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## **From Unproblematic to Contentious: Mosques in Poland**

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## **Abstract**

Although significant scholarly attention has been devoted to the study of mosque conflicts in Europe, up until now most of it has focussed on Western European countries. This has left a significant gap to be filled in the study of mosque tensions in Central and Eastern Europe, where scholarship is scant yet where tensions over constructions of mosques are not less intensive than in the West. Drawing on two recent case studies of mosque constructions in Poland, we argue that a significant shift has taken place in the ways that mosques are perceived, unveiling unprecedented opposition towards their construction. From being largely unproblematic before the Second World War and during the Communist era, mosques have become subjects of fierce public debate. We draw parallels to how anti-mosque arguments raised in Poland fit into a larger European meta-narrative on mosques and Muslims, yet our aim is to situate the paper historically to argue that Polish mosque conflicts must be contextualised within Poland's unique historical encounter with Islam in order to more accurately make sense of its creeping Islamophobia.

*Keywords: Mosques, Muslims, Poland, Islamophobia, Post-dependence theory, Post-colonial theory*

## **Introduction**

Islam in Europe has gained an increasingly public profile over the last decades. This has been linked not only to the demographic growth of European Muslim communities and the multifaceted processes of their adaptation to changing social, economic and political conditions, but also to external factors such as for example the Iranian Revolution, 9/11, and more recently the 'War on Terror'. The terrorist attacks carried out in Europe both by so called Islamists as well as Islamophobes - most notably in Spain in 2004, Britain in 2005, Norway in 2011 and Paris in 2015 - have also contributed to the politicisation of Islam on the continent. Correspondingly, there has been a growing body of scholarship focusing on Muslims in Europe and their relations with non-Muslims, including tensions and conflicts between them (Dassetto and Rallet 2010, Bektovic 2012). Mosque building projects are an important site at which some of these conflicts emerge, and increased scholarly attention has been given to this issue in the last decade (Kong 2010).

The vast body of literature devoted to this subject has, however, almost solely centred on Western European geographies (Gilliat-Ray and Birt 2010, Gale and Naylor 2002, Schmitt 2012) not least in this journal's special issue on mosque conflicts in Europe (Cesari 2005). With a few exceptions (Nalborczyk 2011, Melicharek 2009, Chudzikova & Naglova 2011) there has been little engagement with the topic in the region of Central and Eastern Europe (hereafter CEE). In Allievi's (2010) extensive publication, 'Mosques in Europe', Europe's central region is again overlooked.

This paper aims to start filling the gap that we identify in existing research by exploring conflicts around mosque construction projects in Poland. We contextualise mosque conflicts through an historical lens, one that is sensitive to the significant Islamic history of Poland as well as the country's recent Communist past. In so doing, we propose to enlarge the conceptual as well as empirical lenses through which mosque conflicts in CEE are assessed. By situating this paper in theoretical frameworks that astutely critique the epistemic dominance of Western narratives, we want to write against what we observe to be a tradition of subordination of those European narratives that fall outside of dominant Western knowledges. As such, events occurring in the CEE region are either entirely ignored, or understood as merely reproducing earlier developments in Western Europe. While appreciating that pan-European mosque conflicts influence the Polish setting and, what is more, that Islamophobic attitudes circulate between national contexts, not least with increased migration flows (see Gawlewicz and Narkowicz 2015), we hope to give justice to the local context and more accurately assess an unprecedented growth of public expressions of Islamophobia in Poland.

This paper is inspired by post-dependence theory that draws from postcolonial theoretical insights and applies these to post-communist geographies. Postcolonial theory has enabled for an alternative way of thinking around modernity, giving space for critical engagement with Otherness. It has primarily focused the analytical lens on power relationships between (ex)colonies and Western imperial states (Tlostanova 2012). The geographical space of the 'second world' or as Tlostanova calls it 'a stray outgrowth of western modernity' has not been readily included in postcolonial theory. This, argues Madina Tlostanova has left a 'theoretical void' for a critical study of the effects of Communism. The changes occurring post 1989 carried with them an expectation that post-communist states would 'catch up' with their Western neighbours in what was conceptualised as a linear process of progress to reach Western modernity (Mayblin, Piekut and Valentine 2014). Following Maria Todorova's (1997) early application of Saidian Colonialism to the Balkans, postcolonial theoretical insights found their way into scholarship that aimed to critically make sense of the post-communist context (see Domański 2004, Janion 2006). Although not without critique of being inapplicable to Central and Eastern Europe (Snochowska-Gonzales 2012), postcolonial insights have more recently been adapted to fit the very specific post-communist context with the emergence of post-dependence theory (Tlostanova 2012). Tlostanova proposes post-dependence theory as a way to analyse knowledge that grows out of local histories (Tlostanova 2012). We apply this perspective to make sense of the Polish mosque conflicts and the growth of anti-Muslim prejudice. We stress that not only should scholarship on mosque conflicts in Europe include the often neglected outsiders of Western modernity - the post-communist geographies - but also that these processes need to be

understood within local histories that are influenced by meta-narratives of modernity. Understanding Poland's position as outside of the ideological construct of the West is crucial for an understanding of contemporary politics of Othering in the country. Post-dependence theory thus allows for more nuanced readings of the emerging Islamophobic trends in Poland because it allows the 'not quite European' perspective to be heard on its own terms (Tlostanova 2012:133). It also allows us to tell the story of mosque conflicts and emerging Islamophobia in a country like Poland without the need to fit into pre-existing moulds shaped by Western European experiences of mosque politics. While the religious genealogy of Islam in the West is multifaceted and heterogeneous, there are nevertheless stark historical differences between Western Europe and CEE that impact on the way that Islam, and Islamophobia, manifests itself today.

