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Mosques, Minarets, Burqas and Other Essential Threats: The Populist Right's Campaign against Islam in Western Europe

Hans-Georg Betz

Barcelona 2011: Three girls in miniskirts are jumping over a rope somewhere in a car park in the city. Barcelona 2025: The same three girls, same location, only the miniskirts have been replaced by burqas. This was the content of a video spot produced by Plataforma per Catalunya (PxC) for the Catalan local elections in 2011.¹

Responsible for the video was Josep Anglada, the leader of PxC. Founded in 2002 by Anglada, PxC is modelled on successful Western European right-wing populist parties, without however initially attracting much more than marginal support at the polls. This might have had something to do with the fact that, in the past, Anglada had been closely associated with Spain's post-Francoist far right (such as Blas Piñar's Fuerza Nueva and its successors) which, given the Franco regime's history of iron-fisted repression of Catalan identity, was hardly an asset in Catalonia. It took the party several years to gain some 'brand recognition', not only as a self-proclaimed advocate of ordinary people (*los catalanes primero*), but, more importantly, as a determined fighter against the alleged 'Islamization' of Catalonia. With this programme the party managed to quintuple its popular vote in the municipal elections of 2011. At the same time, the party succeeded in influencing decisions at the local level. Thus in August 2011, the administration of the town of Salt decided to delay a decision on licensing the construction of a mosque after the eruption of a PxC-inspired public protest against the project (among other things, young people from Salt buried a piglet on the proposed site for the mosque).² Anglada, when asked to comment on the events, claimed that Muslims and 'us' were like dogs and cats, cats and rats; in short, he explained, it was 'just a question of the compatibility of species.'³

¹ The spot can be seen on YouTube. <www.youtube.com/watch?v=BKr9yxDDqr0> [accessed 12 September 2011].

² See Salt prohíbe construir mezquitas tras las presiones de la xenófoba PxC, *El País*, 24 August 2011. <http://politica.elpais.com/politica/2011/08/24/actualidad/1314216568_327854.html> [accessed 12 September 2011].

³ Josep Anglada (PxC) Compara A Los Musulmanes Con Los Cerdos, *la República*, 7 September 2011. <www.larepublica.es/2011/09/josep-anglada-pxc-compara-a-los-musulmanes-con-los-cerdos/> [accessed 12 September 2011]

PxC exemplifies what Jens Rydgren (2005: 415) has characterized as a 'contagion' effect on what he calls the extreme populist right. This means that marginal parties – but, as we will see below, also hitherto successful parties – adopt ideas and argumentative frames that have been proven to be political winners elsewhere in order to improve their competitive position in the electoral market. This chapter focuses on an issue which, in recent years, has become central to radical right-wing populist mobilization efforts – the integration of Muslim immigrants into Western Europe's liberal capitalist democracies.

There are several reasons why this has happened. For one, the question of whether or not Muslims – and, by extension, Islam – can and should be accorded a permanent place in Western society is a highly contentious issue, which has provoked a heated public debate in Europe. By positioning itself as the most strident and intransigent opponent of any initiative, proposal or project, in response to the legitimate demands of Western Europe's Muslim community, the populist right has gained significant exposure and publicity, particularly through the media.

At the same time, on the position of Islam in Western societies, the populist right has a significant segment of public opinion and media coverage on its side. The fact that public opinion – reflected in numerous opinion polls – has significant reservations when it comes to extending the rights of the Muslim migrant community has given the populist right an opportunity to mobilize opposition to controversial projects, such as the construction of mosques and minarets. This has helped radical right-wing populist parties to gain both attention and, to some degree at least, new political clout. Finally, the populist right has been able to frame the 'question of Islam' in terms of the larger challenges confronting Western European societies, such as the meaning and foundations of European identity and particularly how to respond to the economic, social and cultural challenges posed by globalization as issues central to radical right-wing populist ideology (Betz & Johnson 2004). The following analysis discusses three issues, which have come to assume a prominent place in the populist right's mobilization against Islam: opposition to the construction of minarets; opposition to permits for building mosques and places for prayer; and unconditional support for the state of Israel. Each of these issues serves as an example of the diffusion of arguments and rhetoric among Western Europe's populist right, which in turn has laid the foundation for the establishment and development of transnational populist networks as well as a common transnational project grounded in hostility to Islam.

The Swiss ban on minarets

In late November 2009, a thin majority of Switzerland's voters (at least those who bothered to vote) supported a proposal to ban the construction of minarets (*Minarettverbot*) throughout the country. The outcome marked a significant political victory for the Swiss populist right, even if its main representative, the Schweizer Volkspartei (SVP), had been far from unanimous in supporting the initiative (most prominently, the party's leader, Christoph Blocher, was opposed to it). The question of minarets was an ideal political issue that fitted perfectly into the Swiss populist right's

identitarian strategy, which was designed to reaffirm and strengthen Swiss traditional identity while suppressing all others.

