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Islamophobia and the radical right in Europe

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Introduction

The ideology of the radical right may be extremely hard to pin down and classify, ranging from extreme social conservatism to ‘soft’ populism with often liberal hues to violent activism; and from seemingly respectable, suave agents of parliamentary democracy to groups with para-military characteristics or even terrorist clandestine links (Mudde 2016). The agents of the radical right seem to disagree on at least as many diagnoses and strategies as those that they profess to share. Yet, in the last decade, strong points of ideological and political convergence have started to crystallise, turning the radical right into a truly transnational European and occasionally trans-Atlantic force with ever-stronger presence, noise, and impact. The topicality of a new range of issues, such as immigration, international terrorism, national sovereignty, globalisation, and the effects of the worldwide economic crisis, have created a political milieu that has allowed the radical right not only to thrive but also to unite its otherwise disparate and fragmented forces (Politico 2015).

In spite of their ideological differences and political disagreements, a visceral hostility to Islam lies at the centre of the contemporary radical right’s ideological profile and political message. It is on this issue that a sequence of its other political priorities have intersected: defending national, ‘European’ or ‘Western’ values; putting a brake on growing migration inflows from north Africa and Asia; waging a ‘war’ against radical ‘Islamist’ and Jihadi groups; challenging state multiculturalism; fighting against (national and ‘European’) identity dilution; campaigning for a ‘fortress Europe’; scrapping the European Union’s Schengen border zone; even destroying the EU as a whole; as well as addressing unemployment and falling living standards on behalf of the national community (Krzyżanowski 2013; Loch and Norocel 2015; Privot 2014).

Islamophobia, a socially constructed and reproduced form of racism directed at Islam and people with a Muslim background, has had deep roots in European societies that, in different forms, go back decades or even centuries (Runnymede 1997, 2017; Hafez 2012). Such roots have also traditionally spanned national and political boundaries. What, however, had been originally linked to a particular form of xenophobia, racism, and primarily religious/cultural intolerance, has recently undergone two important mutations. First, it has become the core of a vision of radical change with strong counter-utopian attributes in direct, visceral opposition to the hegemony
of post-Second World War liberalism. Second, it has mutated into the most effective platform of international ideological convergence between national groups and parties operating in many countries across Europe and other parts of the world (Vieten and Poynting 2016; Hafez 2014).

The marriage between right-wing populism and anti-immigrant/Islamophobic mobilisation has proved potent, in the polls and even more so in terms of political and cultural influence on mainstream discourses. According to the classic definition by Cas Mudde, populism is an ideology that considers society to be divided into two antagonistic groups, the homogeneous ‘people’ and the corrupt ‘elite’. In this bottom-up alternative vision to the current perception of establishment politics increasingly distant from the concerns of ‘real’ people, populists argue for a new kind of politics as an expression of the general will of the people (Mudde 2010). This supposedly homogeneous ‘people’ is pitted against the forces of internationalism, globalisation, seemingly uncontrolled movement, and cultural diversity, which are articulated as direct threats to its existential security and welfare. Control, therefore, needs to be wrested from these sources of power through a number of strategies, including economic nationalism and an embrace of protectionism, political chauvinism, isolationism, reassertion of strict border controls, reversal of previous international commitments to diversity and human rights, and an expansive range of discriminatory measures targeting those excluded from the narrow definition of ‘the people’ (Zaslove 2008). In this context, Muslims as both immigrants and deemed as a culturally alien, indeed threatening presence ‘in our midst’ (Meer 2013) have been operationalised by the radical right as the most extreme international threat to the security and prosperity of ‘the people’. In its own way, Islamophobia has functioned as a powerful node of a wider call to radical action that is both anti-utopian (averting a perceived unfolding catastrophe by projecting as a warning an extreme version of the present) and utopian in its own right (unlocking an alternative actionable blueprint for and path to a better a better future) (Levitas 1990, pp. 165–167; Kumar 1987; Kumar and Bann 1993). Therefore I argue that, in order to understand the dynamics of the radical right’s embrace of Islamophobia, ‘utopia’ is a far more accurate and useful conceptual category than regressive nostalgia for a mono-cultural, territorially rooted, and politically inward-looking alternative vision.