This paper is divided into three parts. Our starting point is historical and aims to show how Muslims in Poland have gone from being a largely accepted community to becoming a suspicious one, opposed by large segments of the Polish society. An understanding of the recent escalations of Islamophobic sentiments in Poland requires a rooting of the mosque conflicts both in Poland's largely amicable and longstanding historical relationship with Islam, and Poland's recent history of Communism and then post-Communism. We show how the growth of the Muslim community in the last decades changed its character and profile. Here, we focus also on the intricate inter-group tensions in the diverse Muslim community and their role in the mosque conflicts. Secondly, we map the contemporary conflicts over mosques by looking at two recent cases of mosque constructions in Warsaw. We attempt to unravel the vast array of arguments that used by various mosque opponents. Finally, we situate the Warsaw case studies within a broader discussion on growing Islamophobia in Poland.

This paper is based on two main sets of qualitative data. The first, conducted by the first author, was part of a year-long doctoral fieldwork project in Warsaw, mapping mosque conflicts in Poland. It involved six focus groups (N=26) and eleven individual and paired interviews (N=13) with local residents, city authorities, anti-mosque activists and Muslims as well as participant observations, media and documentary analysis. The second set of data was gathered by the second author for a research project focusing on Muslim communities in Poland, carried out between 2011 and 2013. This consisted of twenty in-depth interviews with representatives of different Muslim groups, participant observation, and a Muslim focus group (N=10). Additionally, findings are provided from an ongoing project by the second author (2014-2016) on religious dimensions of Islamophobia in Poland. This involves systematic content analysis of Catholic media in Poland as well as interviews with Muslim and anti-Muslim groups in the country.

### **From a homogenous ‘us’ to a diverse ‘them’**

Like in many other parts of Europe the process of Muslim Othering has been closely linked to wider socio-political transformations and national as well as pan-European identity construction processes (Delanty 1995). In the case of Poland, it has in the last decades also been associated with the growing diversity of the Muslim community and the inter-group tensions that accompanied this diversification. Muslims have been portrayed in the Polish historiography in ambiguous ways. While in certain periods and by some groups viewed as heroes and guardians of Polish sovereignty and framed within an inclusive category of ‘us’, at other times and by other groups Muslims were framed as ‘Others’ and perceived as invaders, deadly enemies, and aliens (Borawski and Dubiński 1986). Overall, the Tatars were welcomed in Poland and constituted part of country’s history of religious diversity that spanned across several centuries (Dziekan 2011).

Although the very first account of Polish tribes and proto-state structures on the Polish historical territories comes from 10<sup>th</sup> century Arabic sources (Hermes 2012), until the end of the 13<sup>th</sup> century Poles had only sporadic contact with Muslims. Permanent Muslim settlements did not appear within the Polish-Lithuanian territories until the end of the 14<sup>th</sup> century. Initially these settlements were made up of Tatar prisoners of war and refugees in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, at that time a shared monarchy with Poland. The first presence of a mosque in the Polish-Lithuanian state was noted in the 16th century (Chazbijewicz, Bohdanowicz and Tyszkiewicz 1997).

Polish openness to Muslim and other faith groups was evidenced in the early laws on religious freedom. It was mobilised by the liberal rule of the Jagiełło dynasty and materialised in the 1573 Warsaw Confederation, a pioneering formalisation of religious tolerance law in Europe that secured religious freedoms for minority faith communities. At that time, Poland was ethnically and religiously diverse with significant groups of Tatars, Jews, Armenians, Ukrainians and Germans living side by side with Poles and Lithuanians. The Tatars in the united Poland and Lithuania lost their language by the end of the 16th century and incorporated some Polish-Lithuanian traditions but maintained their religion and customs. A new wave of Tatar settlers arrived in present-day northeast Poland at the end of the 17th century and continue to live there to this day (Czarniejewska, Kosowicz and Marek 2009). As the community grew, comprising up to 25,000 people (Sobczak 1984), mosques were built without opposition as there were no formal restraints to the construction of Muslim places of worship (Konopacki 2010:105). Muslims played a key role in the Polish-Lithuanian defence system and most significantly were part of the Polish King Sobieski’s army during the Battle of Vienna in 1683. Thus, one of the important battles with the Ottoman

Empire was won in part thanks to the support of Muslim soldiers in the Polish army – a fact that is not consistent with the vision of the Second Siege of Vienna as a victory of Christians against Muslims, frequently evoked by Polish nationalists and anti-Muslim groups. In contrast to the contemporary framing of Muslim immigrants as ‘Others’, Tatars have predominantly historically been framed as ‘us’.

