ESSAY

POTENTIAL THREATS OF SECURITISATION OF MUSLIM MINORITY POLITICS IN WESTERN EUROPE

Dániel Vékony

ABSTRACT

Through dealing with the run-up and aftermath of the terrorist attack of Madrid and London in 2004 and 2005, this article explores the problems of the identities of the majority societies in Western Europe and Muslim minorities living there. The article deals with the effects of weakening national identities of majority societies and it also covers challenges of national and religious identity of Muslim minorities living in these states. It tries to demonstrate that due to pressures on identities of both groups, these societies face a certain kind of security dilemma where both groups feel threatened in their identity. Majority groups in Western European societies feel that their national identities are under threat, whereas Muslim minority groups feel threatened through their religious identity. As the acts of these groups to strengthen their identity results in further sense of threat on the other side, these societies risk facing a security dilemma and an ensuing vicious circle that may cause further alienation on both sides instead of peaceful co-existence.

KEYWORDS
Securitization, Islam in Europe, Islamophobia, migration, multiculturalism
INTRODUCTION

The terrorist attacks on Madrid and London in 2004 and 2005 led to a turning point for Western European societies and countries in regards to Muslim minority affairs. It became clear that the events of 9/11 were not isolated to the United States alone, and Western Europe became a target to Islamic terrorism as well. Before 2004 still many journalists and indeed many people thought that what happened in the US could not happen in Europe\(^1\). Causes, such as the arrogance of the US paired up with its biased foreign policy were brought up. As a result, only a very small emphasis was given to the fact that many of the perpetrators of the US attacks were living and possibly planning their attacks in Germany.\(^2\) In this sense, Western Europe already played a tangible part in the American terror attacks, but many people chose to look the other way.

This false feeling of safety was crushed with the Madrid and then with the London bombings only a year later, complemented by the murder of Theo Van Gogh in Amsterdam. Indeed, the years 2004 and 2005 meant a watershed for European Muslim minority affairs. Suddenly, it became clear that the presence of Muslim communities in Western European countries pose not only social challenges, but also security ones. For those, whom the causes of these events were not clear, the letter left by Mohammed Bouyeri on the corps of Theo van Gogh made it clear that these acts have their root not only in foreign policy like the war in Iraq, but also in a clash of values between radical Muslims and the societies where they live.\(^3\)

This article focuses on two questions. Firstly, it will attempt to uncover why Western European societies and governments ignored the threat posed by radical Islamic groups until 2004 and 2005. Secondly, it will shed light on some consequences of the events by using the idea of societal security and securitisation. But before dealing with these issues, the article will deal with some theoretical elements that enable us to better understand the subjects in question. The main goal of the article is to reveal some identity-related challenges that are behind the securitisation of policies regarding Muslim minorities in Western European countries and how these challenges affected politics before and after 2004 and 2005.
Before we deal with our first question, we need to take a closer look at the social environment in Western Europe in order to better understand the subjects the article deals with.

Due to mass immigration after the Second World War, Western European countries have become multicultural societies. Because of the fact that most immigrants came from Muslim countries, in many Western European states Islam has become the second most prevalent religion after Christianity. This spectacularly rapid change in the composition of traditionally Christian societies has been exerting a significant pressure to the identity of the populations. Besides, the continuous erosion of the classic nation-state due to globalization and the European integration exposed the national identities of Western European countries to pressures from within and without their borders.

The constructivist approach to identity emphasises the fact that the identity of an individual is “constructed” by many, sometimes rivalling identities. One can be a woman, live in a city, be a member of a trade union, belong to an ethnic minority and be a citizen of a country at the same time. Various identities exist side-by-side within and individual. Belonging to any group with and identity means that the members of the group are able define themselves as “we”, as opposed to “them”, those outside the group. Indeed, the very essence of the idea of identity is that it is a necessarily exclusivist notion. In order to be able to define “us”, we need to be able to make a distinction between “us” and “them”. Identities are undergoing slow, but nevertheless constant change. As people live in communities and the members of the communities are in constant interaction with each other and the other communities of the “outside world”, identities transform steadily. However, since these changes happen relatively slowly, we tend to experience identities as something permanent.

The identities relevant to the subject of the article are the religious identity, national identity and European identity.

