narrow terms as ethnic Polish and Catholic) in opposition to all others who do not fit; the other is that current Polish authorities not only do not even try to tamper anti-Muslim sentiments but actually fuel them within their own political agenda. This refers not only to indulgence in some of the hate crimes against Muslims or people perceived to be Muslim, but most of all in the pronounced reluctance to accept any refugees from outside the EU or other EU members (occasionally there was an alternative narrative of willingness to accept Christian refugees from MENA region, but hardly materialized into any concrete action).

The other introductory remark is on our position in this issue. While we are both academics, we are also Polish and had been experiencing and living this rapid and dramatic political shift taking place in our country. Only in late December 2017, the EU has initiated the Article 7(1) procedure against Poland, which is labelled as the ‘nuclear option’, as the judiciary power’s independence is at a serious risk, and thus the principle of the separation of powers. Consequently, our chapter is enriched by our insights from – let us call it – ongoing participatory observation. We will start by an overview of Polish ‘platonic’ Islamophobia3 rooted in a discourse transplanted from the so called ‘old’ EU countries as the ideological backbone for the current narratives. Then we will move to the image of the EU in the Polish society, pointing at what is pulling the Poles towards the EU. Having these two building blocks – perception
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The quest for European identity in Poland – we will proceed to the dominant narratives, which combine the Islamic and/or the refugee element with the European one, showing how they evolved – from longing to be a part of the EU to rebelling against its policies and core values. Finally, we will present the case of asylum seekers that Poland was actively opposing to accept as an example of a selective EU membership and a practical consequence of local Polish Islamophobia.

Transplanted discourse and the Muslim Other

Poland is a country where Tatars (Muslim autochthonous minority) have been living side by side with other Poles for over 600 years and have always been loyal to the Polish state, fighting for their Polish homeland when it was needed. While Tatars were outnumbered by migrants from Islamic countries, the total number of Muslims in Poland is nowadays estimated at fewer than 0.1% of the whole population (i.e. 35,000–40,000), and according to official statistics even fewer than that (Górak-Sosnowska 2016). Many of these migrants had come to Poland in the socialist era, learnt the language, got higher education and integrated, or even assimilated, into the mainstream society. There had never been any significant concerns of migrants of Muslim background being unemployed, relying on social care, or living in ghettos, not to mention being a terrorist threat (in fact the very few threats that Poland has experienced in the last years were caused by native non-Muslim Poles). Poland is one of the few EU countries completely unaffected by the refugee crisis. Unlike Hungary there was not even a mass migratory wave passing through Poland, nor any significant number of people who would apply for an international protection (e.g. Pachocka 2016).

Yet, despite all these facts, Islam and Muslims provoke strong and unfavourable feelings as shown by Polish public opinion polls – both in absolute terms, as well as in comparison with the old EU member states. That is why some papers on Polish Islamophobia are entitled ‘Islamophobia without Muslims’ (e.g. Bobako 2014; Górak-Sosnowska 2016) and try to explain this paradox in a reasonable manner. While the numbers and the structure of local Muslim population speak against any fear they could possibly cause, one has to remember, that Poles overestimate the actual number of Muslims in their country and perceive Islamization of Poland as a real threat. According to a 2016 Ipsos study (public opinion polling group), the perceived percentage of Muslims in Poland is 7%. While there have been other European nations which overestimated the actual proportion of Muslims in their home countries more than the Poles in percentage points (in case of the highest – France – the estimation is 31% comparing to the reality of 7.5%, i.e. 24 percentage points difference), Polish estimation is 70 times higher than the real number (while the French just 3.2 times higher). Moreover, according to the Polish public, in four years the number of Muslims in the society is going to reach 13% of the population (Ipsos 2016). This would mean an influx of around 5 million Muslims, turning Poland into an EU country with one of the most numerous Muslim communities. In contrast, Poland ranks below the world average in the Ipsos index of ignorance, which indicates that in other spheres Poles were able to quite accurately guess the facts and data about their country (ibid.).

