

‘Poland for the Polish’¹? Taking a Closer Look at the Polish Rejection of Refugees

Jun 14, 2017 by [Annika Morath](#)

‘Big, bad Visegrad’ – this is how *The Economist* referred to Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic and Slovakia because of their common anti-migrant policy.² After jointly declaring their opposition against plans for a mandatory refugee quota on the Visegrad Summit in September 2015³, they became the scapegoat for the failure of the European refugee policy and were overloaded with accusations of endangering European values, even though other Member States were resisting the agreed refugee quota as well. Although Poland, as the only one of the Visegrad countries, in the end reluctantly agreed to the quota, its newly elected right-wing government soon backpedalled and became one of the biggest opponents of the plan.⁴ Indeed, opposition against refugees is considerably high in all four countries. But while the Visegrad countries were widely criticised from all sides for their lack of solidarity, little effort has been made to truly understand *why* people in those countries do not want to accept refugees. However, if we want to avoid stigmatisation and alienation of European citizens we have to make an effort and try to understand the reasons underlying this attitude. It is important, however, to keep in mind that the anti-refugee sentiments in the Visegrad countries are part of a bigger dynamic of a growing xenophobia in Europe.

In this article the focus will be on Poland, the largest and most populous Visegrad state, and it is Polish society rather than the Polish government’s ideas and policies, which will be at the centre of attention. In Poland, public opinion towards refugees and migrants underwent a major change during the last two years: In May 2015, Polish society was one of the most welcoming in Europe with as much as 72% generally in favour of refugees from conflict zones. However, support decreased to merely 33% in April 2016. Opinion polls show that when asked specifically about refugees from the Middle East and Africa, opposition is generally much higher: In May 2015, 53% of Poles objected to take in refugees from this area. In April 2016, this number increased to as much as 71%.⁵ Given the fact that Poland has traditionally been an emigration country and Polish diaspora is spread all over the world,⁶ one could assume that Poles would be more welcoming towards migrants and refugees. The question is, what are the reasons for this widespread rejection of refugees, particularly from the Middle East and Africa and how can the sudden change in public opinion during the last two years be explained?

Fear of identity loss

When assessing xenophobia in Poland, one has to keep in mind that the country underwent a major transition during the last decades. After suffering Soviet occupation for roughly 45 years – from 1944/45 until 1989 – the country evolved from a socialist satellite state to an independent liberal country very quickly. Hence, the transition was a harsh experience and left many confused and unprepared for some of its initially negative consequences like economic recession and a high level of unemployment.⁷ This dynamic particularly applies to the older generation in Poland which feels uprooted and disoriented in the new world order.

¹ The Telegraph, 12.11.2015: EU flag burned as tens of thousands join Warsaw nationalist demo. Online Access: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/poland/11989250/EU-flag-burned-as-tens-of-thousands-join-Warsaw-nationalist-demo.html>

² The Economist, 28.01.2016: “Illiberal central Europe – Big, bad Visegrad”

³ Euractiv, 07.09.2016: Visegrad Summit rejects migrant quotas. Online Access: <http://www.euractiv.com/section/justice-home-affairs/news/visegrad-summit-rejects-migrant-quotas/>

⁴ Reuters, 14.04.2016: Poland thinks EU refugee quota plan is ‘dead’, minister says. Online Access: <http://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-europe-migrants-poland-idUKKCN0XB0K3>

⁵ Public Opinion Research Centre (2016): Polish Public Opinion, Issue 4, 2016. Online Access: http://www.cbos.pl/PL/publikacje/public_opinion/2016/04_2016.pdf

⁶ Pacyga, Dominic A.: Polish Diaspora. In: Ember, Carol R.; Ember, Melvin; Skoggard, Ian (Eds.) (2005): Encyclopedia of Diasporas. Immigrant and Refugee Cultures Around the World. Springer, New York, pp.254ff.

⁷ Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung (2011): Polen. In: Informationen zur politischen Bildung, Heft 311.

The constantly changing environment and the inflation of foreign influences in the course of globalization have created a high amount of insecurity and the fear of identity loss. As a reaction, common in many modern countries is that, people cling to their traditions and values even more strongly in an attempt to reaffirm their identity and create a feeling of stability or rather security. This promotes the formation of closed communities vehemently rejecting foreign influences.