The societal acceptance of Muslims also translated to an unchallenged visibility of Muslim communities. Before Poland disappeared from the maps of Europe at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, there were 23 mosques and five prayer houses within the country’s borders (Kryczyński 1938). In the Poland that re-emerged on the maps of Europe after the First World War there were 19 Muslim communities, each with their mosques and cemeteries (Kryczyński 1938). After the Second World War and Poland’s westward shift on the map of Europe, only about 10% of the traditional Tatar settlements remained within the new Polish borders. The post-war migrations further dispersed the Tatar community across the country (Gródź & Nalborczyk 2010). In contrast to Poland’s ethno-religious composition prior to World War II, when over 30% of the population belonged to minorities of Ukrainian, Jewish, Byelorussian and German descent, post-war Poland was largely ethnically homogenous. With almost 90% of its citizens declaring adherence to the Roman Catholic Church, Poland also became one of the most religiously homogenous countries in Europe (GUS 2014). In the context of these new socio-cultural realities Islam started to experience a slow revival as a result of the processes of migration. From the 1970s Muslims immigrated to Poland initially for educational purposes (especially from befriended socialist Arab countries), and later for economic and political reasons (e.g. refugees from Chechnya) (Pędziwiatr 2011).

The collapse of Communism changed the regional patterns of migration. Apart from dynamic emigration processes, Poland became increasingly attractive to immigrants (among them Muslim professionals and refugees). With the arrival of these new groups of Muslims the Tatars have gradually lost their status as the representatives of the Polish Muslim community, and today the Tatars make up only a small minority (up to 5000) within a wider (around 35,000) Muslim community in Poland. The remaining majority is a very diverse group that is comprised of former and current students, professionals, members of the diplomatic corps, economic migrants, refugees (up until now predominantly Chechens) and, importantly, a growing number of Poles who have converted to Islam. The community is heterogeneous not only in ethnic but also religious terms.

The growing diversity within the Muslim community in Poland has also led to increasing tensions between the various groups of believers. These tensions have emerged not only as a result of theological differences between

the groups, but also as a consequence of ethno-cultural diversity, differences in religious practice, and struggle for authority (Warمیńska 1999, Pędziwiatr 2011). The two major organisations that claim to represent Muslims in Poland are *Muzułmański Związek Religijny* or MZR [Muslim Religious Union] and *Liga Muzułmańska* or LM [Muslim League] (Pędziwiatr 2011). The MZR, founded by a group of Tatars in 1925, has acted as the main representative body of the Polish Muslims. The Mufti of Poland is the official head of the MZR and is perceived by the state as the primary representative of Muslims in Poland. The LM was set up much later – in 2001 – by Muslims of more recent immigrant origin and gained official state recognition as a religious community in 2004.

Some of the intricate inter-community tensions became particularly visible during the conflicts analysed in this paper when Islam became the subject of intense public scrutiny following the announcement of mosque construction projects in the Polish capital. In contrast to mosque conflicts in the West, an important part of the contestation of the constructions came from within the leadership of the Polish Tatar community. The Tatars used this opportunity to stress their indigenesness, Europeanness, and sameness with other Poles while at the same time implicitly or explicitly pointing to the alienness and difference of the more recent Muslim migrants engaged in the construction of the mosques. The Ochota mosque construction also sparked wider civilisational arguments separating the Tatars from the ‘new’ Muslims. A former Tatar Imam of the Gdańsk mosque argued, for example, that the hijab is a relic from the Middle Ages and should not be adopted by modern European Muslims. Positioning himself as dichotomously opposed to the ‘non-European’ Muslims, and speaking against Polish acceptance of Muslim refugees (NaTemat.pl 2015), he emphasised a division in the Polish Muslim community between Tatars (considered good, European and civilised Muslims) and the ‘Other’ Muslims (largely including Arabs, Polish converts, and other non-Tatars). Such attempts by the Tatars, marked by an ambition towards closeness with Western modernity and maintenance of monopoly of religious authority, feeds into Islamophobic narratives. As we point out towards the end of this paper, the repercussions of heightened anti-Muslim sentiments affect all Muslims in Poland, including the Tatars, who are not themselves immune to this Othering, despite having contributed to the creation of such a narrative.

### **From unproblematic to increasingly contentious mosques**

The history of mosques in Poland reflects the aforementioned transformations of the Muslim community in the country. The historic sources are generally silent about any protests against the building of Muslim religious spaces in the period of shared monarchy and Polish-Lithuanian commonwealth (Kryczyński



1938). The only exception seems to be an incident in Trakai in 1609 when a crowd ravaged a local mosque in the religious fervour of the counter-reformation (Sobczak 1984).