Oskar Freysinger, a rather flamboyant and outspoken SVP Member of Parliament set the tone of the campaign when he characterized minarets as a 'symbol of a political and aggressive Islam', a 'symbol of Islamic law. The minute you have minarets in Europe it means Islam will have taken over' (Foulkes 2007). A few years earlier, in 2007, Freysinger had been behind a controversial election poster which depicted Muslims praying in front of the Swiss parliamentary building (Bundeshaus) in Berne – obviously meant to evoke associations with siege, occupation and eventual takeover.⁴ The anti-minaret campaign picked up this thread. Freysinger once again set the tone, justifying the campaign with the argument that the Islamic doctrine was fundamentally incompatible with Switzerland's order, based on secular law.⁵ At the same time, he and other promoters of the campaign argued that minarets had nothing to do with religion, but represented 'beacons of Jihad' and landmarks of an 'intolerant culture, which put its God-given, Islamic law over the law of the country' – structures that had an 'imperialist connotation' (Freysinger 2007, Reimann 2009). A ban on the construction of minarets would constitute a first decisive step towards stopping what the promoters of the campaign considered the creeping Islamization of Switzerland: It would automatically prevent public calls to prayer and, ultimately, block the introduction of sharia law to the country. At the same time, it would represent a decisive step towards the protection and preservation of Switzerland's Christian and Western liberal values and traditions.⁶

Following the lead of right-wing populist parties in the Netherlands and Scandinavia (Akkerman & Hagelund 2007), the promoters adopted the defence of women's rights as a central issue. Claiming that they acted out of concern for gender equality, the promoters charged Muslim society with sanctioning the subordination of and discrimination against women which, they asserted, was not a result of traditional social norms and values, but an essential characteristic of Islam. All of this suggests that, for the promoters of the initiative, the main issue behind the proposed ban on minarets was not the minarets per se, but the place of Muslim immigrants and Islam itself in Swiss society.

Authoritative exit polls suggest that the populist right was highly successful in decisively shaping the discourse on the question of Islam in Switzerland. Even if a majority of almost 60 per cent of those participating in the vote agreed that the initiators were promoting pure propaganda against foreigners, an almost identical majority

⁴ In 2004, members of the SVP had already placed an advert in several Swiss newspapers that read 'Muslims Soon in the Majority'. Next to it was a graph that suggested that by the year 2040, Muslims would constitute more than 70 per cent of the population. The figures prompted the ethics board of the Swiss office of statistics to issue a statement denouncing the numbers as purely fictitious.

⁵ Interview with Oscar Freysinger, 16 December 2009. <www.swissinfo.ch/eng/Specials/Minaret_Debate/Result_and_reactions/Minaret_vote_was_a_lesson_in_civic_spirit.html?cid=7916178> [accessed 16 September 2011]; also <www.reitschule.ch/reitschule/mediengruppe/Medienspiegel/09-04-28-MS.html> [accessed 16 September 2011].

⁶ See, for example, <www.lematin.ch/actu/suisse/affiches-udc-en-valais-plainte-d%C3%A9pos%C3%A9e-46194>; <www.svp-wasserschlossregion.ch/cms/front_content.php?idart=100> for examples of campaign posters>.

agreed that minarets represented exclusively a 'religious-political demand for power and domination'. Fifty-seven per cent agreed with the statement that it was time 'to set a signal against the growing expansion of Islam in Switzerland and Western Europe'. Finally, 87 per cent supported the notion that 'in Islam, women are being oppressed' (Hirter & Vatter 2010: 33). These findings confirmed the initial observations and interpretations made immediately after the results were made public, which suggested, as the German news magazine *Der Spiegel* pointed out, that the main objective of the vote had been to serve as a 'symbolic referendum on the influence of Islam' (von Rohr 2009).

The Swiss populist right's anti-minaret campaign proved highly contagious. Within a short period of time, a number of Western European far-right parties, such as the British National Party and the German National Democratic Party and pro-NRW (a small anti-Islam movement originating in the city of Cologne), either adopted its text in one form or another or at least posted a more or less plagiarized copy of the Swiss anti-minaret poster on their websites.⁷ The Swiss designers of the poster were not amused. At one point they went so far as to threaten to sue the Front National (FN) after the French party's youth organization had used a copy of the poster in the south-western part of the country during the FN's campaign for the regional elections of early 2010.⁸ This threat, however, did not prevent the FN's rising new star, Marine Le Pen, from expressing her admiration for the Swiss system and, at least implicitly, for the SVP (Chapman 2011).

In defence of Western civilization against Islamization

In fact, the success of the Swiss populist right has served as an inspiration for a larger transnational project designed to unite the European populist right under one common banner – the defence of Europe's Christian heritage and its Western liberal and democratic values against, as one of the project's sponsors recently put it, 'the third Islam invasion of Europe' (Dewinter 2010a). Once again, the initiators of this project focused on a concrete issue – the construction of mosques in Western European towns and cities.