Religious identity is characterised by the belonging to a certain faith group. However, the importance of certain identities to individuals can vary widely. One can have a Christian identity meaning that he regularly goes to church and subordinates his way of life to religious rules. Yet, religious identity, as the example of steadily dwindling church attendance in Europe
clearly demonstrates, can also mean a loose connection to a certain faith group through heritage or upbringing. The same could be applied to the Muslim communities of Western Europe. On the one hand, there are those people, for whom Islam is only present as a heritage from their parents or grandparents, with religion only playing a marginal part in their lives. On the other hand, there are also many Muslims whose religious identity is the main element of their personality overtaking other identity elements such as national identity.

National identity might be a bit more straightforward notion. This is the sense of belonging to a nation. However, upon speaking about nation it is vital to define what we mean by the term. As Roe points out, ‘nation’ could refer to an ethnic, cultural or political group. Thus, a national identity can represent belonging to a certain polity, a given cultural group, or a particular ethnic group as well.

European identity may be the hardest to define. If we ask a Bavarian Catholic about European identity, it is very likely that we would get an answer that would differ in many ways from one we would get from a British Muslim living in London. As this article investigates the relationship between Muslims and the majority societies of Western Europe from a theoretical perspective, let us see some relevant points that shaped contemporary European identity.

According to Henri Pirenne, Europe (or the European identity) was born when the Muslim armies conquered the Southern side of the Mediterranean Basin including much of the Iberian Peninsula in the 7th and 8th century AD. From the 8th century onwards, European territories have been cut off from former Christian lands on the Southern shores of the Mediterranean Sea, and also from Constantinople. This separation was not only cultural, but also economic and political as well. The influence of the former Christian lands and Constantinople disappeared or became marginalised, due to the fact that the Mediterranean Sea that used to unite the region and its former Christian states became a battleground and a porous border that divided the realm of Islam and the lands of Christianity. Thus, according to Pirenne, Muslim conquests were vital for the emergence of a European identity. Consequently, the emerging European identity was defined vis-à-vis Islam and Muslims. In essence, for centuries the history of Europe was constantly linked to Islam and Islamic states of the Middle
East and North Africa. Hence, the European identity owes its existence to the military security threat posed by the expanding.

According to Bassam Tibi, this relationship was characterised by animosity and cooperation throughout the centuries.\textsuperscript{12} On the one hand, trade was flourishing until the great geographical discoveries by European kingdoms. On the other hand, the Crusades, the Ottoman expansion and Western colonisation, among others, are obvious examples of conflict. By this, I would like to demonstrate that the historical heritage of Europe and Islam are closely connected. This ambivalent relationship is marred by conflicts, but also by mutually beneficial trade, and as a side effect, the transition of knowledge.

Thanks to the Renaissance, the Enlightenment\textsuperscript{13} and the subsequent Industrial revolution, European colonization lead to the domination of most of the Islamic lands by European powers by the end of the First World War. The sense of the superiority of the modern European identity that helped ideologically underpin the colonizing efforts, faded after the Second World War and the subsequent decolonization. Today’s reality is a post-modern secularised Europe that is very well aware of its difficult and malicious colonial past. Most Europeans accepted the fact that the formerly emphasized sense of superiority resulted in colonial exploitation and not in the civilising mission, in the name of which European countries expanded their territories. Thus, as European societies took on the post-modern thought, new ‘values’ emerged. According to Paul Scheffer, confronting the racist colonial past leads to the rise of relativism and so-called cultural relativism.\textsuperscript{14} According to this latter idea, different cultures cannot be compared as better or worse ones. Thus, one cannot judge other cultures to be better or worse than their own culture. At a glance, this is not something difficult to absorb. But it could lead to the questioning of the heritage of national and European identities and a feeling of insecurity.

After the Second World War, immigrants started to arrive \textit{en masse} in Western European countries.\textsuperscript{15} This continuous immigration changed the composition of Western European societies. As mentioned above, Islam, a previously distant religion and culture has become part of the everyday life in towns and cities of Western Europe. This influx of Muslim immigrants went parallel to the European integration. Both of these phenomena are still on-going realities. Rescuing migrants from the Mediterranean Sea has become a constant part of the news bulletins of our times. Besides, the aging
population of these societies should result in immigration if these countries want to sustain their economic performance in the future. On the other hand, the process of European integration got a further boost after the Great Recession and the ensuing European debt crisis, making nation states delegate even further powers to EU bodies instead of keeping them at the national level.