Nationalism

Another reason for a rather unwelcoming attitude towards foreigners is the special character of Polish national identity that has to be understood in the context of Poland's history. While up until the late 18th century a civic notion of nationalism prevailed which was solely based on Polish citizenship, this perception changed with the traumas of the three Polish partitions in the late 18th century, both World Wars and the recurrent periods of foreign domination.

Poland has – due to its geographical position between Germany and Russia as well as a lack of natural borders like mountains or waters – always been especially prone to external threats.⁸ Its territorial and political sovereignty has thus often been violated during its more than thousand year old history. In the 18th century, the Polish aristocratic Republic was divided three times: The first partition was in 1772 by the Great Powers of Prussia, Russia and Austria which left Poland with only two thirds of its original territory. Due to the second partition in 1793 by Prussia and Russia, the Republic further lost half of its remaining territory. The death blow finally came in 1795, when the Republic was completely divided among Prussia, Russia and Austria and ceased to exist.¹⁰ Only the decline of the three Great Powers after World War I ended their partly brutal foreign rule and enabled the emergence of the Second Polish Republic.¹⁰ According to Buchowski/Chlewińska (2010), '[t]he interruption of state existence, the rise of ethnic nationalism in (Central) Europe, and the nationalising policies of Prussia and Russia all caused the transformation of Polish nationalism from civic to ethnic.'¹¹ Thus, nationalism was no longer based on citizenship but rather on language, religion and origin. As Balcer states, this 'organic character' of nationalism implies that it is impossible for certain individuals with different ethnic or religious background to be assimilated.¹² Ethnic nationalism was further promoted when Poland once again became the victim of European power politics with the German and Soviet invasion in 1939 and their subsequent occupations. Especially Germany pursued an aggressive 'Germanisation' policy that sought to repress and extinguish Polish national identity in the public sphere, but the Soviet Union as well aimed at nationalising its zone of influence. In turn, chauvinist feelings in Polish society increased.¹¹ Additionally, the notion of a monolithic ethnic state as guarantor of peace was shared by wide parts of the population.¹¹ After World War II, the newly installed Polish communist regime thus pursued the ideal of an ethnically homogeneous nation on the political level which eventually resulted in a restrictive policy towards minorities. Germans were expelled from Polish territories ('de-germanisation') and replaced with Poles ('re-polonisation'). Additionally, around 100.000 Ukrainians and members of the minority group of Lemkos were cast out from the south-eastern regions after permanent military resistance from the Ukrainians between 1945 and 1947. Moreover, Roma and Jews suffered under a severe repression by the regime.¹¹ According to Balcer, ethnic nationalism is furthermore the basis for right wing national populism as promoted by the Polish Law and Justice government (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość; PiS).¹²

⁸ Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung (2011): Polen. In: Informationen zur politischen Bildung, Heft 311, p.3.

⁹ Urban, Thomas (2003): Polen. In: Becksche Reihe Länder. Verlag C.H. Beck, München, pp. 48.

¹⁰ Urban, Thomas (2003): Polen. In: Becksche Reihe Länder. Verlag C.H. Beck, München, pp. 56ff.

¹¹ Buchowski, Michał/ Chlewińska, Katarzyna (2010): Tolerance and Cultural Diversity Discourses in Poland. European University Institute, Florence, Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies (Publ.), Accept Pluralism Research Project, European Commission, DG Research, pp.6.

¹² Balcer, Adam (2017): Beneath the surface of illiberalism: The recurring temptation of 'national democracy' in Poland and Hungary - with lessons for Europe. Wise Europe. Online Access: <http://wise-europa.eu/en/2017/02/14/beneath-the-surface-of-illiberalism-2/>

Furthermore, national identity is strongly connected to Catholicism and the Catholic Church which has played a major role in Poland's history.¹³ Since its earliest beginnings in the 10th century, Poland has been committed to Christianity.⁹ Especially during the several partitions of Poland and under foreign rule, the Catholic Church was seen as the 'defender of Polishness and spiritual force of the nation.'¹⁴ Under national-socialist and communist rule, the church was a bastion of freedom and strong supporter of the resistance movement; it therefore gained a high degree of legitimacy among Polish society.¹⁵ ¹⁶Although the influence of the Catholic Church has been declining since Poland's transition after 1989, especially among youth, still around 87% of Poles identify as Catholic today.¹³