**Islamophobia as (trans-national) nostalgia**

In 2017, Douglas Murray painted a bleak picture of the future of ‘Europe . . . as civilisation’. He argued that this amounted to a ‘suicide’ and that, ‘by the end of the lifespans of most people alive Europe will not be Europe and the people of Europe will have lost the only place in the world we had to call home’ (Murray 2017, pp. 1–2). Predictably, immigration and Islam featured prominently in his shortlist of existential threats, alongside the perceived nonchalance of liberal elites to the challenge and the creeping loss of a sense of distinct cultural identity among Europeans themselves. Neither Murray’s message nor his tone is of course original; self-appointed prophets of cultural pessimism from Nietzsche to Novalis to Madison Grant have in the past heralded the impending death of ‘the West’, of ‘Europe’, of Christianity, of the ‘white race’, and so on (Pick 1993; Svenungsson 2014; Spiro 2009). But Murray’s book also represents a new genre of post-apocalyptic – non-fictional and fictional – writing that sets the image of the migrant Muslim at the heart of an anti-utopian vision of the (immediate) future (cf. Houellebecq 2016; Sarrazin 2010).

Some of the most influential definitions of the contemporary radical right have attributed its appeal to its combination of rejection of the present status quo and retreating to a deeply nostalgic image of some mythical national or civilisational past (Betz 2018; Betz and Johnson 2004; Canovan 2004). They have underlined the anti-progressive message of the radical right
in an attempt to ‘reverse the erosion of the established patterns of ethnic political and cultural dominance’. Zygmunt Bauman (2017) illustrated how the contemporary utopian gaze has been redirected towards an idealised image of a reassuring past rather than an aspiration for a different future. Paul Taggart’s concept of a ‘heartland’ is an even more evocative description of this nostalgic perspective of the populist radical right. Taggart (2004, p. 274) noted that

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\text{[t]he heartland is a construction of an ideal world but unlike utopian conceptions, it is constructed retrospectively from the past – it is in essence a past-derived vision projected onto the present as that which has been lost. Unlike other ideologies that derive their visions of the future from the key values (e.g. egalitarianism or communitarianism), populism derives what values it has from its conception of the heartland.}
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(Taggart 2004, p. 274)

Furthermore, and in contrast to the heuristically unwieldy concept of ‘the people’, ‘heartland’ is proposed as subjective to particular groups of people in a particular national/regional context and at any given moment in time. ‘Populists mobilise’, Taggart claimed, ‘when their heartland is threatened, not when a heartland is threatened’ (Taggart 2004, p. 275; emphasis in the original). This kind of context-specific nostalgia explains to an extent why, in spite of important ideological similarities and rallying against common opponents, the forces of the radical right have remained divided on the international level over the past years.