As a result, the nation-state seems to be weakening. Moreover, the identity connected to the nation-state is going through a crisis. The traditional national identities are being questioned from different angles from the inside and outside as well. As we mentioned before, the post-modern thought meant that the historical and colonial heritage of these countries are under scrutiny. Thus, a new more critical light is thrown upon the glorious past of these states, when these countries flourished and competed for domination in and outside Europe. This alone would lead to the teetering of the national identity. Secularisation further changed the way these states define themselves. Moreover, the many-decade-long presence of Muslim communities in these countries mean that the significant Other, against which European societies used to define themselves, are now within their borders and constitute an integral part of these societies. It has become very hard for many Western Europeans to define their own national identity. It is common knowledge that many people of these countries feel alien when they walk down in some parts of their big cities. Indeed, for many it can be hard to digest the rapid changes on the ground against a perception of a so far perennial-looking national identity.

The Copenhagen School of Security Studies deals with this question extensively. Roe and the main theorists of the Copenhagen School such as Buzan, Waever and de Wilde consider the nation-state as the biggest social unit with an identity. According to their views, this national identity is attached to a given territory through historical roots. When this relationship is disputed, and national identity is questioned, members of the society will lose their sense of security. The secular identities of Western-European countries are challenged by the presence of Islam and Muslims. Debates have been going on ever since controversies began surrounding Salman Rushdie and his book, the Satanic Verses in 1989. The more recent events surrounding the Danish cartoons are a further example of the clash of values within Western European societies. Finally, the debate on the wearing of religious symbols such as
the veil worn by many Muslim women has been a reoccurring issue in many European countries.

However, there are other causes of this feeling of insecurity in Western European societies. Tzvetan Todorov groups the countries of the globe in four simplified categories. The first group is characterised by appetite, meaning those countries and societies who demand a bigger share of the global wealth. Japan used to be a good example prior WWII, now China is the ideal one. The second group is defined by resentment, meaning these countries feel malice towards their former colonial rulers because of their painful colonial past and the resulting difficult economic and social conditions they still need to endure. The third group is dominated by fear and consists of Western countries, which are afraid of members of the two previous groups. The fourth group is typified by indecision and is not relevant to the subject of this article. From Todorov’s typology, it becomes clear that with the rise of some major emerging economies and the increasing demographic pressure from the countries in the first two groups further leaves European societies feeling insecure. Moreover, this typology is further complicated by the fact that the descendants of the countries from the group of resentment now constitute integral parts of European societies. Thus, fear from members of an outside group that is characterised by bitterness is augmented by fear from the descendants of these communities within the borders of these countries.

It is no surprise that religion has returned to the spotlight in recent years. For many people in Western European societies, national identity and belonging to a nation is a more important factor of their sets of identities than religion. This is not unexpected in the secular setting of 21st century Europe. The problem with Islam and Muslim societies from a Western secular perspective is that they never went through a similar period of Enlightenment and secularisation that European societies did. Thus, the question of prioritisation between religious or national belonging could be highly problematic. A study by the Pew Research Center describes this problem very well. According to this survey, the majority of German, Spanish, French and British Muslims believe that there is a conflict between being a devout Muslim and living in a modern society. The opinion of the majority societies of these countries is somewhat more favourable: with the exception of France, the majority of the above societies does not see a conflict, nevertheless there is a tangible minority who does. From another survey by the Pew Research Center, it seems that for the
majority of Western European Muslims, Islamic identity is of bigger importance than national belonging, while the opposite is true of Christians in these countries. The article will deal with the possible consequences of this later.

As mentioned above, a further challenge to societal security comes from above the European states. Namely, the fact that more and more decisions are taken by often unelected European officials gives a further sense of loss of power and control for national societies. The erosion of the nation-states as far as political power and values are concerned gives way to a further feeling of insecurity for many people. The recent European elections in May 2014 and the further rise of far-right and euro-sceptic parties indicate that a tangible share of European voters feel insecure in their current situation and thus turn to parties that offer them solutions based on national self-interest. Most of these parties are not only anti-EU, but also anti-immigration and many times anti-Muslim as well. Many times, the anti-Muslim agenda is disguised as anti-Islamist or anti-Extremist, but nevertheless, these parties tend to capitalise on the insecurity felt by many European voters, who are losers of globalisation, post-industrial European economies.