Lack of experience

Unlike many of the countries in Western Europe, Poland in contemporary history has not had much practical experience with foreigners, which in turn makes it more sensitive to foreign influences. Poland has the smallest percentage of foreigners in the whole EU: of the 38.005.600 inhabitants in 2015, around 108.300 were non-nationals – that is only 0.3% of the total population.¹⁷ As already mentioned, approximately 96% of the population declares adherence to the Roman Catholic Church which makes Poland one of the religiously most homogeneous countries in Europe. Nonetheless, this has not always been the case. From the 15th to the 18th century, the former Commonwealth of Poland and Lithuania pursued a policy of vast religious tolerance which made it stand out from the majority of other European countries.¹¹ Up until WWII Polish society was furthermore one of the culturally most diverse in Europe. Before World War II, around 30% of the population belonged to national and ethnic minorities, most notably Ukrainians, Jews, Belarusians and Germans. During the 20th century however, society became more and more homogenised, which was mainly due to the extinction of around 85% of Polish Jews under the Nazi-regime, several border adjustments and flight and expulsion of the remaining German population.¹⁵ The subsequent Polish communist regime which was guided by the Soviet Union aimed at homogenising Polish society and thus followed a strict isolationist policy which included restrained migration, forced resettlement of non-Poles and assimilation of minorities.¹⁵ Consequently, most Poles today do not have much contact with different cultures or religions in their daily lives. With the exception of bigger cities or universities where exchange students from all over the world are quite common, foreigners are hardly to be found in small towns and rural areas. And while the internet has opened up space for intercultural communication and young Poles are travelling the world, there is hardly a chance to directly communicate and interact with foreigners within Poland itself. This situation further adds to the strange attitude many Poles hold towards foreigners. The lack of direct contact with different cultures and religions prevents a thorough understanding of the other and thus a decrease of stereotypes. Rather, it leads to a deep insecurity of what to expect from the other which in turn makes Poles receptive to prejudices and stereotypes.

Economic fears

Some of the arguments can be summed up under the heading of 'economic fears'. The general perception is that the acceptance of refugees will have severe negative effects on the Polish economy. For one thing, many Poles suspect that refugees merely want to receive government aid and benefits and will thus pose a great economic burden for the country.

¹³ Pew Research Center (2017): Religious Belief and National Belonging in Central and Eastern Europe. Online Access: <http://assets.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/11/2017/05/15120244/CEUP-FULL-REPORT.pdf>

¹⁴ Borowik, Irena (2002): The Roman Catholic Church in the Process of Democratic Transformation: The Case of Poland. In: Social Compass, Vol. 49, Issue 2, p. 240.

¹⁵ Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung (2011): Polen. In: Informationen zur politischen Bildung, Heft 311.

¹⁶ Urban, Thomas (2003): Polen. In: Becksche Reihe Länder. Verlag C.H. Beck, München, pp. 3ff.

¹⁷ Eurostat (2016): Non-national population by group of citizenship, 1 January 2015. Online Access: [http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/File:Non-national_population_by_group_of_citizenship_1_January_2015_\(%C2%B9\)_YB16.png](http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/File:Non-national_population_by_group_of_citizenship_1_January_2015_(%C2%B9)_YB16.png)