In early 2009, leading right-wing populist politicians gathered in Cologne to devise strategies to impede, and eventually reverse, the advance of Islam in Europe. This was in line with the transnational radical right-wing populist project 'Cities against Islamization', a 'European initiative' launched in early 2008 by Filip Dewinter (the leader of *Vlaams Belang*), Heinz-Christian Strache (head of the *Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs* (FPÖ)) and other right-wing populist representatives. One of the main objectives of the initiative was to develop a coherent theoretical doctrine that would

⁷ See <http://tempsreel.nouvelobs.com/actualite/politique/20110301.OBS8873/affiche-non-a-l-islamisme-le-pen-a-nouveau-en-proces-a-nanterre.html>

⁸ Rechtsextremist Le Pen kopiert SVP-Plakat, *Der Tagesanzeiger*, 25 February 2010. <www.tagesanzeiger.ch/schweiz/standard/Rechtsextremist-Le-Pen-kopiert-SVPPlakat/story/15840499> [accessed 18 September 2011].

serve as an ideological foundation and justification for the radical-populist right's campaign against mosques, minarets and other symbols and aspects of Islam's alleged encroachment on Western Europe's liberal democratic societies. For this purpose the initiative's 'charter' advanced the charge that Western society and Islam constituted two fundamentally different, diametrically opposed and mutually exclusive cultural spheres. There was always the risk that Muslim immigrant communities, as long as their members preferred Islam's divine laws to Western civil laws, would become radicalized, as reflected in the growing hostility towards Western civilization and its liberal values. According to the charter, mosques play a particularly pernicious role in this process, given their emphasis on the 'strict observance of Islam'. In fact, as far as the organizers of the initiative were concerned, mosques served as 'catalysts' for the Islamization 'of entire neighbourhoods', thus effectively preventing the integration of Muslim immigrant minorities.⁹

By the end of 2010, the radical-populist right's anti-Islam campaign had developed a core set of arguments, advanced and repeated on numerous occasions. The most important charge against Islam was that it was not actually a religion but, as Filip Dewinter put it in a speech against the planned construction of a grand mosque in the small town of Lier, Flanders, a 'political religion, an ideology, which seeks to subject our free Western society to Islam'. The building of mosques represented above all an attempt to increase Islam's influence on the community, a first step towards the conquest of an area and, therefore, a 'symbol of its Islamization'. Thus Western Europe was confronted with the fact that in its midst there was a steadily growing community which 'subscribed to a fundamentally different social ideology', which instead of integrating into the larger society turned its back 'on our society and culture'. The result was what Dewinter called a process of 'reversed colonization'. The '50 million Muslims already living in Europe' were supposed 'to make Europe Muslim within the next few decades'. This was part of a 'master plan' designed first to subject 'our cities' to Islam, and then all of Europe. From this it logically followed that mobilization against the construction of new mosques – via transnational initiatives such as Cities against Islamization – was an act of resistance, a first step towards both stopping and reversing Islamization and defending Europe's fundamental values, such as 'democracy, freedom of opinion, equality between man and woman' (Dewinter 2010b).

'Cities against Islamization' served as an important platform, not only helping to diffuse core right-wing populist arguments against Islam but also serving to establish contacts with various leading anti-Islamic politicians, such as Oskar Freysinger and Geert Wilders, and members of the Lega Nord, the Sverigedemokraterna, the FN and PxC. Some of these politicians, in turn, established contacts with smaller parties and movements and thus helped to extend the network. Oskar Freysinger, for instance, agreed to take part in an anti-Islam conference organized by the French far-right groups Riposte laïque and Bloc identitaire in late 2010. The two groups had gained notoriety with highly mediatized events designed to provoke France's Muslim community (such

⁹ Cities against Islamization, Charter. <www.citiesagainstislamisation.com/En/2/> [accessed 30 September 2011]. See www.filipdewinter.be/9-december-spoedmanifestatie-geen-supermoskee-in-lier for the respective poster.

as organizing an '*apéro saucisson et pinard*', a street festival with sausages and red wine, in the Paris neighbourhood of Goutte d'or, an area heavily frequented by Muslim immigrants from North Africa and elsewhere). Freysinger defended his participation at this conference, charging that groups such as Bloc identitaire were merely defending France against the advance of 'the halal society' (a reference to the decision by the Franco-Belgian fast food chain Quick to introduce halal hamburgers in some of its French affiliates), which threatened to undermine the country's secular principles (Blumer 2010).