While, however, the reaction may be related to, and influenced by, particular spatio-temporal contexts, Islamophobia has emerged as both a common denominator and an element of transnational political convergence for forces of the radical right. Not unlike anti-Semitism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, there is something about the image of ‘the Muslim’ that transcends the space and time of the Muslim communities themselves, invoking imageries of an ‘external–internal’ threat and referencing a putatively inter- and trans-national challenge (Renton and Gidley 2017, pp. 1–21). In fact, intensifying shared hostility to Islam has provided the most successful platforms for joint initiatives from radical right parties in recent years (Hafez 2014). The 2008 Anti-Islamisation Conference organised by the Pro-Cologne movement with the expected participation of Filip Dewinter, founding member and former leader of the Flemish Block and former minister from the Lega Nord Mario Borghezio was called off at the last minute due to protests (Taras 2012, pp. 166–7). Two years later, Jerusalem became the unlikely scene of the most prominent transnational initiative by radical right parties. Heinz-Christian Strache from the Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ), Rene Stadtkewitz from the German Freedom Party, Kent Ekeroth from the Swedish Democrats, and Dewinter, declared their joint support for the state of Israel against what they described as an existential fight against Islamic terror (Häusler 2012, p. 180). After years of failed attempts, in the summer of 2015 Jean-Marie Le Pen’s National Front (FN) and Geert Wilders’s Party for Freedom (PVV) finally overcame their declared differences to form – together with MEPs from the FPÖ, the Lega Nord, the Flemish Interest (VB), and other radical right parties – a grouping of radical right parties in the European Parliament (Europe of Nations and Freedoms). Their shared political platform was the fight against globalisation, mass immigration in Europe, and predictably the ‘Islamisation’ of the continent – the latter seen as both an existential and a cultural threat, a matter of security and of defence of both traditional and modern ‘Western’ values (Mudde 2016, pp. 39–42).

The cross-over from the national context to the inter- and trans-national platform has been chillingly performed at various points in the last years. The success of the original demonstrations organised by PEGIDA (Patriotic Europeans against Islamisation of the West) in cities around Germany prompted a franchise operation that saw the emergence of smaller groups in
a number of European countries whose name fused the PEGIDA brand with national markers (Pietryka 2016; Druxes and Simpson 2016; Berntzen and Weisskircher 2016). In January 2016, a gathering from representatives of these groups, along established parties of the radical right such as Lega Nord and the Czech Dawn–National Coalition, signed the Prague Declaration – a document with a pervasive anti-Islam/Muslim message. In September 2017, Dresden witnessed a rally organised by PEGIDA and the Alternative for Germany (AfD), calling on the protesters to ‘get your country back’ from immigrants and Islam (Reuters 2017). In the following November, a mass rally of hyper-nationalist forces from across Europe was organised to coincide with the anniversary of Polish independence. The rally attracted more than 60,000 supporters who, in spite of particular national grievances and divergent ideological platforms, marched together in joint opposition to the perceived cultural decay of Europe and opposition to Muslim immigration. ‘Fortress Europe’ was a common theme in many of these and other similar rallies held in the last years – a platform that inter-nationalised both the perceived threat (immigration, Islam) and the pursued remedy (reinstatement of hard borders; expulsion of refugees; stricter ‘integration’ stipulations for Muslim immigrant communities).

Islamophobia and the alternative utopia of the radical right

Thus, while a ‘heartland’ may remain context-specific and different from group to group and from country to country, the diagnosis of the problem (immigration from Muslim countries and the threat or perceived reality of the ‘Islamisation’ of Europe) has become standard across the forces of the radical right. This is no longer just about reclaiming a lost paradise of mono-culturalism and national sovereignty against the twin evils of globalisation and European supranationalism. It is primarily about an alternative vision of radical change that is firmly located in the utopian realm and with a trans-national horizon. Here I use the term ‘utopia’ in a neutral, subjective, indeed realist sense, denoting not a state of abstract perfection for all but a strategy of realising an alternative set of communal bonds pitted against a present (anti-utopian) state of perceived decadence (Claeys 2011, p. 12). This kind of utopia is wedded to the idea that a radically alternative vision of life is not just preferable but urgently needed and immediately actionable. Nostalgia for a past state of harmony can be part of this utopian vision, in the sense that it is re-imagined from its alleged past realisations. But the vision itself is novel and future-oriented precisely because it is rooted unambiguously in the present – the present that has brought about the anti-utopian status quo of internationalism and multiculturalism so emphatically rejected by the radical right (cf. Mannheim 2013).