Perception is clearly far from reality in the case of Islam and Muslims in Europe, but there are two other points that should be made in regard to the above results. The first one is that due to the marginal number of ‘own’ Muslims, Polish society has to actually invent some and does it by reproducing negative stereotypes about them from elsewhere (Pędzwiat 2017). Until the last couple of years this ‘elsewhere’ were Muslim majority countries, mostly from the Middle East, or some abstract, exotic ‘Arabia’. However, later the point of reference became the EU, and thus the discourse became ‘transplanted’ from the old EU member states to Poland (Górak-Sosnowska 2011). A brief look at the country of activity of many Polish anti-Islam speakers and
activists clearly indicates that they either live in the old EU states, or maintain strong links to local anti-Islamic scene (e.g. Rose 2017). The second point resulting from the Ipsos survey is that Poles seem to be particularly ignorant (to use the wording from the index) when it comes to their Muslim population. Maybe that is why they are able to believe, without much hesitation, the most bizarre information, provided it is about the Muslims. One of such examples is a Facebook post about an Arab who drives a black Volga car (in a more extreme modified version: a black camel) and kidnaps women on the streets of a Polish city, which was shared by more than 14,000 people and provoked real discussions about this possible danger (Smigulec 2017).

Now that we’ve joined the EU – what’s next?

For Poland, the European Communities and then the European Union constituted the main point of reference for the major part of the post-1989 period, and the accession to the EU was the key political ambition and the national priority. It is well illustrated by the results of the national referendum on the EU accession held on 7–8 June 2003, approximately one year prior to the EU enlargement in 2004. In 2003, 77.45% of voters were in favour of Poland’s membership in the EU and a national turnout of 58.85% was considered to be very high for Polish standards (PKW 2003). Today, Poles are still quite enthusiastic about the EU. According to the results of the Eurobarometer in autumn 2017, for 84% of Poles the EU conjured a positive image, and for 9% – a negative one. Polish people identified two key most positive results of the EU, i.e. the standard of living of EU citizens (36%) and the free movement of people, goods and services within its territory (31%). The top EU value of respecting democracy, human rights and the rule of law was ranked on fifth place among Polish public (EC 2017, p. 14). Moreover, when asked what a society should emphasise in order to face major global challenges, Poles opted for progress and innovation unlike the vast majority of other EU citizens, who chose social equality and solidarity (ibid., p. 125).

The Eurobarometer results clearly indicate that while Poles are still happy about belonging to the EU, they tend to cherish its economic backbone rather than the core European values and assets (such as social equality and solidarity, or the EU’s respect for democracy, human rights and the rule of law, which on average ranked higher in the poll). Membership in the EU means predominantly the possibility to receive EU (co-)funding in different ways (e.g. through national budget or involvement in EU projects) and enjoy the benefits of the European Single Market and visa-less travels within the EU. When it comes to the cultural and normative foundations of the EU, many Poles are reluctant to perceive it as something positive, or as a strength of the EU (EC 2017). Moreover, while still the vast majority of Poles agree that their country should remain one of EU members, it should be stressed that this consensus does not carry any significant meaning anymore (Balcer et al. 2016).

In 2016 Polish respondents were asked how they would have voted in the event of a hypothetical referendum on the Polish exit from the EU. The results showed that 77% of respondents were in favour of Poland’s presence in the EU. However surprisingly the idea of Polexit was more approved among young people: 27% of those aged 18–29 years would have voted for leaving the EU (Pacewicz 2016). Why is the idea of European integration less endorsed by the generation that in fact has only known Poland as a member of the EU? The change of opinion of the Poles vis-à-vis the EU can result above all from their disappointment with the ineffectiveness of the EU in relation to many external and internal challenges, including the migrant and refugee crisis, Brexit or terrorist threats (Misiuna and Pachocka 2017). The Law and Justice Party, in power since late 2015, has taken advantage of this situation and seems to present a vision of the EU as an organism subject to the disintegration, at least in its present character.
There is a strong emphasis put on the sovereignty and subjectivity of the Polish nation and strengthening Poland’s position both in the EU and in the international arena. Consequently, the conditions of Poland’s membership in the EU as a sovereign state are clearly underlined. In addition, in the statements of government representatives and supporters of the ruling party, comments about the disintegration of Europe as a result of the migration crisis and ineffective EU actions in response to it have been made in recent years. In general, PiS represents a critical approach to the ‘Western model’ implemented in Poland after 1989, and Europessimism as to the future of the European project in its current form. Poland also expresses resistance to deepening integration (Balcer et al. 2016).