As some sources of the feeling of insecurity were taken into account let us see why Western European societies ignored the threat from radical Muslims until 2004 and 2005.

**IN THE TRAP OF POLITICAL CORRECTNESS**

After the European terror attacks, many people started to look for answers and possible causes. Many books were written on this issue, and there are some commonalities among them. One of the main points these authors mention is the lack of debate in society during the 1990s and early 2000s. They complain of the suffocating atmosphere of political correctness. Indeed, during these years those, who dared to raise these issues in public, were quickly considered racist and xenophobic. This is the time when the Runnymede Trust introduced the notion of Islamophobia in 1997 into public discourse. Down to their colonial past and the prevailing cultural relativism, these states and governments chose to ignore the signs of growing pressure between the majority and Muslim minorities in Western European societies. The above-mentioned Rushdie affair could have kick-
started a debate at the beginning of the 1990s. Sadly this chance was missed.

This is the epoch when London was labelled Londonistan, since radical Islamist groups from all over the globe were allowed to operate in the City, and London was only the tip of the iceberg.\textsuperscript{29} In hindsight, this politics would seem utterly irrational for security experts. But at that time, it seemed reasonable. European countries did not have the ideological basis for ousting these individuals, since they were refugees fleeing oppressive regimes down to their political views. Consequently, it was the obligation of European governments to give asylum to many of these people, since most of them were persecuted in their home country. They were wanted by authoritarian governments that otherwise had normal relationship with Western European countries. These radical activist were using the Western European territories as hinterlands for their struggle in their homeland, thus they seemed to pose little threat to domestic societies at the time. In a way, national politics and public discourse was a prisoner of cultural relativism and the post-colonial sense of guilt paired up with international humanitarian regimes created with the agreement of Western governments.

It is also worth pointing out that Western European countries had a stable export market for their manufactured goods in these countries. Besides, after the Iranian revolution, Western European governments dreaded the possibility of Muslim countries dominated by radical Islamist parties in the region. As the civil war in Algeria turned ever bloodier, this policy received further justification during the 1990s. A wide-ranging debate in Western European societies could have exposed all these “dirty laundry” to the wider public. In a time, when national identities of Western Europe were already under pressure, the elites chose to look the other way and have opted for \textit{modus vivendi}, which meant granting asylum and a hinterland to radical Islamists in the name of humanitarian values, and have a correct relationship with authoritarian Muslim countries in the meantime.

But this lack of debate was extremely harmful, since in this climate neither the concerns of the majority societies nor the exclusive attitude of the majority societies towards Muslims were addressed.

What only few people saw coming, were the new social dynamics created by a new generation of Muslims who were born and grew up in these countries by the early 1990s. As Olivier Roy pointed out, as far as their identity is
concerned, these young Muslims fell between two stools. They were neither part of their parents’ national and cultural identity anymore, nor were they admitted fully to the majority societies that looked at them with suspicion. Not being able to belong fully to any national identity, Islam became an obvious choice for many of these frustrated young Muslims. Papers and analyses, such as the above-mentioned Runnymede Trust report further highlighted the problems between Muslim communities and the majority society. These frustrated young individuals were easy targets for radical Islamists that could spread their message unhindered in the open societies of Western Europe. Thus, what we see is not only a crisis of national identities, but also a crisis of the identities of minority Muslim communities. As Roy points out, the blurring of limits between cultures in big cities also challenges the identities of Muslim groups in an environment where they are a minority under constant pressure from the majority. As we will see it later, this pressure has a major effect on how different identity elements are prioritised within and individual.

It is now clear that European countries were not prepared and for some time were unaware of the challenges Muslim minorities posed. When the problems came to the surface, like what we saw with the Rushdie affair, the hard questions were shrugged off for reasons also mentioned above. Bawer points out that the elites of these Western European societies lost contact with the rest of the society. Many Europeans at that time were clearly frustrated about the failure of integrating Muslims into society, but did not dare to raise their concerns in public in fear of being stigmatized. The steady strengthening of the far-right movements of the time was dismissed as a marginal problem caused by globalization and the resulting economic insecurity.