After Poland regained its independence in 1918, the state – along with the Tatar community – renovated the majority of the Muslim places of worship that were left in what became the new Polish territory. No new mosques were built in the inter-war period in spite of plans for such constructions in Vilnius and Warsaw. One of the key reasons for this was a lack of resources (Nalborczyk 2011). Today, out of the 19 pre-war Muslim communities within what were then the borders of Poland only two small Polish Tatar villages, Kruszyniany and Bohoniki, situated in the eastern border with Belarus, continue the Tatar religious and cultural heritage in Poland. Each village is home to an historic wooden mosque, still in use. The wooden mosques have more in common with the local churches than mosques found across the Muslim world, because they were both conceptually influenced and physically built by the same carpenters that constructed Catholic and Orthodox churches at the time (Nalborczyk 2011). In addition to the mosques in Kruszyniany and Bohoniki, a purpose-built mosque was also constructed in the northern city of Gdańsk between 1984 and 1989. It was not local opposition to the mosque that delayed its construction but rather the limited availability of building material and funding in the failing Communist economy. In fact, as Nalborczyk (2011) writes, the Tatars were helped by non-Muslim neighbours and collaborated with the local church to build the mosque.

Despite being home to approximately 10,000 Muslims, Warsaw did not have a single purpose-built mosque prior to 2015. In 1993 a residential home in the Polish capital was converted into a prayer space and functioned as the main mosque in the capital until 2015, when Warsaw's first purpose-built mosque opened three years later than planned. While the erections of the wooden mosques in Bohoniki and Kruszyniany and the modern one in Gdańsk were by and large unproblematic, recent mosque constructions in Poland have been vehemently opposed.

In many European cities where Muslim minorities are significantly larger in size, mosques are often located in areas where these minorities themselves reside (Naylor and Ryan 2002). In the case of the two mosque construction plans in Warsaw, due to the vastly different Muslim landscape in the city, the Ochota and Włochy mosque sites are located in non-Muslim majority residential areas. The two districts where mosque constructions were planned in 2010 and 2012 are located only a few kilometres apart and neighbour each other. While geographically close, the mosque neighbourhoods are very different. The Ochota mosque site is located far from the residential centre of the neighbourhood, close to a shopping complex, a main road and a roundabout. In contrast to the Ochota mosque's bustling

location, the Włochy mosque site is in an old residential neighbourhood, called 'Stare Włochy'. The area is much quieter and poorer than Ochota, with local residents taking great pride in its unique Garden City inspired architectural style. Differences in the make-up of the two neighbourhoods, along with the scale of their gentrification and transformations since the collapse of Communism, was also apparent in the way in which the two mosque constructions were opposed. While in Ochota - considered one of the most attractive parts of the city, ethnically diversifying and visibly gentrifying over the past decades - the construction of the mosque did not mobilise large groups of local protestors, it did so in the district of Włochy. As will be shown below, the fact that Włochy has been one of the poorest parts of the city and particularly negatively affected by the post-Communist economic transformations – for example by relocation to it of families with social problems from other parts of the capital (Kuć-Czajkowska 2008) – had clear implication for the case in question. The act of excluding a mosque from the Włochy neighbourhood has to therefore be understood through the prism of Włochy's marginalised position in the wider context of Warsaw.

The transition towards democracy generated new insecurities which in turn contributed to a scapegoat effect, as Kaprański (2008) has illustrated with the example of the Roma population. In a renewed search for easy targets to blame, racist stereotypes targeting minority groups flourished in a post-Communist context where the relatively weak state structures bend easily to nationalist public sentiments. At the same time some old traditional 'folk devils' have been losing attractiveness while new ones, especially Muslims, are coming to the fore (see Pędziwiatr 2010).

### ***Warsaw's first mosque conflict: Ochota case study***

In 2010 the Muslim League publicly announced plans for the first purpose-built mosque in the Polish capital, fuelling an unprecedented national debate on Islam. Shortly after the news of the mosque construction burst into the public debate, an anti-mosque demonstration was organised. A group called *Europa Przyszłości* [Europe of the Future] emerged as the main orchestrators of the opposition to the new mosque. The group is headed by three men who articulated their opposition in eloquent terms, proclaiming 'European values' of democracy, secularism, freedom of expression and, importantly, women's rights:

We critique Islam from the position of secularism, from the position of women's movements, gay movements, human rights, let's call it rational humanism, that is our ideal.

(Male, 30+. Member of Europe of the Future)

The group argued that these liberal values were core to the Europe they identified with and contradictory to the values of the Muslim League and Muslims at large.

Ahead of the anti-mosque protest in March 2010, Europe of the Future plastered Warsaw city centre with posters of a woman in a black niqab, standing next minarets that resembled missiles. The posters were almost identical to Swiss anti-minaret posters (yet with a Polish flag and a slogan in Polish that read ‘Stop the radical mosque in Warsaw’), again confirming a clear ambition for the Polish anti-mosque group to be read as in line with a Western European mobilisation. The image of the veiled woman on the poster served a double purpose; on the one hand symbolising a threat in the form of a foreign terrorist body (see Puar 2007), and on the other hand reflecting the organisers’ neo-colonial ambitions to save Muslim women who they expressed concern for, with little acknowledgement of the violence and superiority contained in such narratives (Spivak 1988, Abu-Lughod 2002). Employment of ‘gender exceptionalism’ (Puar 2007) has become a common form of Islamophobic expression in some Western countries, perhaps most prominently discussed in the case of the Netherlands (Bracke 2012, Butler 2008). While the poster was only temporally glued to the walls of Warsaw’s cityscape, liberal arguments borrowed from anti-mosque protests in other countries were adopted by anti-Muslim opposition in Poland. As a local councillor observed, opposition to the mosque was often expressed within the context of a concern for ‘the treatment of women by Muslims’ (interview with councillor, Ochota neighbourhood). This was echoed by many of the interviewees, thus dehumanising Muslims and further creating a civilizational gap between Muslims who en bloc treat women badly and ‘us’, who do not:

The [Muslim] women do not get anything. I think they are treated worse than animals.