Instead of paying for foreigners, Poles demand that the state should first take care of 'its own' needy inhabitants. Furthermore, it is often argued that Poland already receives many asylum applications from neighbouring countries, especially Ukraine. But while it is true that Ukrainians are the second largest group of asylum-seekers in Poland after citizens of the Russian Federation, only a small number of them are recognised as refugees¹⁸. Of 2305 asylum applications in 2015, none was granted refugee status, six were granted subsidiary protection and six were issued permission for tolerated stay¹⁹. This is because most Ukrainians from conflict zones are able to resettle within their own country and are therefore not eligible for protection in Poland. Hence, the majority of Ukrainians in Poland are students and economic migrants who make their own living rather than being dependent on governmental support. Nonetheless, the Polish government further contributes to this false perception by officially stating that the country has done its duty in taking in refugees and is not capable of accepting any more. This way, it strengthens the fears of many Poles that the acceptance of even more refugees from the Middle East and Africa will overstrain the economic capacities of the country. Yet, a paradox in the discourse becomes visible: In contrast to the argument that taking care of refugees costs a lot of money, another argument states that refugees will overflow the labour market and take the jobs away from Poles. Once again, this argument needs to be understood in the context of Ukrainian migrants in Poland. Until now, Ukrainians have been beneficial to the Polish economy, as they mostly work in low-paid jobs that Poles do not want to do. However, many people share the fear that once the conflict in Ukraine gets out of control, Poland's labour market will be flooded with Ukrainians which in turn will cause mass unemployment and eventually make the whole system collapse. In light of the huge influx of refugees from the Middle East and Africa that have entered Europe, this fear is increased as those refugees would add to the burden and bring about a collapse even quicker. Besides those perceived negative effects for the economy, people see no strong incentives for taking in refugees either: as already mentioned, the majority of Poles does not feel the need for foreign workers to boost the economy but in contrast still believes unemployment to be high, even though it has been constantly decreasing during the past years.²⁰ Neither is the demographic argument – young people are needed to balance the pension system and boost the economy – very present in the public discourse. In fact, the governing PiS party has introduced a child birth subsidy programme in April last year in order to increase birth rate and stabilise economy in the long term.²¹ Additionally, in contrast to other European countries like Germany for example, Poland is not as wealthy and thus many people think that it should be burdened less. To sum it up, while the perceived negative effects on the economy are very high, incentives to take in refugees are low.

Objections against refugees from the Middle East and Africa

Besides those factors that contribute to a general mistrust towards and fear of foreigners, more specific reasons can account for the especially high rejection of refugees from the Middle East and Africa.

- **Integration difficulties**

While Poles share many ethnic, cultural and historical similarities with people from Ukraine and other countries in Central and Eastern Europe, they do not have much in common with

¹⁸ Reuters 20.01.16: Ukrainian ambassador rejects Polish premier's 'million refugees' claim. Online Access: <http://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-europe-migrants-poland-ukraine-idUKKCN0UY2BN>

¹⁹ Office for Foreigners March (2016): Information of the Head of the Office for Foreigners, on the use in 2015 of the Act of 13 June 2003 on granting protection to foreigners within the territory of the Republic of Poland. Online Access: <http://udsc.gov.pl/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/Information-on-granting-protection-to-foreigners-within-the-territory-of-Poland-in-2015.pdf>

²⁰ Eurostat (2017): Total unemployment rate. Online Access: <http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/tgm/table.do?tab=table&init=1&language=en&pcode=tsdec450&plugin=1>

²¹ Reuters 19.07.2016: Poland's ruling party bets on child subsidy to prop up support. Online Access: <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-poland-politics-subsidy-idUSKCN0ZZ19L>

people from the Middle East or Africa. The culture and religion of people from these regions differ vastly from those of their Polish counterparts. The fear of the unknown is therefore very strong. Many people believe that the perceived 'otherness' of refugees from the Middle East and Africa poses a big challenge to their successful integration. Islam plays a major role in the rejection of refugees from Middle Eastern and African countries. It is often regarded as a huge obstacle to successful integration, since Catholicism is seen as one of the main pillars of Polish national identity. Islamophobia is common in Poland, despite the small size of the Muslim population and their low presence in the public sphere²²: only around 35.000 Muslims live in Poland.²² There is a multitude of stereotypes and prejudices: e.g. Muslims are often associated with bad character traits like aggressiveness, criminality and misogyny. Islam itself is perceived by many as an intolerant religion.²² Due to a lack of real contact with Muslims and exaggerations by the media and politicians, negative stereotypes have spread easily.

It is generally neglected in the public discourse that Muslims have been living in the country for centuries, most notably the Tatars who have settled in the country already in the 13th/14th century and whose descendants still constitute a large part of the Polish Muslim community.²³ Another major group consists of immigrants from Arab countries, who have come to Poland as students, mainly in the late 20th century. Last but not least, since the beginning of the second Chechen war in 2004, Poland has accepted and more or less successfully integrated Muslim refugees from the Russian Republic of Chechnya. They are one of the largest groups of refugees in Poland and accounted for over 80% of all refugees in 2011 with a number of between three and five thousand.²⁴ In opposition to Muslim refugees from the Middle East and Africa, however, Chechens have either completely assimilated to Polish culture and identify with the Polish nation or are rarely visible in the public space.²⁵ According to Buchowski/Chlewińska (2010), the attitude towards them can be described as an 'indifferent tolerance' and shows that Polish society does not per se perceive the integration of Muslims as a major problem.²⁵

It can therefore be concluded that in addition to the actual cultural and religious differences between people from the Middle East and Africa and Poles, it is most of all the negative stigmatisation of the former that leads to a reluctance to accept them and poses a huge challenge to the integration capability of Polish society. Much emphasis should furthermore be put on the rising security concerns of Polish society that derives from increasing Islamist terrorism which will be discussed below.