When Pim Fortuyn first raised the issue of failed Muslim minority politics as early as 1997 he was immediately dismissed as a racist. The novelty of Fortuyn’s set of arguments was that he attacked Muslims and Muslim minority politics using contemporary and post-modern set of values. He was one of the few politicians who addressed the feeling of insecurity of the Dutch society, hence his success. Fortuyn touched on what Barry Buzan considers a threat for societal security. That is an existential threat to a society due to a lack of cohesion within a given society. Roe uses the notion of societal security in relation to the European integration and its effect of weakening the national identity as it was also mentioned above. I would like to argue that the notion should be used on an intra-state level in
relation to Muslim minority politics as well. As mentioned earlier, Fortuyn attacked the tolerant minority politics of his country from a clearly post-modern direction. Being openly gay, and having a Moroccan partner, he was a clear product of a post-religious globalised Europe. According to Ian Buruma, he became so popular before his tragic death, because he was anti-establishment, anti-immigration and eventually offered Dutch society a dream of returning to the old days, when Holland was not yet a multicultural society.\(^{38}\) He was exploiting the very feeling of insecurity felt by many Western Europeans, as their national identities were increasingly questioned from underneath and above the state level. We will never know, what kind of political programme he would have realised, since he was killed by a white Dutch person before the parliamentary elections in 2002. Nevertheless, the spectacular rise of Fortuyn and other far-right parties in Western Europe bespeak of the need of re-empowering the national identity.

**Effects of the Events of 2004 and 2005**

After the aggressive acts mentioned earlier, it seemed that the old hostility between Islam and Europe is reemerging and the frontline is now within the borders of Europe. In order to better understand changes in policy, the idea of securitisation needs to be dealt with. The notion of securitization was also developed by the Copenhagen School of Security Studies. According to this idea, a certain issue within (or without) a society can reach a point where the political system needs to deal with it through certain extraordinary measures. When a problem becomes so grave that it threatens the society’s existence, it can be raised to special importance and get a special place in ordinary politics, or it might even be placed above the latter.\(^{39}\) Thus, it is not surprising that the securitization of politics regarding Muslim minorities took a huge leap after 2005. On the one hand, with the act of securitisation special resources could be allocated to certain policies.\(^{40}\) On the other hand, this reallocation of resources could siphon off funds from those social entities which dealt with the problem from another approach before. As Sue Kenny described, funds from NGOs dealing with the amelioration of Muslim minority affairs were diverted to cover the extra costs of the security agencies.\(^{41}\)

Securitization seems to be the obvious answer for majority societies regarding the European terror attacks. By the demonstration of force from
the governments’ side, members of the society could regain some of their confidence in the state that was further damaged before by the fact that it could not prevent the people of resentment from committing such atrocities. In this way, people living in fear could feel a bit safer after extraordinary measures are taken. For governments of those countries that did not suffer from terrorist attacks themselves, similar measures are also on the agenda, in order to make sure their voters about their safety. Sue Kenny applies Ulrich Beck’s idea of Risk Society on Muslim minority politics. This concept is very close to the idea of securitisation. The main idea of risk society is that government policy is designed in a way to avoid future threats and possible catastrophes to society. In this case Islamic terrorism is the obvious risk. Thus the target of such policies based on the idea of risk society are Muslim communities. It would be an obvious choice to put Muslims and Islam back to the place of the significant Other, where they have been many times ever since Charles Martell defeated the Muslim armies in the battle of Tours–Poitiers in 732. But this fails to shed light on the shortcomings of the majority society, and thus it would prevent societies from the much needed self-reflection.

What we can see is a sense of mutual threat. On the one hand, majority societies are afraid that their traditional way of life and values are threatened by Muslims who fail to fit into the framework of the traditional national identity. This was given a further boost by the above-mentioned aggressive acts by Muslim terrorists. On the other hand, there is fear among Muslims as well, that despite the slogans of cultural relativism, the secular majority societies of Western Europe threaten their cultural and religious identities, thus the survival of their community. This sense of threat on the side of Muslims is furthered by the increasing securitisation process and the measures linked to it.