The growing influence of radical right-wing populist Islamophobic ideology can even be seen in the case of established parties, such as the FN, which hitherto had themselves served as a model. Until recently, the FN had been rather ambiguous on the question of Islam. This was in part due to the fact that a significant number of Algerian Muslims (the so-called *harki*) had fought on the side of the French during the war of independence, in part also because Jean-Marie Le Pen did not want the question of Islam to distract from what he considered the main issue – immigration (Lecœur 2007: 185–6). The election of his daughter, Marine Le Pen, in January 2011 marked a decisive turning point with regard to the question of Islam. Under Marine Le Pen, the FN adopted the Islamophobic rhetoric of the Western European populist right, undoubtedly because Marine Le Pen recognized its potential as a winning issue. Not only did she equate radical Islam with totalitarianism, she also went so far as to characterize the presence of Muslims praying on the streets of Paris and other cities as a sort of territorial conquest comparable to Nazi occupation during the Second World War. At the same time, Marine Le Pen promoted herself as the only true defender of secularism (*laïcité*) and the republic, calling for the 'reconquest' of its values (Chabrouit 2010). One prominent example of this strategy was her campaign against what she claimed was the advance of halal meat into canteens, school cafeterias and elsewhere, characterized as the intrusion of the religious into secular society (Le Bars 2012).¹⁰ The campaign culminated in her charge made during a speech given in February 2012 in Lille that, unknown to French consumers, virtually all meat sold in the Paris region was halal. The remark provoked a major controversy, particularly after it was revealed in the media that Marine Le Pen had been at least partially correct (Jaillette 2012a). All of these references were thinly veiled attacks on Islam and France's Muslim community, designed to appeal to lower-class voters who, as surveys suggested, formed an increasingly significant constituency for the FN.

Islamophobia, anti-Semitism and the populist Right's commitment to the state of Israel

Shortly after Marine Le Pen was elected president of the FN at the party's congress in January 2011 in Tours, there occurred a telling incident in the corridors of the meeting

¹⁰ Marine Le Pen started her campaign against the 'Islamization of France' before her election as new president of the Front National in January 2011. See, for example, her interview with Thierry Guerrier, the host of the TV programme 'C'à dire', France 5, 10 September 2010. <www.youtube.com/watch?v=nH8EiIFIOx8> [accessed 12 March 2012].

hall. Farid Smahi, until recently a member of the party's politburo, emerged from the congress, hardly able to contain his anger after having lost his politburo seat. Furious, he charged that he had lost his seat because of his pro-Palestinian position, which obviously no longer jibed with the new party line. Smahi went so far as to accuse Marine Le Pen of being in the pocket of the 'Zionists' (Zaiane 2011). Smahi's attack was not entirely unfounded. In late March 2010, Adar Primor, in an article for Israel's centre-left daily newspaper *Haaretz* (Primor, 2010), posed the provocative question, 'Where have all the anti-Semites gone?' In the article, Primor noted that, in recent years, a growing number of prominent European radical right-wing politicians, such as Heinz-Christian Strache of the FPÖ, had sought 'Israeli recognition' by adopting positions – both on the question of the Holocaust and on the state of Israel – which radically diverged from traditional far-right anti-Semitism.

The case of Marine Le Pen has been emblematic of this development, which has spread in similar fashion throughout Western Europe's populist right in recent years. If Jean-Marie Le Pen hardly ever missed an occasion to flirt with Holocaust denial and anti-Semitism, his daughter has made it her policy to eradicate both these from the new FN. Even her detractors concede that her commitment to ridding the party of the *nostalgiques* of historical French anti-Semitism (in the tradition of Charles Maurras and the Vichy regime) is genuine (Daniel 2011: 7).

Marine Le Pen established her position in a lengthy interview accorded *Le Point*, one of France's leading weekly news magazines. Although the interview covered a number of issues, the headlines were dominated by Le Pen's responses to questions about the Holocaust. Not only did she declare herself 'irritated' by anyone who showed any 'ambiguity' with regard to the Holocaust, she also made it completely clear that there was no doubt as to what had happened in the camps and 'under what conditions' and that, in her view, the Holocaust constituted 'the height of barbarism' (*le summum de la barbarie*).¹¹ A few months later, the international edition of *Israel Magazine* gave Marine Le Pen the opportunity (after the French Jewish radio station, Radio J, had cancelled an invitation for an interview with the new leader of the FN) to clarify her position on France's Jewish community and on the state of Israel. Once again, Marine Le Pen reiterated that she and her party were neither racist nor antisemitic. With regard to Israel – for which in the past she had expressed great admiration – she pointed out her party's official position supporting the right of the state of Israel (as well as a sovereign Palestinian state) to 'sure and secure borders'.¹² At the same time, she aggressively courted France's Jewish community and tried to persuade Israel's government to invite her for an official visit (see Mahrane 2011). When this failed, she sent her partner (and vice-president of the FN), Louis Aliot, on a secret mission to Israel (in early December) to 'warm up the atmosphere' and meet with a group of French Jews resident in Israel and interested in Marine Le Pen's platform (Ettinger 2011). When asked in an interview with the Israeli news portal *Guysen News* what might explain Marine Le Pen's recent

¹¹ 'Les camps ont été le summum de la barbarie', *Le Point*, 3 February 2011. <www.lepoint.fr/politique/les-camps-ont-ete-le-summum-de-la-barbarie-03-02-2011-135109_20.php> [accessed 18 September 2011].

¹² Entretien avec Marine Le Pen, *Israel Magazine*, May 2011, pp. 10–12.

