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THE RISE OF RIGHT-WING POPULISM AND SPREAD OF ISLAMOPHOBIA IN WESTERN COUNTRIES

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Abstract. Right-wing populism is one of the leading factors in the spread of Islamophobia in Western countries in modern times. Right-wing populism, as an ideology promoted by right-wing parties and movements, promotes forms of intolerance and discrimination such as racism, xenophobia, anti-Semitism, and Islamophobia. One of the main features of right-wing populism, which is widespread in Western countries, is Islamophobia.

The impact of right-wing populism on the spread of Islamophobia in Western society is reflected in the activities of right-wing political parties and movements. The article shows that Islamophobia is one of the main directions of the activities of right-wing political parties. The Islamophobic policies of right-wing political parties and movements not only strengthen their positions in society, but also lead to an increase in intolerance, discrimination and violence against Muslims.

Key words: right-wing populism, Western countries, Islamophobia, right-wing parties and movements, Muslim immigrants, migrant crisis, Great Recession.

Introduction. There is no consensus among researchers on the definition of right-wing populism, or populism in general. This point stems from the rather vague and broad content of the concept of populism. In his article "The Rise of Populist Extremism in Europe: What is Populism?", Turkish researcher Ayhan Kaya shows that scholars studying right-wing populism explain the essence of this phenomenon through the following characteristics inherent to it: anti-elitism, anti-intellectualism, and anti-establishment positions; affinity with religion and past history; racism, xenophobia, anti-Semitism, anti-Islam, anti-immigration; promoting the image of a socially, economically and culturally homogenous organic society; intensive use of conspiracy theories to understand the world we live in; faith in the leader's extraordinariness as well as the belief in his/her ordinariness that brings the leader closer to the people; statism; and the sacralisation of the people (Kaya, 2017: 4).

Right-wing populism is promoted as a political ideology by right-wing parties and movements operating in Western countries. Right-wing political parties and movements that promote Islamophobia, xenophobia, and ethnic nationalism have been gaining ground in Western countries in recent times. This, in turn, is reflected in their active role in the socio-political life of Western countries. Among such right-wing political parties and movements we can list the following ones: the National Front political party in France (led by Marine Le Pen since 2011); the Freedom political party in the Netherlands (founded in 2006, led by Geert Wilders); the Alternative for Germany political party (founded in 2013) and the National Democratic Party (founded in 1964) in Germany; in Italy, the political party Lega Nord (founded in 1989. Its leader is Matteo Salvini), the political party "5 Star Movement" (founded in 2009) and the political party "Brothers of Italy (Italian: Fratelli d'Italia, FdI)" (founded in 2012. The party's leader Giorgia Meloni has been the Prime Minister of Italy since 2022); in Hungary, the political party Jobbik ("For a Better Hungary") (founded in 2003); in Slovakia, the political party "Smer" (Social Democratic) (founded in 1999 by the current Prime Minister of Slovakia, Robert Fico), in Sweden, the political party "Sweden Democrats" (founded in 1988); in Finland, the political party "True Finns" (founded in 1995); in Denmark, the "Danish People's Party" (founded in 1995).

These parties and movements advocate right-wing populism and have combined many of its characteristics. Thus, the mentioned parties promote nationalism, Euroscepticism, and oppose the settlement of immigrants, especially Muslims, in Europe. For example, the government led by Robert Fico, in addition to boycotting the European Union's policy of resettling refugees and immigrants in Europe, adopted a law in the Slovak Republic in December 2016 banning Islam (10-th OIC Observatory Report on Islamophobia, 2017: 45–46.)

The aim of the article is to examine the role of right-wing populism in the spread of Islamophobia in contemporary Western countries.