Polish Islamophobia: from (be)longing to rebellion

Three years ago, before the refugee crisis and the rise of the PiS party, Polish philosopher Monika Bobako (2014) formulated a thesis that Polish Muslim-less Islamophobia should be understood as a way of belonging in Europe. After the collapse of the USSR, Poland was able to shift to the West, and joined the EU in 2004. Poland and many other so-called new EU member states joined a club of much more economically and socially developed countries and this opportunity was the capstone of a long-term political and cultural strategy that has been reasonably and deliberately fulfilled by Polish government backed by almost universal popular agreement. In this new political order, it managed, however to occupy only a (semi-) peripheral position. As Bobako (2014) suggests, Islamophobic discourses applied in Poland can be interpreted as confirming Polish membership in (Western) Europe, as a community of values, but also of high economic standards. In other words, Poles ‘borrow’ Islamophobic discourses from the ‘old’ EU member states, and use them despite not having own challenges related to local Muslim population, in order to feel included in what is going on in the European core. Thus, not by coincidence, Polish Islamophobic discourse is focusing on what is going on in the old member states, rather than e.g. in wider Central and Easter Europe. It serves as a tool to create and negotiate Poland’s European identity through participating in what is going on in the West.

The same approach was noticed by one of the authors (Górak-Sosnowska 2013) in a study on narratives around building a mosque in Warsaw. With respect to mosque opponents, the most dominant one was of a ‘conscious European’, who perceived building a mosque in Poland as a further step of Islamization of Europe. The ‘conscious European’ claimed to be pragmatic and willing to protect his country from what he has personally seen or knew about Muslim communities in Europe. Not by coincidence, he often recalled examples from Germany, France or the UK rather than e.g. the Czech Republic or Romania. This way he could link Poland to the biggest players in the EU. On the one hand, those who supported building the mosque often revoked feelings of shame, that Poland positions itself at the outskirts of Europe by being xenophobic and limiting freedom of belief. Again, in this case, Poland was linked to what is going in the ‘old’ EU member states (where mosques are generally allowed and built). Interestingly, the supporters of the mosque viewed Poland as the periphery of the EU, and believed that it could improve its position by adjusting to the liberal democratic values. On the other hand, the opponents of the mosque revoked the historical idea of Poland as the bulwark of Europe and perceived the problem of Islamization as a pan-European one. In both cases, Polish Islamophobic discourse was strongly linked to the way in which the idea of Polish national identity was managed vis-à-vis the European one.

It seems that the refugee crisis and the rise of PiS party have recently changed this discourse, or rather re-shifted it. Previously, Islamophobic discourse was used as a way of belonging into...
the European symbolic universe of problems and challenges. Currently, it seems to serve as a means of semi-peripheral rebellion against the EU core. Islamophobia became a significant tool in compensation and defensive strategies implemented by the current political elite. It is worth stressing that the enlargement process put a greater stress on economic development and convergence within the EU at the expense of political development and shared European values. European peripheries got a set of rules and indicators to follow in order to catch up (or rather, to some extent, be levelled up) with the core. One of the results is paradoxically the emergence of semi-authoritarian regimes located at the peripheries of the democratic EU community (Kelemen 2017).

Mobilizing people around Islamophobia is just one of the examples of defence and compensation strategies which serve political elites as means of strengthening Polish national identity, but at the same time indicate the troublesome and complicated attitude of Poland towards the EU. While Poland would like to join the core, it still wants to stay away as an ethnic and religious autarky. Lacking economic capital – comparing to the ‘old’ EU member states – Polish political leaders evoke and implement other types of capital, namely cultural and political. As indicated by Bobako (2017), Islamophobia fits them perfectly. On the political level, opposing refugee quotas and refusing to share the responsibility with other EU states in the refugee crisis proves that Poland regains its own independence and sovereignty – i.e. Poland wins. Culturally, strengthening Polish tradition, and religious values not only can ‘spare’ Poland from Islam, but also cure the rest of the continent – i.e. Poland wins again. The last part of this component can actually be referred to as ‘East European messianism’ – belief that Poland has a special role to play in Europe due to its unique history, tradition and morality. A significant part of its role is rescuing Europe from Islamization, which is understood as a part of a bigger project of sparing it from moral decay (Bobako 2017).