(Female, 20+, local resident, Ochota neighbourhood)

It is difficult to think that we might see a mosque built here next door, with these people that treat women badly.

(Male, 20+, local resident, Ochota neighbourhood)

We argue that such employment of feminist discourses here is not consistent with the current Polish context nor the genealogy of its gender politics that differs vastly from many Western European contexts, where the formation of gender politics has often been intimately entangled within a colonial nation-state framework and then with the post-1989 multicultural debate (see Bracke 2012). In Central and Eastern Europe, throughout times of war and struggle, ideal womanhood was intimately linked with sacrifice and martyrdom, an ideal represented in the Virgin Mary (Janion 2006). This mechanism is further complicated by the ambivalent position of Polish gender politics in the first

place. The enforced gender equality of the Communist regime – with childcare provision, legal abortion and the increase of women’s education and employment – was hailed and then lamented by Western feminist circles after the fall of Communism (Siklova 1993). Consequently, with assistance from post-dependence and post-colonial thinking, we assess calls among our participants for the liberation of Muslim women in Poland as symptomatic of a Polish ambition for closeness to Western Europe that it never truly gained. In the words of Stuart Hall, ‘Eastern Europe doesn’t (doesn’t yet? never did?) belong properly to "the West"’ yet the ‘desire to become the West’ takes precedence (see Mignolo and Tlostanova 2006).

On the day of the mosque protests in the Ochota neighbourhood, around 150 people gathered at the mosque construction site, in what was a curious spectacle of unlikely allies. From secular liberals to Polish right-wing nationalists, various banners danced in front of the then partially built mosque, bearing slogans such as ‘Stop Islamisation of Europe’, ‘Sharia contradictory to democracy’, and ‘Let’s not repeat the mistakes of Europe’ (Narkowicz 2014). The liberal anti-Muslim group who coordinated the protests hoped to expand their base of alliances by pointing to the historic legacy of the mosque construction plot and the deceptiveness of the Muslim League (Euroislam Facebook Page, 22 February, 2014). According to the local councillor from the Ochota neighbourhood mentioned above, the site was the former battleground of Polish soldiers fighting against the Russians in the November uprising of 1831. The proximity of the Ochota mosque site to a place where Polish soldiers were allegedly buried was for him ‘identical’ to the conflict around the ‘Ground Zero’ mosque in New York, leading him to conclude that the Polish Muslims had a hidden agenda (interview with councillor). Europe of the Future raised accusations about the suspect nature of the Muslim group behind the mosque construction, arguing that it had links with the Muslim Brotherhood (interview with representative). The group also argued that the local councillors were misinformed about the construction in their area because ‘the plan was only to build a cultural centre in the neighbourhood – without a mosque’ (Gazeta Wyborcza, 24 March, 2010). According to official protocol from a 2010 committee meeting dedicated to construction of the Ochota mosque, the authorities gave approval for the construction of a Centre for Muslim culture with a prayer space. The description for the construction was reminiscent of a similar project in the Italian city of Lodi where the project was described as a ‘centre for Islamic culture’ with a ‘special space to be used as a prayer room’ and not a ‘mosque’ (Saint-Blancat and Schmidt di Friedberg 2005:1087). This ostensibly minor difference in description of the Warsaw construction was significant in stoking the confusion and resentment felt among the Warsaw locals regarding whether the construction was a mosque or a cultural centre with a prayer space.

If I wanted to build a church with a bell tower I would not write in my project proposal that I would build a little house with a little bell, would I? It says a Centre of Islamic culture with a prayer space – there is nothing here that says it will be a mosque!

(Local councillor, Ochota neighbourhood)

For some Muslims the wording was not as significant. While acknowledging the confusion around the definition of the construction, the Muslims interviewed did not regard this as unusual. To them, what mattered most was to have a space to pray. The current mosque in Warsaw, a converted family house, was physically incapable of accommodating the congregation and a larger space was required. To them, the narratives of deception fuelled strongly by Europe of the Future were exaggerated. A focus group of Muslim women challenged the secular public-private divide propounded by the protestors, proposing the use of a more flexible definition of what constitutes a mosque which reflects that of Islamic tradition (Nasser 2005) and is also a more familiar narrative in Poland, where religion is an important part of the public sphere:

Marta: A group of people who tried to force through provocation [were] saying that there was an agreement for a Muslim Cultural Centre and not a mosque.

Dagmara: There will obviously be prayers there and teaching, whether it is called an apartment, a centre of dialogue or a mosque.

Ayesha: For us it doesn't matter!