Of course there can be no meaningful utopia without the conviction of those pursuing it that their prescription is the optimal remedy for the perceived ills of the current state of affairs. The ideologues of the radical right have arrived at the demonisation of Islam and ‘the Muslim’ through a meandering route that has identified the postwar loss of sovereignty by the institution of the nation-state and its dominant ethnic community as the root of their anti-utopian critique (Spiegeleire, Skinner and Sweijns 2017; Kallis 2018a). The period after 1945 gave the gasping liberalism of the interwar years a surprising new lease of life, an unlikely third chance after the setbacks of the two world wars. In spite of the division of the world into two ideologically opposed camps, the liberal project flourished in ‘the West’ and sought to become a universalisable paradigm of political, socio-economic, and institutional change on a global scale (Fawcett 2018, pp. 283–386). Economic globalisation and trade, it was argued, would foster ever-closer international ties across the world, thereby minimising the risk of future conflict. Meanwhile, the political manifesto of postwar liberalism, steeped in memories of the two world wars and the brutal extermination of millions of Jews and other minorities, rejected nation-statism in favour of more deliberate diffuse models of political power, more inclusive notions of citizenship, and a
far stronger role given to inter- and trans-national institutions in an attempt to counterpoise the power of the old Westphalian state. In many ways, this is what the Entente planners of Versailles world order had expected to happen – diffusing the power of grand empires into significantly smaller and imperfect nation-states, and then underwriting the risks through a series of inter- and trans-national checks and balances. That the post-First World War order failed so devastatingly to operate in this manner and that the liberal order came so close to being obliterated by the models of concentrated state power that it had attempted to neutralise served a powerful lesson to post-1945 liberal planners (Kallis 2018a).

What can be described as the postwar liberal globalist/post-sovereigntist utopia emerged in a piecemeal way over subsequent decades. Supra-national and trans-national innovations, together with advances in human rights legislation on both national and international levels, created a momentum of change that cumulatively transformed the conventional paradigm of nation-statism in a post-national direction. This change also had seismic implications for how community, identity, border, and movement were articulated (Bustillo and Mares 2016, p. 116). But it was the political and institutional parabola of what is known today as the European Union that has ventured further and more ambitiously than any other single post-war institution from conventional understandings of national sovereignty. It is thus not a coincidence that the radical right in Europe has identified the EU as the most symbolic representation and one of the primary drivers of what it stands against (FitzGibbon, Leruth and Starting 2016). The combination of political expansion, socio-economic integration, institutional deepening, and removal of boundaries in key areas from trade to currency exchanges to citizen migration challenged many of the assumptions about the ineliminable core of nation-state sovereignty and the existence of a bounded political community at its very heart (Laffan, O’Donnell and Smith 2013, pp. 15–17).

The combination of growing migration flows, freedom of movement within the Schengen zone of the EU, and the resulting gradual loss of border control by the sovereign nation-state increased both the numbers and the (subjective) visibility of non-European populations in the EU member states. By the 1990s, the parties of the radical right seized the growing anxiety caused by these changes and successfully nurtured the perception that the continent ‘was being ‘invaded’ by alien traditions, culture, and religion’ (Betz 1993, p. 416). It was during this period that the European radical right underwent a process of ideological and discursive transformation that resulted in a seismic ‘anti-Muslim reorientation’ (Zúquete 2008, p. 325). Long before 9/11, rising stars of the radical right such as Filip Dewinter, Jean-Marie Le Pen, and Pim Fortuyn (founder of the Pie Fortuyn List in The Netherlands), used the ideological trope of ‘ethno-pluralism’ as an antidote to discredited racism in order to attack Islam as allegedly alien, unassimilable, and existentially dangerous to ‘European’ liberal culture (Taras 2012, pp. 193–195). In 2005, Dewinter rejected the accusation that the radical right is either racist or xenophobic but had no problem declaring ‘Islamophobia’ as a legitimate ideological feature of the Flemish nationalist movement. Four years later, Dewinter again described Islamophobia as ‘a duty’ for European citizens, calling ‘moderate’ Islam ‘a multicultural illusion’.