'change of direction' with respect to the Holocaust and the state of Israel, Aliot gave the new party line: thus, he argued, both the FN and Jews (including Israelis) defended common Greek-Roman and Judeo-Christian values, which were under heavy attack on the international scene today. Under the circumstances, it would be important to stand together in the defence of common ideas and a common civilization (Bahloul 2011). Aliot's Israeli interview partner was not convinced, pointing out that at no point during the interview had Aliot clearly distanced himself from Jean-Marie Le Pen's infamous antisemitic and negationist statements, qualifying them instead as 'ambiguities'. Under the circumstances, it was hardly surprising if official French Jewish circles remained highly suspicious of Marine Le Pen's FN.

There certainly are good reasons to remain cautious. For one, Jean-Marie Le Pen still plays a major and highly visible role behind Marine Le Pen, presumably to reassure the party's hard-core clientele that the FN has not fundamentally deviated from its traditional course (Jaillette 2012b). At the same time, Marine Le Pen has made a significant effort to dispel doubts about her own sincerity. The question is what has motivated her to adopt this course. Strategic considerations are an obvious answer. There can be no doubt that anti-Semitism has proved to be a major reason for the FN's marginalization during the past several decades – a position which Jean-Marie Le Pen appears to have relished, since it allowed him to project himself as both victim and uncompromising detractor of 'the system', a people's tribune. Against that, Marine Le Pen has made it her strategic priority to 'mainstream' the party via a process of 'de-demonization' and 'de-diabolization' which is supposed to bring the FN closer to power (Le Pen 2012). De-demonization, in turn, necessarily presupposes a strong and unequivocal disavowal of anything that might be construed as antisemitic (such as questioning the Holocaust and/or questioning Israel's policies in the name of anti-Zionism). This was also behind Marine Le Pen's highly controversial meeting with Israel's ambassador to the United Nations during her visit to New York in early November 2011. Although Israel's government tried to dismiss the meeting as a misunderstanding, casual statements made by the ambassador after the meeting suggest the opposite (see Perrault 2011).¹³ Strategic considerations were also behind Louis Aliot's meeting with ex-pat French Jews in Israel. As the far-right paper *Minute* maintained, the objective was to appeal to a community which has the right – since July 2008 – to vote in one of the 11 constituencies (in this case number 8, which includes French residents of Israel – some 70,000 potential voters, according to *Minute*) for the French National Assembly reserved for French citizens residing abroad (Humbert 2011).

¹³ On 18 December 2011 the French pay TV channel Canal+ aired a documentary on 'the hidden face of the Front National' which gave ample space to Marine Le Pen's visit to the United States in early November 2011, including her meeting with the Israeli ambassador and influential Jewish community leaders in Florida, among them William Diamond, head of the Palms Beach synagogue and a member of American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC). La face cache du nouveau front, Canal+, 18 December 2011, 12.45h. <www.canalplus.fr/c-infos-documentaires/pid3354-c-dimanche.html?vid=561600> [accessed 19 December 2011]. For a brief account of these meetings see also Folch 2011.

The ideological U-turn on the 'Jewish question' is hardly a new development on the French far right. As early as 2007, Guillaume Faye, once a leading intellectual figure of Alain de Benoist's *nouvelle droite*, published a book on the 'New Jewish Question', in which he chastised and ridiculed the 'inanity' of the 'revisionist theories' of Holocaust deniers such as Robert Faurisson, a former professor at the University of Lyon, who gained notoriety beyond France's borders for his claim that the Nazis had never used gas chambers or systematically exterminated Jews (Faurisson 2000). Faurisson and other prominent 'negationists' such as Switzerland's Jürgen Graf were not amused. In fact Graf, writing from 'exile' in Moscow, declared that, with this book, Faye's reputation on the far right was ruined forever (Graf 2007). Marine Le Pen obviously disagreed, adopting instead the notion that Holocaust denial and anti-Semitism in general represented a political dead end and should therefore be abandoned. This is a lesson that appears to have spread throughout the Western European populist right.

Equally important, the disavowal of anti-Semitism is intricately linked to the Western European populist right's broader anti-Islamic ideological turn, which targets Western Europe's Muslim migrant community as the main enemy, eclipsing any other (including the Jews). In short, if Western European radical right-wing populist parties have increasingly sought to embrace Israel, it has been in order 'to unite against what they perceive to be a common threat' (Theil 2011). Geert Wilders, the leader of the Dutch anti-Islamic right, laid out the rationale behind this strategy during a speech he delivered in Tel Aviv in December 2010:

Let us never forget that Islam threatens not just Israel; Islam threatens the entire world. Without Judea and Samaria, Israel cannot protect Jerusalem. The future of the world depends on Jerusalem. If Jerusalem falls, Athens and Rome – and Paris, London and Washington – will be next. Thus, Jerusalem is the main front protecting our common civilization. When the flag of Israel no longer flies over the walls of Jerusalem, the West will no longer be free . . . Because it is here that our civilization is under attack as we speak. It is here that we, men and women of the West, must show our resolve to defend ourselves. It is here that Israel has lit the light of freedom and that Europeans and Americans must help the Israelis to keep that light shining in the darkness. For Israel's sake and for the sake of all of us.¹⁴