Finally, successful integration is further hindered by the common perception that Poland is only a transit country for most refugees who will soon move on to countries which are more attractive to them like Germany. This discourages Poles from making serious efforts to integrate them. This argument is especially relevant in the case of relocated refugees, who do not come to Poland by choice. Besides the above mentioned factors that weaken the integration willingness of Polish society, the lack of an effective infrastructure to manage migration hinders successful integration of refugees from the Middle East and Africa. The period of isolation prevented the emergence of an immigration tradition in Poland and consequently of expertise and infrastructure to manage migration. There are only few integration programmes whose small funding was further cut back under the PiS

²² Pędziwiatr, Konrad (2016): Islamophobia in Poland. National Report 2015. In: Bayraklı, Enes/ Hafez, Farid (eds.)(2016): European Islamophobia Report 2015, Istanbul, SETA, pp.426. Online Access: http://www.islamophobiaeurope.com/reports/2015/en/EIR_2015_POLAND.pdf

²³ Hunterová, Jana; Suchardová, Hana (eds) (2011): Muslims in Visegrad. Institute of International Relations, Prague, pp.90. Online Access: <https://ec.europa.eu/migrant-integration/librarydoc/muslims-in-visegrad>

²⁴ Hunterová, Jana; Suchardová, Hana (eds) (2011): Muslims in Visegrad. Institute of International Relations, Prague, p.12. Online Access: <https://ec.europa.eu/migrant-integration/librarydoc/muslims-in-visegrad>

²⁵ Buchowski, Michał/ Chlewińska, Katarzyna (2010): Tolerance and Cultural Diversity Discourses in Poland. European University Institute, Florence, Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies (Publ.), Accept Pluralism Research Project, European Commission, DG Research, pp.21.

government. Mutual exchange and communication is thus not promoted. The lack of language skills on both sides further hinders a decreasing of prejudices and stereotypes.

- **Muslims as a security threat**

'Today refugees, tomorrow terrorists'²⁶ – this is what thousands of Poles shouted at demonstrations prior to the EU quota plans. As mentioned earlier, Muslims are increasingly associated with the atrocities committed by a group of self-proclaimed 'holy warriors'. Anti-Muslim sentiments in Poland were especially fuelled by the terrorist attack on a German Christmas market in Berlin where the perpetrator hijacked a truck from a Polish company, ran over dozens of people and shot the Polish driver. Since 9/11 anti-Muslim sentiments in Poland have constantly increased and reached a critical dimension over the past years of IS terrorism. With each attack on Western targets, people feel more confirmed in their opposition against Muslims and rejection is further legitimised. By constructing Muslim immigrants as an essential security threat, the debate was moreover securitised by the government. This enabled the governing Law and Justice Party to introduce a restrictive counterterrorism law and allowed its politicians to portray themselves as capable leaders.²⁷

- **Contributing factors**

As one can see, there are various factors that promote a rather rejectionist attitude towards foreigners in general and refugees from the Middle East and Africa in specific. However, opposition would have never become so strong without some major contributing factors that set a spiral of rejection in motion: the rhetoric of right wing politicians, the media and the far right movement. Together, they have launched a massive anti-refugee campaign which radicalised the public discourse and prevented a proper, objective debate on the consequences of taking in refugees and how integration could be successfully managed.

The topic of refugees was instrumentalised already during the presidential and parliamentary election campaigns of 2015 by the now governing PiS party. The rejection of refugees was and is one of the major points on their political agenda. PiS succeeded in addressing the growing fears of the losers of globalisation and in presenting itself as a preserver of order and tradition. The refugee question and the protection of national sovereignty by opposing the EU are major sources for the legitimacy of the party. In order to stay in office, PiS has to live up to its promises now and follow a strict anti-immigration policy. While the government claims to merely address already existing fears in the population, it further fuels them with aggressive rhetoric against refugees and thereby strengthens its own base for legitimacy. An especially infamous statement comes from the Polish Interior minister Mariusz Błaszczak, who connected the Nice lorry attack in July 2016 instantly to the welcoming attitude towards refugees by stating that the attack was '[...] the result of multi-culti policies and political correctness.'²⁸ The role of the media, which were largely put under state control in January 2016 through several controversial laws²⁹, as a tool of the government cannot be overstated either. With one-sided coverage, misinformation and a generally negative representation of refugees, the media have strongly enforced anti-refugee- and anti-Muslim sentiments in society. Events like the mass harassment in Cologne on New Year's Eve for instance got extensive coverage and have strengthened stereotypes about Islam. Islamist terrorism and