(Muslim women, focus group)

The Ochota mosque protests marked a conflict not seen before in the Polish public sphere. So when a new mosque project was proposed by an entirely different Muslim group a couple years later, a protest engaging the whole local neighbourhood erupted. With the involvement of the locals, a shift from liberal concerns of women's rights and democracy to arguments rooted much more in a Catholic opposition to a foreign religious threat, sufficed.

### ***Warsaw's second mosque conflict: Włochy case study***

The Ochota protests were still echoing when in 2012 a new mosque conflict surfaced only seven kilometres from the Ochota site. This time mosque construction plans were put forward by the Ahmadiyya community, a different Muslim group that has little in common with the Muslim League that was behind the Ochota mosque. The Ahmadiyyas – a revivalist movement within Islam that is by many Muslims not even considered as part of Islam – started their missionary work in Poland before the Second World War and currently has a few dozen followers in the country (Stawiński 1994). The Ahmadiyya community was not new to Włochy at the time of their application for mosque planning permission. Indeed, they had for several years owned a small piece of land in the area with a house on it, prior to the emergence of the idea of expanding their current offices and prayer space to build a mosque. Their plan

was to erect a mosque that would be only two meters higher than their existing building and which would house a bookshop alongside prayer facilities (interview with the Ahmadi chief architect).

Resistance to the Ahmadiyya mosque in Włochy differed to that in neighbouring Ochota. Firstly, and surprisingly, the main opponents of the Ochota mosque – the liberal *Europa Przyszłości* – did not engage in the opposition to Włochy mosque. A statement on their website declared that they would not be protesting against the Ahmadiyya mosque because, they argued, the Ahmadiyya group was peaceful and not politicised like the other Muslim groups in Poland (Euroislam.pl, 11 January 2011). The way that *Europa Przyszłości* distinguished some Muslims from others reflected dichotomous binaries established between the ‘good’ and the ‘bad’ Others (Valentine 2010) or between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ Muslims (Mamdani 2004). Despite the fact that the group was supportive of the Ahmadiyya construction project, there was still significant opposition to the mosque initiated by the local councillors which attracted considerable local support. To locals, the Ahmadiyyas were no different to other Muslims and irritation was caused due to the proximity of the two mosques that for them was a sign of the Islamisation of space. The opposition here was driven by locals and reflected local and national sentiments to a larger extent than in Ochota. The arguments mainly focussed on spatial concerns and, albeit to a lesser extent, unveiled religiously-based opposition.

A couple of the local councillors from the conservative PIS [Law and Justice] party initiated a petition signed by 500 local residents which represented almost the entire neighbourhood. Their arguments focussed on spatial aspects, interwoven with cultural and security issues:

The planned mosque, due to its size, would not fit well into the low-built residential neighbourhood... lack of parking spaces and many vehicles on the street would cause it to lose its character as a leisure space with old trees... the mosque construction may lower house prices... We also point to the fact that Islam, irrespective of the religious differences between us, is culturally distinct and different, which may lead to unwanted and hitherto unknown social problems in the locality (Włochy protest letter, 2011). Two of the signatories were a mother and daughter who had been living in Włochy for many years. During an interview with them, they insisted that their opposition was necessary in order to maintain the character of the neighbourhood. To them, the mosque was yet another imposition on the already fast transforming area:

The urban planning here is very specific. The neighbourhood is called Residence Włochy, so just the word residence speaks for itself, right?

(Females 30+ and 60+, local residents, Włochy neighbourhood)

The neighbourhood as imagined by the locals held on to its unique character with no more than a few broken bricks. Our fieldwork in the area revealed, however, that a huge construction site for a new apartment complex had been erected less than 500 metres from where the mosque plot was situated. The apartments were to be several stories high, with a tall clock tower in the centre. While the clock tower and the minaret were not considered equally out of place, the recent developments in Włochy were not necessarily welcome interventions either:

We got the airport, we got the animal shelter and the trucks passing through... everything is brought on the Włochy neighbourhood!

(Females 30+ and 60+, local residents, Włochy neighbourhood)

The Włochy opposition, with its focus on the NIMBYesque sentiments of the erosion of the character of the locality and its greenery, reflected familiar arguments against mosque constructions across Europe (Allievi 2010) and beyond (Dunn 2001). As such, the issues of spatial planning dominating the vigorous opposition in Włochy acted partly as subtext to deeper neighbourhood tensions and were a way to restore something that was long gone amidst new and unwanted developments. The concerns of the local residents were imbued with nostalgia, attachment, and a need to block what was viewed as negative developments by the city authorities (Kuć-Czajkowska 2008) - making Włochy into a 'social dumping ground'. Entangled in these arguments, moreover, was a religiously-rooted opposition – elaborated on below – which drew clear inspirations from the idea of Poland as a bulwark of Christianity and the force capable of re-Christianising Europe.

We are not against them for who they are! But let's not exaggerate because, as I say, soon... if you let them once, second time and third time and then a tenth time then there will be more mosques because a city won't find the basis to reject them and there will be more of them than of our Catholic churches!