Managing paradoxes

Both types of capital used are of symbolic nature, and thus can be easily manipulated for the sake of the political agenda, despite possible paradoxes that they bear. In order to successfully manage them, a wide range of reinterpretative tools are used. On the political level Poland accuses EU of neo-colonial approach (i.e. imposing its will on weaker members), but at the same time benefits from EU funding. The logic behind this paradox can be presented by combining two quotations from PiS politicians: in an interview, Elżbieta Witek, the PiS spokesperson stated: ‘We shall not let the European dictate to be imposed on us... It wasn’t us who colonialized these areas... We cannot be politically correct and accept everything only because the Germans want it’ (Polskie Radio 2015). At the same time, the selective EU membership is justified – this time by the chairman of PiS, Jarosław Kaczyński: ‘The fact that some people spend some very small amounts comparing to their national income and we benefit from it, doesn’t mean that we so cheaply ought to renounce our most fundamental rights’ (Rzeczpospolita 2016). In other words, Poland can proudly benefit from EU funding, and at the same time (also proudly) refuse any responsibility in the refugee crisis.

Some politicians took this narrative even further by stating that Poland should actually demand war repatriations from Germany (Gazeta Wyborcza 2017). This strategy proved to be quite tricky, as specifically Germany is accused of forcing Poland to accept refugees. By claiming that it is actually Poland, who should receive funding from Germany, Poland becomes a victim (and not so the refugees). Interestingly, while Polish competitive victimhood-based identity has so far been used mostly as acknowledgement of past suffering (Vollhardt et al. 2015), it seems now to be used as a justification for not helping others.
Another paradox that needs to be resolved is proving that EU is weak while Poland is strong and safe from Islamist-motivated terrorist attacks. The latter is actually quite easy to prove, since Poland is located at EU peripheries, and since terrorist attacks are meant to reach a wide audience, conducting one in Poland is simply less worth it, when compared to West European countries. Taking into account the migration flows, Poland is also unattractive for Muslim migrants or refugees due to its lower economic development, weak migrant networks and political climate. There are also ways to prove that it is actually the EU that is weak. One of the examples is a recent statement of the Interior Minister of Poland, Mariusz Błaszczak, after the terror attack in France: ‘What conclusions were drawn after the terrorist attacks in Paris? Marches were organised, flowers were painted on the sidewalks in different colours, with crayons of the colours of the whole rainbow. For me it is a clear link to LGBT’ (Gazeta.pl 2016). France was presented here as helpless and irrational, not knowing how to deal properly with Islamist extremism and terrorist. Of special interest should be the link to LGBT, which might make no sense at first glance, but it actually fits well into the narrative of moral decay in the EU (with LGBT being, next to the refugees, another piece of evidence for it) juxtaposed against Polish neotraditional Catholicism and morality.

Finally, a paradox on religious dimension, namely, how to combine Polish strong religious identity (as indicated in many Islamophobic narratives) with the essence of Catholicism – i.e. giving a helping hand to those in need, carrying and loving your brothers and sisters, and showing compassion. A December 2017 opinion poll published just before Christmas showed that 65% of Poles would not welcome any refugee at their Christmas Eve party, despite the tradition of keeping one empty seat for an unexpected guest in need (Wirtualna Polska 2017). While this aspect of Polish selective religiosity has not been researched yet, it should be noted that there are Catholic priests who publicly justify their lack of willingness to accept any refugees by e.g. degradation of Jesus in Qur’an, hatred towards Christians in Islamic countries, security issues and political correctness, pointing at Biblical virtue of vigilance and prudence (Fronda 2015). Another priest who called for accepting refugees was deemed as Pharisees, who leads them to temptation and let devil in (Woźnicki 2016). With the Polish Catholic scene (both clergy as well as believers) being also divided, it is clear that religious arguments can be used both in favour and against accepting refugees.

This selective religiosity is well-reflected in the results of opinion polls combing the Polish attitude to accepting refugees with socio-demographic profile of respondents. As we learn from CBOS research (2017) the general characteristics of people who are in favour of accepting refugees from countries affected by armed conflicts (in general) are Poles with higher education, aged 35–44 years, living in cities (especially the biggest ones), with monthly per capita income of at least PLN 1,400, declaring left political inclinations and not participating in religious practices. In addition, more often than average, disapproval for admission of refugees specifically from the Middle East and Africa who have arrived to some EU countries, concerns younger and the least educated people from rural areas, with low or average per capita income, declaring rightist political views and most involved in religious practices.