In a similar vein, Filip Dewinter, during the visit of a delegation of right-wing populist politicians to Israel in December 2010 (unrelated to Wilders' appearance), characterized Israel as being on the front line in the clash between two civilizations: one living in freedom, the other one bent on subjecting the rest of the world to 'Islamic theocracy'. The bombs and rockets that threatened Israel on a daily basis, all in the name of Islam, were the 'true face' of an ideology seeking to conquer Europe. The main difference, he argued, was that in Europe, Islam conducted an 'undercover, cultural jihad', which used mosques, minarets, burqas, halal food and sharia to undermine freedom, democracy and 'our way of life'. In this struggle, Israel represented 'the outpost of our European

¹⁴ Speech delivered in Tel Aviv, 5 December 2010. <<http://gatesofvienna.blogspot.com/2010/12/geert-wilders-speech-in-tel-aviv.html>> [accessed 16 October 2011].

civilization', an island of freedom and democracy, which had agreed to engage in the fight against 'an extremist, fundamentalist Islam', something Europe was 'too cowardly' to do (Dewinter 2010c).

Dewinter's engagement with the state of Israel was motivated in part by the same strategic considerations that explain Marine Le Pen's break with the FN's history of anti-Semitism. Like Marine Le Pen, Dewinter has sought to gain political respectability in order to break the *cordon sanitaire* which the traditional parties in Flanders erected around his party (Coffé 2005). At the same time, Dewinter, who has had ambitions of becoming the mayor of Antwerp, has a history of appealing to Antwerp's sizeable Jewish community for support by both evoking images of an Islamic threat and promoting himself as an ardent supporter of the state of Israel (Betz 2007: 33–4).

This led Dewinter, as early as 2005 (in an interview with *Haaretz*), to declare that he distanced himself from 'all of those individuals and groups with antisemitic tendencies and from Holocaust deniers' and wanted nothing to do with them. It was in this context that Dewinter expressed his desire to visit Israel, not only to express his affinity with a state that he regarded as 'a sort of outpost for our Western society' but also to prove that he was sincere in his disavowal of anti-Semitism and Holocaust negationism (Schwartz 2005). It should not be forgotten, however, that Dewinter's visit to Israel in 2010 was on the invitation of extreme right-wing Israeli political circles and settler groups. The latter characterized Dewinter and the other members of the delegation as representatives of parties 'that support Israel, renounce anti-Semitism and see the Islamic takeover of Europe as a clear danger', and thus promoted the visit as an expression of political support for 'the struggle against a common foe – Islamic jihadism and expansionism' (Ronen & Kempinski 2010). Israeli critics of the visit were not convinced. For one opposition politician, the delegation's visit was nothing surprising given the general deterioration of the political culture in Israel, as reflected in the growing acceptability of 'racist opinions spreading throughout large sections of the public' and receiving only a feeble, if any, response from the government. At the same time, the visit was symptomatic of Israel's growing international isolation, which had reached the point that the country was forced to 'take comfort in the arms of radicals, just because they prefer at this stage to pursue Muslims rather than Jews' (Whbee 2010).

These doubts are well-founded. Even if right-wing populist leaders no longer hesitate to keep their distance from anti-Semitism, their sincerity is very much in doubt, given the composition of their political constituency, which consists of a significant number of extreme nationalists. It was hardly a coincidence that delegation member Heinz-Christian Strache, during a visit to Yad Vashem, chose not to wear a kippah to show respect to the victims of the Holocaust. Instead he donned a cap worn by life-long members of Vandalia, an Austrian right-wing student fraternity which has a long history of Pan-German nationalism and anti-Semitism. Although Strache rejected the charge that this had been a deliberate provocation, other members of the delegation had their own interpretations. Thus a German member maintained that Strache was playing to his Austrian audience, delivering a coded message to his constituency that not everything is as it seems (Theil 2011). This suggests that the populist right's embrace of the state of Israel represents above all a tactical move, in the

process of which both Western European populists and Israeli right-wing circles have found a perfect opportunity to instrumentalize each other in their common campaign against Muslims and Islam.

For the European populist right, the support accorded to the State of Israel and its government's policies (especially with regard to new settlements) is, like the campaigns against minarets and the construction of new mosques, part of the new common platform on the basis of which some of the major representatives of the Western European populist right have sought to coordinate their activities against the alleged 'Islamization' of Europe. And like the anti-minaret and anti-mosque rhetoric, the discourse on Israel has started to be adopted even among some right-wing extremist groups. A case in point is the English Defence League (EDL), which promotes itself as a staunch defender of liberal democracy against the advance, in Britain, of Islam, which is characterized as a political and social ideology bent on dominating all non-believers and imposing a system hostile to democratic accountability and to human rights. At the same time, its leader has maintained that one of the 'fundamental beliefs' of his movement is 'its support for Israel's right to defend itself'. The reason for the EDL's 'support of Israel and the Jewish people' was that Israel 'is a shining star of democracy', a 'beacon of democracy amid repressive Arab states . . . If Israel falls, we all fall'. At the same time, the leader of the EDL strongly affirmed that the EDL 'reject(ed) all anti-Semitism' and stood 'where it always has stood, which is side-by-side with Israel'.¹⁵