²⁶ The Independent 13.09.15: „'Today refugees, tomorrow terrorists': Eastern Europeans chant anti-Islam slogans in demonstrations against refugees." Online Access: <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/refugees-crisis-pro-and-anti-refugee-protests-take-place-in-poland-in-pictures-10499352.html>

²⁷ Hunyadi, Bulcsú; Molnár, Csaba (2016): Central Europe's Faceless Strangers: The Rise of Xenophobia. In: Freedom House (Edt.). Online Access: <https://freedomhouse.org/report/special-reports/central-europe-s-faceless-strangers-rise-xenophobia-region#.WThIFG5CTIU>

²⁸ The European Post, 17.07.16. Online accessible: <http://europeanpost.co/polish-interior-minister-nice-attack-is-the-result-of-multi-culti-policies-and-political-correctness/>

²⁹ BBC News, 07.01.16: Polish media laws: Government takes control of state media. Online Access: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-35257105>

its connection to Muslim refugees and migrants in particular is one of the most popular themes in media coverage. Other arguments are artificially heated like the claim that refugees bring dangerous diseases into the country.

Further aggravating the discourse is the strong ultra-right movement in Poland which has steadily increased over the past years. Apart from strong right-wing parties like PiS, Kukiz'15 and Korwin, associations like the All-Polish Youth and the National Radical Camp are increasingly dominating public space and spreading nationalist ideas. In the course of the refugee crisis, one of their main concerns has become the opposition against refugees from the Middle East and Africa as well as from Ukraine. With their aggressive rhetoric they have massively contributed to the poisoning of the climate regarding refugees and migrants. The main instrument of particularly the All-Polish Youth is the Internet and social media, where it specifically addresses the young.³⁰ Nationalist propaganda and anti-refugee sentiments are spread almost unrestricted in the World Wide Web and the opinions expressed in cyberspace are often much more radical than in real life. Due to their high affiliation with the internet, young people are especially vulnerable and receptive towards such rhetoric. Additionally, the ultra-right is highly present in the public sphere and offers a variety of social and political activities to the young, as for instance discussions, holiday camps and street campaigns. With its activities, the All-Polish Youth aims to shape the identity of young people and promote traditional, Catholic and patriotic values. It furthermore rejects any foreign influence, especially from the West.³⁰ The strong activity of ultra-right movements can at least partially explain the high degree of far-right radicalism among Polish youth: Since 2014, the proportion of right wing supporters among Polish youth has rapidly increased and has become higher than in the overall population. In the first three quarters of 2015, as much as 33% of Poles aged 18-24 have described their political views as right-wing.³¹ Accordingly, opposition against taking in refugees from the Middle East and Africa is proportionally the highest among people below the age of 45.⁵ Consequently, it is vital to take the ultra-right movement seriously as it is highly popular among Polish youth, especially lower class youth.

Finally, the role of the church in politics must be taken into consideration. As explained earlier, the Catholic Church has a high degree of legitimacy among Poles and is strongly connected with national identity. During history, it did not restrict its role to the religious sphere, but has also been interfering in the political sphere, often playing the part of political opposition. Recently, it has allied with the governing Law and Justice party and helped to put it into power.³² The state-church relationship is mutually beneficial: support from the church enables the government to confirm its legitimacy and thus strengthen its political power position. The church, on the other hand, profits from the influence on politics and promotes its political agenda which includes for instance an anti-abortion law.³² Nonetheless, the refugee issue has divided the church: while the liberal wing accords with Rome and appeals to the country for taking in refugees, the more conservative wing is supporting the government in its anti-refugee stance and is especially reluctant to take in Muslim refugees.³³

Due to the aggressive rhetoric of politicians, the media and the far right, the discourse on refugees and migrants is constantly further radicalised which leads to even stronger rejection. This dynamic is further facilitated by the fact that no real, coherent opposition is voiced by opposition parties or the church. The outcome being that, although most Poles do not have personal contact with refugees, they have a very negative image of them.