Islamophobia as one of the main features of right-wing populism

Populist political parties and movements operating in Western countries also actively promote Islamophobia. For example, the political program of the Alternative for Germany (AfG) political party, called the “Manifesto for Germany,” adopted in May 2016, clearly reflects the anti-Islamic and Islamophobic nature of this party in its various articles. Thus, the program in question states that Islam does not belong to Germany, that Islam is alien to Germany, that minaret and muezzin calls contradict a tolerant coexistence of religions, which the Christian churches of modernity do practice, and that Muslims in Western society are advised to accept criticism of Islam and its saints (Manifesto for Germany, 2017: 48–49). In addition, the program demands that Islamic organizations not be granted the status of public body (Manifesto for Germany, 2017: 49) and that schools where the Quran is taught be closed (Manifesto for Germany, 2017: 54).

The program, along with promoting Islamophobia, rejects the ideology of multiculturalism as a dangerous ideology. Based on ideas of ethnic nationalism, the program criticizes the ideology of multiculturalism for not giving due value to the culture of the German people, not protecting it, and equating it with foreign cultures. According to the program, the main task facing the government and civil society is to confidently preserve German cultural identity as a leading culture (Manifesto for Germany, 2017: 46). The program pays special attention to the preservation and development of the German language. It is noted that the large number of Muslim immigrants coming to Germany from Muslim countries due to the migrant crisis is a great threat to the development of the country. In the section of the program entitled “Islam and its tense relationship with our value system”, it is stated that although the party respects religious freedom, it is categorically opposed to Islamic practice. Such a biased attitude towards Islam is justified by the fact that Islam is supposedly directed against the liberal-democratic constitutional structure and laws of Germany as well as against Judeo-Christian and humanistic foundations of German culture (Manifesto for Germany, 2017: 47). It is claimed that Islam does not belong to Germany, and the increase in Muslims in the country is portrayed as a threat to the state, society, and the values of the German people. While it is noted that Muslims living in the country have equal rights, the parallel Muslim society created by them is criticized (Manifesto for Germany, 2017: 48). The program shows a loyal attitude towards the issue of the publication of caricatures of the Prophet Muhammad in several Western countries, which have offended the religious feelings of Muslims. The issue mentioned in the program is presented not as a manifestation of Islamophobia, but as a matter of freedom of thought and freedom of art (Manifesto for Germany, 2017: 48).

Muslim religious organizations operating in Germany want to obtain the status of public body, official state status under public law. In the AfG party program, this request of Muslim organizations is not accepted because they allegedly do not comply with the requirements of the existing state-religion relations in Germany (freedom of religious belief, separation of religion from the state) (Manifesto for Germany, 2017: 49).

The AfG party's program also includes Islamophobic proposals in the field of education. Such proposals include the abolition of Islamic studies and theology departments in German universities, the teaching of Islam-related subjects in secondary schools only in German, the fact that teachers teach-

ing these subjects must be graduates of German universities and not be under the influence of any Muslim organization, etc. (Manifesto for Germany, 2017: 51–54).

The Islamophobic stance of the AfD party is also reflected in the speeches of its leaders. Alexander Gauland, one of the founders of the party, describes the immigration of Muslims to Germany as an invasion by foreigners. He considers the immigration of Muslims to be a serious threat to German culture and identity. In this regard, he said in one of his speeches: “We say we don’t want to lose Germany to an invasion of foreigners from a different culture. Very simple” (John, 2017). Gauland’s Islamophobic stance is also reflected in his attitude towards Islam. He states that Islam is not a suitable religion for Germany. He attributes this to the fact that Islam, unlike Catholicism or Protestantism, is aimed at overthrowing the state. the status of public body (Soeren, 2016).

The role of right-wing populist political parties and movements in the socio-political life of Western countries

In modern times, the role of right-wing populist political parties and movements in the socio-political life of Western countries is increasing. These parties and movements, pursuing pragmatic policies, base their activities on issues that reflect the interests of ordinary people and are relevant to society. They skillfully use the people's dissatisfaction with the policies of the ruling circles, primarily immigration policy, for their own political goals. For example, currently in Western countries, right-wing political parties and movements receive support from the people in their struggle for power by showing that the local people's dissatisfaction with immigration is justified. The well-known researcher of populism, Dutch political scientist Kas Mudde, in his article “The Populist Zeitgeist”, notes the following features of political parties promoting populism. He believes that right-wing political parties are based on logic and common sense in their activities. They attach great importance to direct democracy, such as referendums, in the governance of the state. They criticize the corrupt political elite, which is not interested in the problems of the people, pursues its own interests. These parties try to attract groups of the population that are critical of politics or are far from politics to their side. They often try to polarize and individualize politics by using friend or foe arguments and significantly simplifying political issues (Mudde, 2004: 541–563).