The 9/11 attacks were quickly seized by the radical right as the alleged confirmation of a dire prophesy and a jolt to urgently needed action (Sheridan 2006; Bonney 2008). Immediately, populist politicians like Jörg Haider (then leader of the Freedom Party of Austria FPÖ) and Le Pen argued that the terrorist attacks were a spectacular and brutal performance of the very essence of the ‘clash of civilisations’ that Samuel Huntington had written about back in 1993 and the likes of Guillaume Faye, a pioneer of the Nouvelle Droite, had adapted for the nativist, ethno-pluralist discourse of the radical right (Wodak 2015, pp. 40–44). Unsurprisingly then, post-9/11 the radical right has made a lavish political investment in Islamophobia,
it into an extreme obsessional prejudice par excellence at the heart of its discourses and political programmes. This Islamophobia has become the overarching *idée fixe* that fuses the sedimented layers of long-term prejudice towards Islam and nativist hostility to the Muslim immigrant with acute contemporary insecurities about the status, identity or even future existence of the traditional nation-state (Bauman 2011; Mamnone, Godin and Jenkins 2013, p. 5).

It was the radical right’s most charismatic leaders and their controversial party programmes that broke the taboo of scapegoating Islam and communities with Muslim background in Europe, fanning the flames of Islamophobia and gradually establishing it as a form of widely ‘accepted racism’ in many contemporary Western societies (Hafez 2014, p. 2). From the wider pressure for immigration restrictions (assertion of strict border controls, bans on particular categories of immigrants or even calls for mass deportation) to more blatantly anti-Muslim campaigns targeting mosques and traditional Islamic customs, the radical right has broken one taboo after the other, set ever more radical precedents. It has also forced ‘mainstream’ political forces to at least take note and, sometimes, to even concede ground to them (Boomgaard and Vliegenthart 2007; Kallis 2013). Amid an atmosphere of growing and protracted moral panic, parties of the radical right have led the chorus of hostility to Islam as the unifying theme that drew together fears of ‘invasion’, ‘oppression’ and ‘colonisation’ by immigrant Muslims, on the one hand, and an imagery of an all-out global civilisational Armageddon that cast into doubt the very survival of the West, on the other (Morgan and Poynting 2016). In addition, Islamophobia became an integral part of the radical right’s anti-elite/-establishment discourse, directed at both the national and supranational (e.g. the European Union) political classes (Fennema 2005). The diagnoses (of alleged civilisational incompatibility and ‘zero-sum’ competition for finite resources) and negative prognoses – erosion of ‘European’ values/Islamification, and heightened insecurity – found increasingly receptive audiences well beyond the traditional electoral constituencies of the radical right.

Thus, post-9/11, the radical right re-invented and re-tooled Islamophobia as the most potent exclusionary ideology for re-defining the notions of ‘us’ in opposition to ‘them’, mixing race with culture and prejudice with rational arguments about integration, compatibility, and absorption capacity (Gingrich 2005; Bunzl 2005). In intellectual terms, little original or new was added to the Islamophobic ferment post-9/11; instead, what makes 9/11 such a critical watershed in the parabola of Islamophobia was the radical right’s subsequent framing of existential hostility to Islam as the single most important strategy for reversing the current state of affairs and unlocking an alternative future for ‘the people’ and ‘Europe’. Anything from immigration and terrorism to unemployment and multiculturalism have been exploited by the radical right in order to reinforce a key security message – either Islam is defeated and stamped out from host societies or ‘Europe’ and ‘the West’ will perish (Huysmans 2006, pp. 65–67).