**Practical consequence: the case of the refugees**

Poland seems to treat the EU instrumentally and selectively to achieve its own national goals and defend its interests, while forgetting that membership in the EU is not only a right but also a duty. An example here is the refusal to implement relocation and resettlement mechanisms that were proposed by the European Commission in May 2015 within the framework of its ‘European Agenda on Migration’ (EC 2015) as part of the EU level response to the migrant and refugee crisis (Pachocka 2016, 2017). These two emergency actions involved the adoption
of a distribution key of asylum seekers from Italy and Greece (relocation) and from third counties (resettlement) among EU Member States. A more controversial scheme that aroused the most emotions among EU countries – the relocation – was launched in accordance with Art. 78 (3) of the Treaty on the Functioning of the EU (TFEU), which deals with the EU asylum policy. It is also important to note that Art. 80 of TFEU stresses that the EU policies in the field of migration, asylum and border management and their implementation ‘shall be governed by the principle of solidarity and fair sharing of responsibility, including its financial implications, between the Member States. Whenever necessary, the Union acts adopted pursuant to this Chapter shall contain appropriate measures to give effect to this principle.’

In this light, it is also worth recalling other treaty provisions that relate to the general conditions and principles of the EU membership, not only with regard to migration, asylum and borders. Of a special importance is Art. 2 of the Treaty on European Union (TEU) stressing the EU values. Moreover, Art. 4(3) of TEU clearly underlines how the EU members should act in relation to their EU membership and EU law. Bearing in mind the above perspective, it is worth emphasizing that the relocation was not an unlawful act of the EU interference in the sovereignty of its member states or a non-binding invitation to cooperate based on a soft, unwritten principle of solidarity, but it was an urgent and immediate solution established for two years until September 2017 having legal roots in the treaty provisions. It was a duty, not a right.

Poland’s negative attitude to receiving refugees under the relocation and resettlement schemes was related to a certain extent – even if not directly – to the social conviction (of course only by some) that they would be Muslim migrants, who may not want to integrate with the host society, who could pose a threat to the security of the country and import terrorism. This was strengthened by – sporadic but still occurring – statements by PIS politicians – that Poland could only accept Christian refugees (e.g. PCh24.pl 2016). In this way, the anti-refugee discourse overlapped with anti-Muslim and anti-European ones. There were even voices saying that the EU wants to force Poland to accept ‘Islamists’ threatening the country with financial penalties. It should be remembered that these are extreme views and they cannot be attributed to the whole society, but nevertheless taking place.

Nowadays anti-migration, anti-refugee narrative is mixed with anti-Muslim, anti-Arab and anti-European discourse. We are dealing with a great simplification regarding the links between the increasing immigration to Europe and the threat of its Islamization, as well as limiting the decision-making sovereignty of Poland by the EU and its institutions in the context of implementation of the relocation scheme or a reform of the judiciary. In this context, the unfavourable attitude towards Muslims seems to be part of a larger puzzle, related to Poland’s struggle for self-identification and redefinition of both – its identity and position on the European scene. Unfortunately, this important process takes place at a difficult time for the EU, which is affected by different crises and challenges and for Poland, which is ruled by the right-wing Law and Justice party (e.g. Misiuna and Pachocka 2017). In the years 2015–2016, the approach of Poland to relocation and resettlement was mostly in line with the broader stance taken by the Visegrad Group composed of Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic and Slovakia. The V4 countries were critical towards the above-mentioned schemes and they objected to the compulsory migrant quotas. The V4 stand towards the relocation and resettlement pulled the V4 countries together in 2015–2016, however not enough to contribute to the development of deeper cooperation within the V4 in other areas or to favour the institutionalization of the Group as an independent body. The close cooperation of the four Visegrad countries was rather fragmentary and ad hoc. However, this example showed that it is possible that the V4 countries could re-attempt to take a common position on issues concerning the future of the EU and European integration to strengthen their bargaining position and make them a loud voice among EU member states (Pachocka 2016).
It is interesting that Visegrad States are not major immigrant-receiving EU countries, not in absolute numbers and not as a percentage of the total migration to the EU. In addition, Poland is a regular net emigration state with more emigrants than immigrants each year. The migration and refugee crises affected significantly only one of the four V4 countries since 2015 – Hungary – and only because of its location on the Western Balkan migration route leading from the Mediterranean Sea deeper into Europe. Therefore, with limited migration experience after World War II, the Visegrad states were acting in the analysed period as if they intend to ‘escape forward’ from what is unknown (Pachocka 2016). In fact, nowadays, there are two Visegrad countries that could be considered today’s *enfants terribles* of the EU – Poland and Hungary due to many reasons, including i.e. their ‘no’ to the solidarity of the EU Member States in terms of implementation of the relocation and resettlement schemes as the response to the migrant and refugee crisis and their internal political situation, characterized by anti-democratic tendencies, growing xenophobia, racism and Euroscepticism (e.g. Klaus 2017).