³⁰ Cox, Terry/Myant, Martin (eds.) (2008): Reinventing Poland. Economic and political transformation and evolving national identity. Routledge, Abingdon, New York, pp.100.

³¹ Public Opinion Research Center (2015): Polish Public Opinion, Issue 10, 2015. Online Access: http://www.cbos.pl/PL/publikacje/public_opinion/2015/10_2015.pdf

³² Politico, 05.04.2016: Poland's PiS in bed with Catholic Church, backs abortion ban. Online Access: <http://www.politico.eu/article/polands-church-state-alliance-to-ban-abortion/>

³³ Politico, 21.05.17: Why Poland doesn't want refugees. Online Access: <http://www.politico.eu/article/politics-nationalism-and-religion-explain-why-poland-doesnt-want-refugees/>

Conclusion

As we have seen, the reasons for the Polish objection of refugees are manifold and complex. Although not all aspects could be covered in this article, to have a notion of Polish history and its recent political dynamics helps to understand the way Polish society reacts to the refugee question. The impact of Poland's transition to a new world order after the breakdown of the Soviet Union and the increasing globalisation have to be taken into account, even though these factors are not exclusive to Poland, but apply to many other countries. Polish society is however especially sensitive towards foreign influences because of its high homogeneity and the lack of experience with different cultures and religions after World War II. And we shouldn't forget that, due to its specific historical experiences, a strong ethnic nationalism has evolved in Poland which promotes a rather reluctant attitude towards foreigners and facilitated the rise of national-conservative and right-wing forces. When assessing the arguments that are used specifically against refugees from the Middle East and Africa, namely the big challenge which integration means due to their 'otherness', the overload they allegedly mean for the economy and their stigmatisation as a security threat, it becomes evident that media and politicians have contributed a great deal to this negative image. The governing PiS party has instrumentalised the issue for its own ends and thus has strengthened anti-refugee sentiments in Polish society. This way a self-enforcing dynamic between society, politics and the media has been set in motion leading to a constant radicalisation of the public discourse. It will not be easy to reverse this process, especially in the context of an increasingly radicalised international atmosphere where xenophobia and racism become more and more socially acceptable and far right movements are on the rise. However, there are also some positive developments.

One positive impact of the election of the right-wing government was the reactivation of civil society as a counter force against the reactive government policy. Polish society has been largely polarised after PiS took over. Faced with the restrictive anti-refugee stance of the government, masses of people protested and stood up for human rights. They showed their solidarity by travelling to Italy and Greece and giving emergency aid there. Meanwhile, human rights organisations in Poland have received much support. There is a broad array of local, national and international organisations in favour of refugees that are active in various fields: some of the established organisations like Amnesty International Poland, 'Nomada' in Wrocław or the organisation 'Never Again' aim to increase awareness for the rights of refugees, fight discrimination and promote their successful integration into Polish society. Younger organisations have been established as well: the Polish section of 'Refugees Welcome' for instance brings Poles into direct contact with refugees through shared flats. The Nahda Foundation on the other hand aims to educate Poles about different cultures and religions and promoting cultural exchange, thereby seeking to increase understanding on both sides and prevent stereotyping. Moreover, many universities got engaged and took a stand in favour of refugees. One example is the Rule of Law Institute Foundation which is closely connected to the Catholic University of Lublin.

As one can see, considerable progress has been made by Polish civil society in promoting the rights of refugees and contributing to their successful integration. Moreover, civil society organisations take influence on the public discourse and thereby promote its de-radicalisation. Most initiatives are however restrained in their impact as they severely lack funding. The EU should therefore give all possible support to civil society initiatives and organisations and increase its financial and institutional assistance. By encouraging liberal and democratic forces in Poland (and other hesitant countries in the area), the EU would make a considerable step forward towards meeting the challenge of the refugee crisis and towards living up to its values. Western Europeans should furthermore avoid stigmatising Polish society as a whole, as it is vital to understand the underlying reasons for the Polish opposition against refugees. As has become evident, one has to differentiate between the government level and society. A premature condemnation of Polish society would only fit in

the EU-sceptical narrative of the government and lead to a further alienation of Polish citizens from the EU.

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