(Females, 30+ and 60+, local residents, Włochy neighbourhood)

Plans for the Ahmadiyya mosque in Włochy were eventually rejected by the local council in the spring of 2013. An extract of the letter motivating the decision to reject the mosque construction project read:

The local residents in Włochy are simply concerned about maintaining the calm and the character of the area. The construction of a culturally foreign object is a reason for concern regarding the loss of value of the estates in Włochy.

(Rejection Letter. Włochy council, April 2013)

Arguments about spatial planning and parking spaces functioned on the one hand as general expression of the resistance to change in the neighbourhood and on the other hand, as subtext to deeper resentment towards 'culturally foreign' and religiously Other Muslims, evidenced in the rejection letter above.

### *The aftermath of mosque conflicts*

After years of conflict around mosque construction in the capital, only one of the two planned constructions went ahead and eventually opened its doors shortly before Ramadan in 2015. The construction of Warsaw's first purpose-built mosque, located in Ochota neighbourhood, marks a significant turning point in the long history of Polish Islam. The mosque, which also serves as a cultural centre, brings recognition to the Muslim community as was evidenced by the 'Noc Świątyń' [Night of the Temples] in September 2015, when the newly constructed mosque saw more than 1000 non-Muslim visitors (Życie Warszawy, September 15, 2015). Yet since the beginning of its construction, the Ochota mosque has also been a target of hostilities. During construction, it was shot at by a person using a pneumatic firing weapon; not long after its official opening in 2015, a woman threw a pig's head inside the building (Interview with the mosque's imam).

What started as protests against one mosque construction, quickly transformed into an unprecedented surge in attacks on mosques across Poland in the cities of Gdańsk, Poznań and Białystok. Yet perhaps the most devastating - not in scale but in symbolism – was the 2014 attack on the 17<sup>th</sup> century Tatar mosque in Kruszyniany. A pig was drawn on the outside wall of the green wooden mosque and abusive graffiti was sprayed on the graves of the adjacent Muslim cemetery. The Tatars, having lived in Poland for several hundred years without experiencing hostility, were deeply affected by this unprecedented rise in Islamophobic attacks. This incident showed that, in the context of an unprecedented rise in Islamophobia, all Muslims are targeted through attacks on their places of worship, whether they have lived in Poland for centuries or just a few years. As such, the inter-group conflicts between Muslims that were discussed earlier can potentially contribute to – rather than challenge – anti-Muslim prejudice targeted towards all communities.

The transition of the ways that mosques are perceived in Poland, from being largely accepted to becoming opposed, should be understood in light of wider geopolitical processes. On the one hand, the collapse of Communism opened the way for Poles to participate in the life of the international community more fully, while on the other hand bringing concomitant fears and anxieties. The weakening of historic Polish-Jewish antagonisms led to a search for the new Other. In spite of the long Muslim presence in the country, such a new enemy was found in the form of the broadly conceived figure of a Muslim Other. The concept of the 'clash of civilisations' (Huntington 1993) frequently mentioned by our interviewees from diverse backgrounds was applied to make sense of the deaths of Polish soldiers during the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan – as part of the 'War on Terror' – and various terrorist attacks, in addition to being cited in conjunction with the recent rise of the so called Islamic State. While these are some of the factors that have solidified the



belief that many Poles hold of ‘the Muslim threat’, the impact of the ‘War on Terror’ on Polish society does not tell the whole story of the gradual shift in the Polish imagination from a considerable openness towards its Muslim minorities to increasing hostility, and the emergence of Poland as one of Europe’s most anti-Muslim countries (Pędziwiatr 2015a). Research from 2011 revealed that 47% of Poles believed that ‘too many Muslims live in Poland’. Among the eight nations involved in the research, Poles were the most critical towards Islam. Nearly 62% of the Polish respondents agreed with the thesis that ‘Islam is an intolerant religion’ and only one in five believed that Muslim culture could adapt to life in a European/Polish society (Zick 2011). Even if the aforementioned statistics need to be understood in light of different contexts of public expressions of prejudice (Piekut, Vieten and Valentine 2014), the findings of various national studies (see CBOS 2012, CBOS 2015a, CBOS 2015b) confirm an unprecedented level of anti-Muslim prejudice expressed in Poland. To take one example: Arab people, who most often are identified with Muslims in Poland and categorised as a ‘national group’ in the studies carried out by the Centre for Public Opinion Research, consistently emerged as the most disliked groups, alongside the Roma (CBOS 2012).

While outside the scope of this paper, it is critical not to ignore that Poles are no strangers to the Othering of racialised groups of which the long period of Polish anti-Semitism that continued well after the Second World War is an obvious case in point (Bilewicz & Krzeminski 2010). While we are arguing that Islamophobia, particularly expressed through mosque conflicts, is a recent and unprecedented phenomenon, we also stress that it is critical to understand Polish Islamophobia within broader processes of racialisation in the country. As such it requires an engagement with Polish anti-Semitism and recognition that there is a continuity of hostility expressed towards racialised groups in Poland. In the national collective memory, Poles predominantly see themselves as being the heroes who largely helped Jews during the Second World War rather than those who also sometimes participated in their oppression (CBOS 2015b). Yet hostility towards Jews and Jewishness still exists in Poland, even if according to recent statistics Jews are much more liked and accepted than two decades ago (they score higher in polls conducted in Poland than the most disliked groups, which are Russians, Turks, Roma and Arabs) (CBOS 2012). As such, the eruption of Islamophobic attitudes in Poland can be understood as part of a continuous trajectory of Othering and its alignment with racism (Meer 2013).