In case of such societal threats, radical ideas and answers seem to gain acceptance. According to Fekete, the far-right parties of Western Europe in the last couple of decades managed to address those people who traditionally supported leftist movements. It seems that parties on the left could not deal with the needs of marginalised communities, neither on the majority societies’ side nor on the Muslims communities’ one. In search for regaining the lost strength of national identities, the former increasingly turned towards far-right movements. Besides, as according to Roy, a similar process took place among the Muslim communities, namely the rise of neofundamentalist Islamist movements. Feeling rejected by the
majority society, many Muslims first sought refuge by social democratic movements. The inability of these parties to protect the interest of Muslims, coupled with the lack of belonging to any national identity and the subsequent rediscovering of the Islamic religious identity, pushed many Muslims towards Islamist movements and a few in the hands of extremist groups.

When an individual is targeted on the basis of one of their identity elements, that element tends to grow stronger. Thus, terrorist attacks by radical Muslims, targeting the Western countries’ individuals and values can push further people from the majority societies to the far right—towards movements that try to capitalise on the strengthening of national identity and on targeting the identity of Muslims living in these societies. Consequently, as the ever stronger far-right movements target Muslims, the Muslim religious identity comes under attack. This could result in the strengthening of this religious identity element even in those individuals, for whom religion used to be a marginal issue. Besides, this could lead to the further strengthening of radical Islamist movements.

In this respect, sustaining the sense of threat from radical Islamists is in the interest of both sides—the radical Islamists and far-right movements. As long as both community feels threatened by each other, more and more people can be radicalised by the feeling of threat to their identity and eventually to their existence.

**Conclusion**

What we are seeing is a form of a societal security dilemma introduced by the Copenhagen School. As both sides are feeling threatened in their societal existence, they will take steps to re-affirm their respective identities. But these very steps from the tow communities could act as further threats on the groups on the other side, and thus further steps will be urged to reassert the identity under threat.

As a result, Muslims would feel that they are excluded from society and their identity is further threatened by the possible policies of securitisation and assimilation. This would not only bring religious identity to the foreground for many Muslims, but it could also push many members of the Muslim communities in the hands of radical groups, which would be seen as further threats to the society from the aspect of the majority.
Respectively, many from the majority society, in search for safety in their national identities, would turn towards far-right movements, which would act as a further menace to Muslims. As a result, the pressure would mount on Muslims even with a marginal religious identity, pushing this identity to the foreground. Therefore, further steps would be taken to reassure this identity, which the majority society could classify as a pressure on their national identity.

What could governments do in such situations? A tempting choice would be to go down the road of securitisation and become an actor in the security dilemma. If a government would like to get re-elected, it needs to protect its society both physically and identity-wise as well. Thus, the seemingly obvious choice would be to securitise Muslim minority politics and to deal with the ailing of national identity with assimilationist policies. However, this would risk further alienation and radicalisation of Muslims.

Maybe Western European societies should rediscover their past relations to Islam and Muslims. As mentioned above, according to Pirenne, the birth of European identity is closely linked to Islam and Muslims. Reconstituting European identity and national identities with Islam having an integral part in them could strengthen them and could also create a social environment in which radical ideas will not have fertile soil to flourish. Sadly, as identities tend to change very slowly, this could mean a hard and long road to walk down on.

---


2 Ibid.


4 This does not mean that multiculturalism dominated these societies, only that so far quasi homogenous nation-states have become highly heterogeneous societies with a number of ethnic and religious groups living together side-by-side mainly in big cities.


Some well-known examples are being French, German and Scottish.


Ibid.


Tibi also describes how Muslims helped safeguard and further develop the antique philosophical heritage which was adopted and „rediscovered” during the Renaissance and later was used during the Enlightenment by European thinkers. See: Ibid.


This theory could also be used to the European identity, but as of today, European identity is too weak to mobilize large masses.

Roe (2007).


Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.


Ibid.


Ibid.


31 Ibid.
33 Roy (2004).
35 Ibid.
36 Roe (2007).
37 Ibid.
38 Buruma (2007).
40 Ibid.
42 Ibid.
44 Roy (2004).
45 Roe (2007).
CORVINUS SOCIETY FOR FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND CULTURE

biztpolaffairs.com