**Islamophobia as radical subtractive utopia**

It is this stark proposition of removing Islam and ‘the Muslim’ from ‘Europe’ that links Islamophobia to the contemporary radical right’s radical utopian project. The anti-Muslim ideological and discursive re-orientation of the radical right has now reached an advanced stage of normalisation so that the image of ‘the Muslim’, individually and collectively, epitomises most or all perceived fundamental pathologies of the current dystopian status quo: non-native in ‘Europe’ and understood in terms of a radical alterity; allegedly hostile to ‘the West’ and potentially aggressive to members of Western society; culturally, religiously and/or socially alien in liberal societies; freely wandering yet putatively unassimilable; economically parasitical in the context of a rigid ‘zero-sum’ competition for resources; politically suspect due to their alleged involvement in a quasi-demonological conspiracy against the traditional nation-state and ‘Europe’ (Kallis 2018b; O’Donnell 2018).
Thus Islamophobia becomes the symbolic vertex of the anti-utopian status quo that the radical right has vowed to destroy as a precondition for embarking on its own utopian pursuit of a re-territorialised nation-state and a ‘pure’, revitalised national community. This utopia is profoundly hierarchical and non-egalitarian, positing the urgent necessity of radical redemption in order to transform itself into an egalitarian future state of harmony and abundance reserved only for the members of the native community (cf. Claeys 2011, p. 13). The fulcrum of this transition for the radical right is the subtraction of ‘the Muslim’ from European societies, as both physical presence and cultural/religious root or influence. Subtraction may take a number of forms – from cultural assimilation and enforced invisibility to quite literally removal and a ‘fortress’ scenario that bans future immigration, and any combination thereof. But this very subtraction also unlocks an alternative future of abundance and egalitarianism for the ‘redeemed’ native community. In this respect, the demonisation of ‘the Muslim’ and the normalisation of Islamophobia have been subsumed into the alternative utopian project of the contemporary radical right to the point that they have become its untroubling, respectable milestones (Fekete and Sivanandan 2009; Wolfreys 2018, pp. 45–84; Warsi 2017).

At first sight, the proposition of subtracting ‘the Muslim’ from European societies rings more pragmatic and corrective than redemptive (cf. Canovan 2002) and utopian. For example, the ‘Manifesto for Germany’ that the AfD approved in 2016 and used as ideological programme for its campaign in the 2017 federal elections made clear that the ‘utopian’ orientation of globalisation, supranationalism (meaning primarily the EU), and multiculturalism have ‘always brought great suffering to mankind’ and therefore needs to be abandoned in favour of the retrotopia of ‘freedom of the European nations devoid of foreign paternalism’ (AfD 2016). Still, talking of discredited and dangerous ‘old [liberal] utopias’ that had to be abandoned and reversed provided the stepping stone for imagining an alternative future: ‘uphold human dignity . . . retain our western Christian culture, and maintain our language and traditions in a peaceful, democratic, and sovereign nation state for the German people’ (ibid., pp. 16 and 3 respectively; emphasis added). In The Netherlands, the political manifesto of Wilders’s PVV for the 2017 elections headlined the sovereigntist claim to make ‘Netherlands ours again’ but prioritised the goal of ‘de-islamizing’ the country through a combination of immigration ban, arrest and expulsion of ‘radical Islamists’, the removal of Islamic symbols from the public sphere, and the prohibition of mosques and the Qur’an (PVV 2016). Matteo Salvini, the leader of the Italian Lega, has repeatedly spoken of a Europe-wide all-out ‘culture war’ pitting the alleged values of the continent against Islam, which he considers an aggressive ‘invading’ force ‘entirely incompatible with European values’ (King 2017). Meanwhile, during the 2018 Hungarian elections, Fidesz posited a stark dilemma to the voters: an ‘immigrant country’ with the associated loss of national cultural values versus the victory of a ‘national government’ and the defence of full Hungarian sovereignty against ‘invading’ Muslims (Walker 2018). The message was predicated on a wholesale rejection of the European and global status quo of supranationalism and its associated institutions – predictably the EU but in the Hungarian case also ‘the people of George Soros’ as a synecdoche for an alleged world conspiracy of globalists against the power of the nation-state (Witte 2018).