In this context, the current political line officially implemented by the Polish government and the ruling party since the late 2015, leads to a situation in which Poland’s role in the EU could be marginalized in the coming years and in which Poland could have less real and symbolic influence on the future of European integration. It matters for several reasons for Poland and the future of the EU. Just to evoke two of them: Poland was a good example of a successful multidimensional transformation of the political and socio-economic system in the early 1990s in Europe which could be followed by other countries; it is the largest and the strongest country in Central and Eastern Europe since 1990s in terms of area, population and economy. Unfortunately, today Poland’s example and role are questionable. The worst-case future scenario would be Poland’s exit from the EU (Polexit).

**Conclusion**

Over the past 25 years, Polish foreign policy has been guided by the desire to participate in the life of the EU and its policy. It was recognized that only such behaviour could guarantee a sustainable socio-economic development and grant it political stability. Unfortunately, this has not been the case in the last few years, especially since late 2015 onwards. Poland has made a choice and has moved away from its position as the European ‘decision-making centre’, which is also linked to the primacy of national affairs over European ones (e.g. Misiuna and Pachocka 2017). Nevertheless, it does not mean that this new orientation of Polish foreign and domestic policy enjoys general support.

The rise of Polish Islamophobia is a clear proof of this political shift. While Poles occasionally used Islamophobia as a mean of participating in the EU challenges, now under PiS Islamophobia became a powerful tool to oppose EU’s political and cultural foundations. Due to the marginal number of Muslims in Poland, the physical dimension of Polish Islamophobia is maybe not so visible in absolute numbers, since the number of Muslims or foreigners is still negligible. It is yet clear on the EU scene, where Poland, accompanied by some of the V4 countries, argues against refugee quotas, what has become a significant ideological component of wider fight for the ‘right place’ in Europe.

Finally, it should be noted that Islamophobic narratives start to become less popular and might even be losing their momentum. This is, however, not backed by any change in attitudes towards Islam or Muslims, but rather in changing priorities. During the last few months of 2017, the Polish political scene was dominated by the argument around the judiciary system and possible sanctions from the EU. These were the topics that have been occupying the public, and the hearts and minds of the opposition. Comparing to the issue of refugees
or Muslims, both of these challenges are much more immediate and visible. However, the Muslim Other (or even ‘Alien’ as it is often dehumanized) is still close at hand, ready to be reactivated in the battle against Europe.

Notes

1 Marta Pachocka’s contribution to this chapter is partially based on her research results from the project EUMIGRO – “Jean Monnet Module on the European Union and the Contemporary International Migration – an Interdisciplinary Approach” (project number: 575228-EPP-1-2016-1-PL-EPPJMO-MODULE; agreement/decision number: 2016-2187) carried out at the Collegium of Socio-Economics of the SGH Warsaw School of Economics and co-funded by the Erasmus+ Programme of the European Union.

2 Article 7(1) of the Treaty on European Union stipulates: “On a reasoned proposal by one third of the Member States, by the European Parliament or by the European Commission, the Council, acting by a majority of four fifths of its members after obtaining the consent of the European Parliament, may determine that there is a clear risk of a serious breach by a Member State of the values referred to in Article 2. Before making such a determination, the Council shall hear the Member State in question and may address recommendations to it, acting in accordance with the same procedure. The Council shall regularly verify that the grounds on which such a determination was made continue to apply.”

3 A term one of us used over a decade ago to describe Polish negative attitude towards almost non-existent Muslims – i.e. a negative feeling towards something that is not even there (see Górak-Sosnowska 2006).

4 ‘In the event of one or more Member States being confronted by an emergency situation characterised by a sudden inflow of nationals of third countries, the Council, on a proposal from the Commission, may adopt provisional measures for the benefit of the Member State(s) concerned. It shall act after consulting the European Parliament.’

5 ‘The Union is founded on the values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities. These values are common to the Member States in a society in which pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, solidarity and equality between women and men prevail.’

6 ‘Pursuant to the principle of sincere cooperation, the Union and the Member States shall, in full mutual respect, assist each other in carrying out tasks which flow from the Treaties. The Member States shall take any appropriate measure, general or particular, to ensure fulfilment of the obligations arising out of the Treaties or resulting from the acts of the institutions of the Union. The Member States shall facilitate the achievement of the Union’s tasks and refrain from any measure which could jeopardise the attainment of the Union’s objectives.’

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