Anti-Islamic mobilization and the populist Right

The analysis presented so far demonstrates that fanning the flames of anti-Islamic sentiments has become central to right-wing populist mobilization in Western Europe, and that too for good reasons: Right-wing populist parties have generally promoted themselves as 'identitarian' movements, committed to the defence of national traditions, customs and values. At the same time, in recent years, right-wing populist discourse on immigration has increasingly focused on the challenges posed by the integration of Western Europe's migrant communities, which have been used as a justification for exclusion in the name of the preservation of identity (Betz & Johnson 2004: 317). According to this discourse, whether or not a migrant can be integrated depends crucially on whether or not his or her cultural background is compatible with the values of the local majority population. For the populist right, Islam is fundamentally incompatible with Western values and the Western way of life, and so Western Europe's Muslim migrant community is therefore deemed to be 'unassimilable' (Betz & Meret 2009).¹⁶

The overwhelming emphasis on culture in the populist right's campaign against Muslim migrants and Islam in general is, to a large extent, also motivated by political

¹⁵ Statement by Tommy Robinson to Stop the Islamization of America (SIOA), 30 June 2011. <http://atlasshrugs2000.typepad.com/atlas_shrugs/2011/06/tommy-robinson-any-rogue-elements-within-the-edl-that-go-against-our-mission-statement-will-be-remov.html> [accessed 13 October 2011].

¹⁶ See also www.filipdewinter.be/vlaams-belang-start-met-%E2%80%9Cvrouwen-tegen-islamiseren%E2%80%9D for an example of this belief system.

calculation. In a recent article on anti-immigrant attitudes in present-day Western Europe, Silke Schneider (2008: 63) has demonstrated that cultural distance, rather than the economic status of immigrants (either as competitors for jobs or welfare benefits), 'adds to the average level of perceived ethnic threat in European countries. The higher the percentage of non-Western immigrants, the higher the country's average level of perceived ethnic threat.' These results jibe well with the findings of studies that have shown that radical right-wing populist support at the polls is significantly influenced by a voter's cultural disposition. This is particularly true for lower-class voters (such as skilled blue-collar workers, routine operatives and low-skilled service employees), who have increasingly become the core constituency of radical right-wing populist support (Bornschieer 2010). Under the circumstances, Marine Le Pen's anti-Islamic turn is hardly surprising, given her strategy to appeal in particular to those lower-class voters disenchanted with the mainstream right.

Recent surveys conducted in various West European countries to gauge public attitudes towards Muslim migrants and various issues related to Islam suggest that, at least on this subject, the populist right's position resonates with a significant segment of public opinion. With respect to Islam in general, a German survey from 2006 found over 90 per cent of respondents agreeing with the notion that Islam was hostile to women; 71 per cent thought Islam was intolerant; and over half of the respondents agreed with Samuel P. Huntington that the relationship between the West and the Muslim world was best described in terms of a clash of civilizations (between the West and the Muslim world).¹⁷ In the same year, a British YouGov poll found more than 50 per cent of British respondents agreeing with the statement that 'Islam' posed a threat to Western liberal democracy (Johnston 2006). French polls suggest that the populist right's campaign against the construction of mosques and minarets has considerable public support beyond Switzerland's borders. In 2009, more than 40 per cent of French respondents said they opposed the construction of mosques and 46 per cent came out in favour of a law prohibiting the construction of minarets. Support for a ban on the construction of mosques and minarets was (at more than 60 per cent) particularly pronounced among workers (ifop 2009).

Some of the latest surveys indicate that Islamophobia remains strong among a considerable proportion of public opinion. In a representative Austrian survey from 2010, for instance, 71 per cent of respondents agreed with the statement that Islam was fundamentally incompatible with Western ideas of democracy, freedom and tolerance. Fifty-four per cent thought that Islam represented a threat to the West and its way of life; and more than 70 per cent of respondents thought Muslim migrants living in Austria did too little to adapt to Austria's way of life (IMAS 2010). A comparative French/German survey from December 2010 found similar results. Thus, in both countries, four out of ten respondents thought that the Muslim community in their country represented a threat, twice as many as thought it represented a 'factor of enrichment' for the country. Between 68 (France) and 75 (Germany) per cent thought

¹⁷ Eine fremde, bedrohliche Welt, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 17 May 2006. <www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/inland/allensbach-analyse-eine-fremde-bedrohliche-welt-1328270.html> [accessed 17 October 2011].

Muslims were not integrated into society. Among those who held this view, more than 60 per cent charged Muslim migrants with refusing to integrate into society. Finally, when asked which three characteristics best reflected their idea of Islam, two-thirds of respondents chose characteristics with negative connotations (rejection of Western values, fanaticism and submission). In both cases, negative views of Islam and the country's Muslim community were particularly pronounced among lower-class respondents (ifop 2010). Islamophobia, however, is hardly a lower-class phenomenon. Wilhelm Heitmeyer has shown, on the basis of time-series data, that over recent years attitudes hostile towards Islam and the Muslim community in Germany have been growing dramatically among the affluent, reaching far into the educated middle class (2010: 24–5).