With public opinion support for an outright ban on immigration from Muslim-majority countries hovering above 50% in recent Europe-wide years (Osborne 2017), this kind of radical subtractive utopia has steadily moved from the fringes of the political spectrum much closer to the heart of mainstream politics and society. It has become an effective mobilising platform for political parties across the continent, capable of generating both rational and emotional support. In this respect, it has also accepted one of the fundamental propositions of utopian thought – namely that a radical alternative future is possible only through the active dismantling of the
existing institutions and norms of liberal internationalism that stand in its way and prevent it from materialising (Douglas 2018, pp. 146–147). The performance of this subtractive utopia is not just confined to the discursive domain, employed as a negotiating threat and mobilising cry for electoral gains. For more than a decade, it has been slowly but steadily creeping into the domain of official state policy and local vigilantism. There is now a distinct lineage of symbolic bans targeting communities with Muslim background – from the 2009 referendum decision to ban minarets in Switzerland (Langer 2010) to more recent prohibitions of the call to prayer in parts of Germany (DW 2018), of street prayers in France (Agerholm 2017), and of the forceful closure of mosques in Austria (BBC News 2018); and from the landmark ban on the headscarf in France to a series of bans involving the Muslim female dress in France, Belgium (Sanghani 2016), and more recently Denmark (Kallis 2013; Guardian 2018). Meanwhile, anti-immigrant vigilantism has reared its ugly head on the border zone of countries such as Greece, Bulgaria and Hungary (DW 2016).

And if the creep of Islamophobia into state practice has so far been relatively slow, inconsistent, and lagging well behind discourses of moral panic, this has not stopped local performances of the anti-Muslim subtractive utopia. In 2017, the southern Hungarian border town of Asotthalom, with a population of approximately 4,000 and only a handful of Muslim inhabitants, took the arbitrary decision to declare war on Muslims (and incidentally gay people as well) by prohibiting the settlement of people from Muslim-majority countries and by vowing to remove all Islamic symbols from the town. The mayor of the town had already achieved notoriety back in 2015 when he launched a video message titled ‘Message to illegal immigrants from Hungary’, with which he warned Muslim refugees that they would be immediately arrested and imprisoned upon entering the town (Bulman 2017). In Sesto San Giovanni, nowadays a suburb of Milan, the new mayor decided to take unilateral action by expelling hundreds of undocumented migrants, evicting them from council housing in favour of local Italians citizens, and blocking the already approved construction of a mosque (Povoledo 2018). The local initiatives to ban the so-called ‘burkini’ from the beach in Nice and elsewhere southern France during the summer of 2016 (Almeida 2018) may have been eventually lifted following rulings by national courts – a fate that also awaited the Asotthalom ban in Hungary; but their taboo-breaking intent has already been fulfilled by the temporary performance, adding to various other forms of national and transnational Islamophobic momentum.

Conclusion

Such, in the end, is the pervasive power of the Islamophobic imaginary in contemporary Europe that the pugnacious rhetoric of Muslim subtraction has been operationalised as both precondition for, and primary constitutive element of, the radical right’s alternative utopia. While still an important aspect of the etiology of Islamophobia, the nostalgic longing for an imaginary ‘heartland’ or ‘retrotopia’ is no longer capable of sufficiently accounting for the growing mainstream popularity and creeping normalisation of the Islamophobic discourse evinced by the forces of the contemporary radical right. Instead, I have argued that this Islamophobic impulse is situated at the dialectical intersection between an idealised (national) past and the pursuit of an alternative future identitarian utopia. What now binds these two attributes together is the radical premise of removing Islam and ‘the Muslim’ from the social and cultural sphere. The redemptive sovereigntist utopia of the radical right has reached the point of being so intrinsically linked to the notion of Muslim and, more broadly, immigrant ‘contestant enmity’ (Cohen 2006, pp. 92–93) that aggressive subtraction and boundary-redrawing have been retooled as cherished utopian milestones themselves.
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The radical right in Europe


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