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The Rise of Islamophobia in Europe

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In the last decade a constant increase in the popularity of Islamophobic political parties can be observed in Europe, to some extent owing to sporadic cases involving Islamic extremists. At the same time, Islamic parties are taking power in Arab states. These two trends might lead to an increasingly extreme polarisation of European and Arab societies, which will hinder the shaping of homogeneous and moderate EU policy towards Europe's southern neighbours. As a result, tensions between the EU and the Member States' interests will also grow.

The murder on 22 May of a man who was a member of the British military in London and the Boston Marathon attacks, are rare examples of Islamic extremism. Based on those events, and for other reasons, some European parties have formed anti-Muslim agendas, while some Islamophobic political parties (right-wing parties with anti-Muslim elements in their platforms) enjoy stable and relatively large support in many European states.

Background and Level of Islamophobia in Europe. The Swiss People's Party, the initiator of a campaign against the construction of minarets in the country in 2009, is the biggest party in the Federal Assembly (26.6%). The Freedom Party of Austria is the third largest party in the country, with 34 seats out of 183 in the National Council (17.5%)—a third more compared to 2006. In last year's legislative elections, the Dutch Freedom Party won 15 seats in parliament and remains the third-ranked party in the country, which is similar to Marine Le Pen's National Front in France, if the latest presidential elections there are taken into account.

In recent years, a new development can be observed: extreme right-wing parties in Scandinavia are gaining ground, reflecting broader Islamophobia among the European electorate. In 2010, Sweden's Democrats entered the Riksdag for the first time, winning 5.7% of the vote. True Finns has been the third largest party in Finland since 2011, with 39 seats out of 200 in parliament. In 2009, the Norwegian Progress Party won 22.9% of the vote, making it the second-ranked political power in Norway. In Denmark, the Danish People's Party is the third-ranked political party in terms of parliament members (22 seats). The annual Report to Congress on International Religious Freedom published in May by the U.S. State Department confirms a general increase in anti-Muslim feelings in Europe.

One of the prominent rationales used against Islam and Muslims in Europe is the alleged threat to national identity and culture stemming from the growing number of Muslims in European countries. According to a 2010 Pew Research Center report, the Muslim population in Europe amounted to around 44.1 million people (6%), excluding Turkey but including Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia and Russia. In Western Europe, the biggest Muslim minority populations in 2010 were in France (7.5%), Belgium (6%), Switzerland (5.7%), the Netherlands (5.5%), Germany (5.0%), the UK (4.6%), and Spain (2.3%). The number of Muslims had been increasing steadily, but the growth rate is now slowing: forecasts anticipate an additional 7.5 million Muslims in 2010–2020, but only about 6.6 million in 2020–2030. The slowdown in the population growth of Muslims in Europe is related to two factors—decreases in Muslim immigration and the fertility rate of European Muslims.

Data on Islamophobia, expressed in public opinion by a feeling of a prevalence of anti-Muslim discrimination, shows big differences between EU countries and is often associated with the size of the local Muslim population: the bigger the Muslim minority, the higher the discrimination. According to Eurobarometer, countries with the highest perception of discrimination are France (66%), Belgium (60%), Sweden (58%), Denmark (54%), the Netherlands (51%) and the UK (50%). Compared to 2009, these indicators increased the most in France and Belgium. Last year's National Consultative Commission on Human Rights report on racism, anti-Semitism and xenophobia in France underlines the

growth in all racism and xenophobia indicators (on average, a 30% increase compared to 2011, and five times more than in 1992). While Muslims are discriminated against for religious reasons (10%), very often it is for reasons associated with ethnic origin or immigrant status (43%). In 2008, discrimination was reported by more than half of North African immigrants in Italy and a third in Spain, and by a third of Turkish immigrants in Germany and the Netherlands (Amnesty International).

Conclusions. The economic crisis continues to foster a nationalist, xenophobic and Eurosceptic atmosphere. Social fear towards liberal social changes, including immigration, are instrumentalised by far-right populist political parties, whose stances are increasingly trivialised as the parties become accepted as a permanent and indispensable part of the European political scene. The political parties do not encourage violence against Muslims. Nevertheless, the hate-filled speeches used by far-right party leaders can influence the behaviour of individuals in society and may lead to cases of extreme behaviour. The Oslo terrorist attacks of 2011 conducted by a former member of the Norwegian Progress Party, Anders Breivik, in protest of Islamisation, or the profanation of Muslim graves in France in 2012, illustrate this relation. Meanwhile, some far-right European parties replicate Nazi slogans disguised as national values. Islamophobia is additionally promoted by grassroots activist movements, such as the English Defence League (EDL) or the French Bloc Identitaire, which organise street protests against Islam and in response to Islamic extremism.

Based on historical instances, the rhetoric of Islamophobic parties should be identified with anti-Semitism even if it is not articulated as such. Jean-Marie Le Pen, the former French National Front leader, was commonly known for his anti-Semitic views, and the British National Party leader, Nick Griffin, is openly a Holocaust negationist. The issue of the growing popularity of far-right movements in Europe, including the openly anti-Semitic Hungarian Jobbik party (the third largest party in Hungary) was debated during the World Jewish Congress in May in Budapest.

The anti-Muslim feeling is thus one part of a widespread far-right movement in Europe that has supporters in all EU countries, even those with a small Muslim minority. In Poland, for example, a counter-jihad page on Facebook called “Nie dla Islamizacji Europy” (“No to the Islamisation of Europe”) has more than 30,000 supporters. This ideology combines all symptoms of xenophobia (Islamophobia, anti-Semitism and homophobia), ideas against which the European Union and the moderate political parties in the Member States fight. Extreme public sentiment, on the other hand, has a direct impact on the policies of national governments, such as restrictions on education, employment, personal security and the activities of Muslim centres.

As a result, both internal EU policy and its policies towards the southern neighbourhood could be in conflict with the interests and policies of major European nations—France, Germany, the UK—countries with large Muslim minorities. The level of Islamophobia and size of the Muslim minority in these countries often determines their positions on key EU issues, such as migration, aid policies, and even Turkey’s status with the Union. This trend becomes more and more problematic as national governments tend to incorporate different popular views, legalising them along the way. Grassroots social movements, such as the EDL, inspire the formation of parties that nominally deny EDL’s anti-Semitism or Islamophobia, but in fact promote just that. It helps them enter the political mainstream in an acceptable way and have an impact on the foreign policies of their nations.

If this trend is combined with the seizure of power by Islamic parties in some Arab countries in the EU neighbourhood, the European Union, under the influence of its Member States, might soon find itself in conflict with these Arab states. However, before this happens, the EU will struggle with the ongoing internal conflict of interests regarding the issue of Muslim minorities (and, per analogiam, the southern neighbourhood) between the EU and its Member States. This division has already surfaced in relation to the new authorities in Tunisia and Egypt—in this conflict, national capitals are far more distrustful of the new regimes than is Brussels. Both the EU and its Member States should implement a monitoring scheme for extreme xenophobic public sentiment in Europe so that the process of its diffusion into the political mainstream may be researched and subject to some level of control. Such a scheme could help predict and reduce tensions in the foreign policy creation process within Member States and between them and Brussels.