The media have done their part to reinforce existing impressions that not only is Islam – and Western Europe's resident Muslim community – to a large extent incommensurable with Western values and the European way of life but also that it represents a serious threat. A telling example is *Der Spiegel*, Germany's left-leaning news magazine, which has generally been at the forefront of the fight against xenophobia, prejudice and the populist right. Yet in early 2007, the magazine devoted both its cover and lead article to the 'silent Islamization' of Germany (under the headline 'Mecca Germany'). Islamophobic tendencies have been even more pronounced in Western Europe's yellow press, which generally seeks to appeal to lower-class voters and those media close to the populist right. Take, for instance, the Swiss weekly newsmagazine *Die Weltwoche*, which does not hide its sympathies for Blocher's SVP. In May 2010, the cover of the magazine raised the provocative question of whether 'Islam should be outlawed' (*Muss der Islam verboten werden*).¹⁸ Given Switzerland's recent decision to ban the construction of minarets, this was hardly a moot question.

A few years ago, the American historian Philip Jenkins (2003) referred to anti-Catholicism as the 'last acceptable prejudice' in the United States, for good reason: Ever since the 1830s, Catholicism – and particularly Catholic immigrants from Ireland and Germany entering the United States in record numbers – represented the favourite target of American nativists bent on safeguarding the Protestant nature of the United States against a creed they considered fundamentally at odds (i.e. incompatible) with the very foundations of liberty, democracy and the American way of life. In the eyes of leading nativists, Catholics represented an 'ignorant mob ready to sacrifice rational individualism to Church hierarchy', and thus a fundamental threat to American democracy (Fenton 2011: 53).

Nativism gave rise to the 'Know-nothing' movement of the mid-1850s (later renamed the American Party), which the American historian Ronald Formisano (2008: 198) has characterized as 'one of the largest populist mobilizations of U.S. history'. As it was, Know-nothingism (in the form of the American Party, one of the most important third parties in American history) proved to be short-lived, torn apart over the question of slavery (much of the party was soon absorbed by the newly formed Republican Party). Yet nativism was to continue to have a lasting impact on American political culture.

¹⁸ *Weltwoche*, No. 19, 2010. <www.weltwoche.ch/ausgaben/2010-19/artikel-2010-19-seite-3.html> [accessed 15 October 2011].

Elizabeth Fenton (2011: 21) has even argued that anti-Catholic nativist mobilization was instrumental in shaping American conceptions of pluralism and liberalism, conceptions fundamental to American identity.

Anti-Catholicism did not disappear with the beginning of the Civil War. In fact, it re-emerged in the latter part of the nineteenth century, giving rise to a second wave of nativist mobilization (ironically during a period which is generally referred to as the 'Progressive Era'), which lasted well into the early decades of the twentieth century (Nordstrom 2006). Tom Watson for instance – a once eminent figure in the agrarian populist movement of the 1870s and 1880s from Georgia and candidate for the vice-presidency on the 'fusion' (i.e. Populist/Democratic) ticket for the 1896 presidential election (together with Democrat William Jennings Bryan) – warned in 1912 of the 'Roman Catholic Designs on the American Nation' (ibid.: 30–1). Even Franklin D. Roosevelt's embracing of Roman Catholics two decades later did not prevent large numbers of native-born Protestants from continuing to harbour profound suspicions toward the 'popists' (Gerstle 2001: 46). Later on, a few years after the end of the Second World War, Paul Blanshard (an associate editor for *The Nation*) gained notoriety through his anti-Catholic writings. In them he characterized Catholicism as 'an authoritarian cultural system, directed by foreign (and foreign-appointed) figures', which raised the question of how to confront a 'hierarchy that operates in twentieth-century America under medieval European controls' and asked what would happen if Catholics became a majority in the country. This he considered a real possibility, given the fact, as he warned, that Catholics were 'outbreeding the non-Catholic elements in our population' (Wolfe 2000: 17, Massa 2001: 554).

For enlightened Western Europeans today, this might sound arcane and a bit ridiculous – were it not for the fact that the tropes and arguments advanced in today's right-wing populist campaign (such as the conjuring up of images of invasion, subversion and the eventual displacement of the local population as a result of demographic trends) against the Muslim migrant community and Islam in general represent an almost exact replica – some might say a pastiche – of American anti-Catholic nativist mobilization. Today, in the United States, Catholics are fully accepted as a vital part of the fabric of American society. However, it took more than a century for Catholics to be fully accepted as loyal citizens of the United States who could be entrusted with the country's highest political office without fear of betrayal. If the American experience has any relevance for the situation of Muslims in contemporary Western Europe, Western Europe's Muslim community – and with it Islam – has a long way to go.

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