There are two main reasons for the increasing role of political parties and movements promoting right-wing populism in the socio-political life of Western countries:

1. *The migrant (refugee) crisis;*
2. *The Great Recession.*

In modern times, immigration and the migrant crisis it has created have a great impact on the spread of Islamophobia in Western countries. The spread of Islamophobia in society, in turn, creates favorable conditions for the activities of right-wing populist parties and movements. The refugee crisis that has engulfed Europe as a result of the influx of refugees from North Africa and the Middle East into Europe is in the focus of attention of right-wing populist parties. The fact that this crisis has created serious problems for the socio-economic situation and security of the local population in European countries has led a large part of the population to turn to right-wing populist parties and support them during elections. As a result, the influence of right-wing populist parties in Europe is increasing. In other words, the anti-immigration policy of right-wing populist parties creates a favorable opportunity for them to attract voters to their ranks.

The anti-Muslim and Islamophobic ideas underlying the anti-immigration policies of right-wing populist parties and movements, on the one hand, increase voters' support for these parties, and on the other hand, lead to an increase in Islamophobic tendencies in society. After becoming members of these parties, voters' anti-Muslim and Islamophobic positions are further strengthened.

Another reason for the rise of right-wing populism in Western countries was related to the Great Recession that occurred in 2007–2009. Although the Great Recession lasted from December 2007 to June 2009, its negative effects were evident in the socio-economic development of some Western

countries even until 2016. These countries achieved their pre-Great Recession levels in a number of economic indicators only in 2016.

For example, as a result of the Great Recession, the volume of gross domestic product (GDP) in the United States decreased by \$650 billion (approximately 4.3%) (U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis, 2019), the number of people with jobs (excluding agriculture) decreased by 8.6 million people (6.2%) (U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis, 2018). In October 2009, the unemployment rate in the country reached 10% (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2019). The US managed to restore the pre-Great Recession levels for the aforementioned indicators – GDP in the third quarter of 2011, employment in May 2014, and unemployment in June 2016 (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2019).

The Great Recession, which was an economic and financial crisis by its nature, also had negative consequences in the political sphere. It posed a threat to political stability in the countries where it spread. Thus, the Great Recession, which was accompanied by a serious economic and financial recession in the countries and a sharp deterioration in the material well-being of the population, led to mass protests against the government. This, in turn, further accelerated the spread of right-wing populism.

Thus, in modern Western countries, the migrant crisis and economic recession lead to an increase in the role of right-wing populist parties and movements in the socio-political life of these countries. This, in turn, is observed in the increase in cases of intolerance and violence against Muslims. An example of this is the PEGIDA movement (“Patriotische Europäer gegen die Islamisierung des Abendlandes” – “Patriotic Europeans against the Islamization of the West”) operating in Germany. This movement is notable for its activity not only in Germany, but also throughout Europe. The PEGIDA movement, which emerged in 2014, is a far-right and anti-Islam movement. PEGIDA, which considers Islam and Muslim immigrants to be a major threat to Germany, is fighting against the country's current immigration policy. It portrays Muslim immigrants as criminals, homophobes, and terrorists and opposes their settlement in Germany. In addition, PEGIDA supporters claim that Muslim immigrants pose a threat to the German economy and welfare state, and that the social assistance provided to them by the government hinders the country's socio-economic development.