One of the important players in this process of Othering is the Catholic Church. After the collapse of Communism, to which it significantly contributed, the Church emerged as a highly trusted institution and was widely attended. More recently however, the popularity and influence of the Church has been declining (Pędziwiatr 2015b).

While in the West the religious dimension of Islamophobia has been frequently linked with concerns about the public manifestation of faith by European Muslims (Asad 2003), in the context of Poland it has been above all connected with the idea of the re-Christianisation of Europe by a Catholic Poland. Poland's conviction of its key role in a new Christianisation project derives from the concept of Poland as the bulwark of Christianity [*Polonia Antemurale Christianitatis*]. This is also based on a vision of Europe in which the processes of secularisation has lead less to the social space being increasingly liberated from the control of the sacred (Church), than to the opening of new spaces for the religious expansion of Islam. As such, anti-Muslim sentiments that derive from this particular Catholic position further set aside Polish Islamophobia from what has been observed in Western contexts (see Cesari 2005).

Religious Islamophobic attitudes are nested in various institutional, grassroots, and media outlets. Right-wing publications playing an important role in the Catholic media landscape (e.g. *Polonia Christiana* and *Fronda*) actively promote essentialist and nationalist anti-Muslim rhetoric. Tellingly, in an article about the opening of the Ochota mosque in the Catholic weekly (*Gość Niedzielny* 8 June, 2015), the author argues that the spiritual void produced by the processes of secularization is being filled by Islam. Another article on the mosque construction project published in the second major Catholic weekly explicitly accuses the group behind the mosque project of links with terrorism and jihadism (Niedziela, 21<sup>st</sup> issue, 2010). In this vision Poland as a country spared from dynamic secularisation processes is destined to defend Christianity and the religious foundations of Europe. Othering of Muslims and Islam is used to galvanize the faithful around common 'Christian' principles and with the goal of stopping the supposed 'conquest of Europe and Poland' by Islam.

## **Conclusion**

European scholarship on mosques has typically been concerned with Western Europe, where the growing Muslim populations have increasingly wanted to build houses of worship – a trend that 'local' populations have often objected to. Despite the fact that Central and Eastern Europe is home to a significantly smaller Muslim population than Western Europe, mosque constructions in Central and Eastern Europe have also recently become contentious and are causing fractions both in the wider society as well as within the increasingly heterogeneous Muslim communities resident in the region. Yet academic inquiry into these spaces is still scarce.

By focusing here on two recent mosque construction conflicts in Warsaw, we hope to begin to fill the identified gap. As demonstrated by the way in which opposition to the Polish mosques was mobilised, one may

presume that much of the discourse that surrounds mosques corresponds to narratives from Western European countries where mosque conflicts have occupied the public sphere longer (see McLoughlin 2005). With Poland recently entering into more divisive politics around mosques, some might conclude that Polish mosque conflicts will follow a similar trajectory to those previously observed in Western European countries. Such a reading risks reproducing problematic assumptions conceptualising these processes in linear ways and ignores the very different realities for Muslims in countries such as Poland where Muslims were not primary (ex)colonial subjects and had different class positions; from the Tatars who were highly regarded in the Polish army to the students from befriended socialist Arab countries during Communism. Therefore, we argue that in the study of post-Communist countries it is helpful to apply a post-dependence lens that draws from post-colonial theory. Post-dependence theory assumes the local specificity as a starting point and actively resists surrendering to a temporal trajectory that constructs Western European modernity as a model for its outsiders to follow. With the assistance of post-dependence theory, the phenomenon of mosque conflicts in a post-Communist setting can be better understood.

By taking an historical starting point, we understand the mosque conflicts as being a new phenomenon that is in contrast to the historically largely unopposed Islamic presence in Poland. Islam is not a new phenomenon in Poland, and the history of the Polish Muslim community has not followed a similar path to Muslim communities in Western European countries. As such, in contrast to Jocelyn Cesari's (2005) argument that Islam goes from invisible to later becoming visible and then unwanted, in the Polish case Islam was indeed both visible and largely welcomed, and has only recently become more diverse and increasingly contentious, with mosques being ideologically as well as physically opposed. The second notion that post-dependence and post-colonial thinking allows us to engage with more critically, is the ease with which our interviewees applied 'gender exceptionalism' through identifying themselves with a largely imagined gender equal national community – Western Europe – in order to be able to mark Islam and Muslims of discrimination of women. Thirdly, as we have shown, in contrast to the West, Polish anti-Muslim sentiments have an important religious dimension and are used to galvanize the faithful around common "Christian" principles in order to prevent "Islamisation of Poland and Europe". Understanding these complexities is critical in countering growing Islamophobia and opening up possibilities to challenge the worrying historical discontinuity of positive inter-faith relations between Muslims and non-Muslims in Poland and the wider region.

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