Right-wing populist political forces use stereotypes and conspiracy theories related to Islam and Muslims in their activities, trying to instill them in the public consciousness of the local population. The most widespread of these stereotypes are the following:

1. Muslims are prone to terrorism

After the well-known terrorist incidents in the United States on September 11, 2001, right-wing forces in Western countries have frequently used the term "Islamic terrorism" in the political lexicon, portraying Muslims as terrorists;

2. Muslims are anti-Semitic

Muslims have historically been said to have harbored hatred for Jews. As a continuation of this, Muslim anti-Semitism is now presented as a major component of modern anti-Semitism;

3. Muslims advocate gender inequality

The supposedly patriarchal religion of Islam does not accept equality between men and women. Therefore, women's rights are violated by men, women are subjected to domestic violence, and they are forced into marriage. All this does not correspond to German norms on gender issues;

4. Muslims demonstrate intolerance towards sexual minorities

To further tarnish the image of Islam and its followers in public opinion, Islamophobes portray Islam as a religion that does not treat sexual minorities as equal citizens of society, persecutes them, and subjects them to violence;

5. Muslims are not inclined to integrate into Western society, including German society

Muslims are not integrated into Western society, including German society because their ethno-cultural values do not correspond to those of the West. Sometimes they deliberately resist their integration.

In their propaganda, right-wing forces justify their activities among the population by citing the aforementioned stereotypes about Islam and Muslims, thereby attempting to win the population over to their side. Unfortunately, they have largely succeeded in achieving their goals. Clear evidence of this is the rapid spread of Islamophobia among the local population. "Islamophobia in Germany. National Report 2022" prepared by Zubair Ahmad presents the results of several studies proving the prevalence of Islamophobia among the local population in Germany (Ahmad, 2023: 271). According to these results, in 2020, almost half of the country's population (46.8%) agreed with the statement "due to the many Muslims here, I sometimes feel like a stranger in my own country." 24.7 percent of respondents believe that Muslim immigration to Germany should be banned. Only a third of respondents consider Islam to be beneficial to society. Half of respondents (52%) view Islam as a threat. As a result, many people today perceive Islam not as a religion, but as an anti-democratic and extremist ideology. The reasons for this are primarily related to the media, which portray Islam and Muslims almost exclusively in a negative context (Ahmad, 2023: 271).

Among the above-mentioned signs of right-wing populism, such as anti-elitism, anti-intellectualism, racism, ethnic nationalism, xenophobia, anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, anti-immigration, and promotion of a socially, economically, and culturally homogeneous organic society, Islamophobia is considered one of its main signs in Western countries for the modern era. Currently, the positions of right-wing populism are strengthening in the socio-political life of Western countries. That is why right-wing populism plays an important role in the spread of Islamophobia in Western countries in the modern era. Islamophobia is one of the main directions of the activities of right-wing populist parties and movements in Western countries. Right-wing parties and movements note that the increase in the number of Muslims in Western countries leads to a decrease in the standard of living of the people and poses a threat to their ethnic and cultural values. In short, they note that the increase in the number of Muslims in Western countries is contrary to the national interests of the country. Since the increase in the number of Muslims in Western countries is mainly due to immigration, anti-immigration policy is also one of the main directions of the activities of right-wing populist parties and movements. In Western countries, right-wing populist parties and movements are influencing the growth of anti-Muslim and Islamophobic sentiment among the country's population by linking the socio-economic crisis with immigration and the increase in the number of Muslims in the country.

Conclusion. Thus, right-wing populism acts as one of the main reasons for the emergence and spread of Islamophobia in Western countries in modern times. Its function in relation to Islamophobia is realized through right-wing political parties and movements operating in these countries and promoting the ideology of right-wing populism. The migrant crisis faced by Western countries in modern times worsens the socio-economic situation in society and lowers the standard of living of the population. This, in turn, creates conditions for right-wing political parties and movements to be supported by the broad masses of the people. As a result, the social bases of right-wing forces are strengthened. Right-wing forces do not limit their anti-Islam activities to propaganda. They also resort to violence and terrorism in their fight against Muslims. This further increases the scale and impact of their Islamophobic activities. A large number of innocent people are killed in terrorist incidents committed against Muslims by right-wing forces. One of the most horrific acts of terror committed against Muslims by right-wing forces in Western countries in recent times is the incident committed by an Islamophobe named Brenton Tarrant on March 15, 2019, at two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand, which resulted in the deaths of 51 innocent Muslims and the injury of 49 others (Sengupta, 2019).

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