

The Risks of (Anti-)Muslim Radicalism

Charlie Hebdo, Islamic Minorities and Political Violence in Central Europe

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Although the number of victims was low when compared to the attacks in Madrid in 2004 or in Utøya in 2011, the Paris attacks of January 7th – 9th 2015 had a tremendous symbolic impact that reached far beyond France. The Charlie Hebdo shootings and subsequent hostage crisis have renewed debates about the jihadi threat to Europe and how to fight it, but also about the position of Muslim minorities in Western societies and the relation of tolerance and freedom of speech. While most French and European politicians have been remarkably united and restrained and have been careful to blame the individuals in question rather than the Muslim community as a whole, anti-Muslim and anti-immigration parties and movements (e.g. FN in France and PEGIDA in Germany) have been quick to [try and make political capital](#) out of the attacks. Neither Muslim communities, nor anti-Islamic movements are as strong in Central Europe (CE)¹ as in Western Europe (WE) and the responses of politicians and populations generally reflect this. However, focusing on security and failing to address potential divides between Muslim and non-Muslim communities politically, could have an inflammatory effect, which would make no one safer.

Analysis: Central Europe's Anti-Muslim Bark is Worse Than Its Bite, for Now.

Both public reaction and proposed security responses to the events in Paris have been relatively muted in CE countries, which have small and low-profile Muslim populations ([0.1% - 0.3%](#)), low migrant populations in general and do not tend to see radical Islam as a dominant domestic problem. Muslims in CE have, thus far, not committed acts of political violence; although they have been subject to repeated harassment from small, [vigilante groups linked in some cases](#) to far right political parties or organized football hooligans. However the number, frequency and seriousness of these attacks is lower than in WE countries such as Germany.

However, anti-Islamic sentiments extend beyond this radical fringe and these discourses are increasingly echoed by politicians, media and the wider public. Protests organized by 'We do not want Islam in the Czech Republic' in late January [drew hundreds of people](#), including some politicians, making them the largest such events in CE. Anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim statements have also echoed across the region from smaller, right-wing parties, attempting to use the events to boost their profiles. In Hungary, PM Viktor Orban joined in this chorus, [advocating stopping inward migration](#) to Europe as a way to guard against such attacks in future.

However, in this regard Hungary is an exception as neither politicians nor the public reports of intelligence services [see an imminent jihadi threat](#) and note that there is only isolated, individual support for some more radical Islamic NGOs and other groups. That Hungary is the only CE country where a far-right party is a significant political player points to the

1 For the purpose of this text, the Central Europe is considered to be the Visegrad 4 (V4) countries – Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia.

dangers of allowing prejudice to become mainstream, a problem that approaches to Islam and migration that focus too much on security is likely to exacerbate rather than solve.

Outlook: Security for whom?

While institutional co-operation between security services can be improved and technical capacities can be upgraded, the scholarly and analytical consensus is that preventing attacks such as those in Paris is nearly impossible without seriously compromising the freedoms that define 'Liberal' societies. However, the challenges posed by these attacks and the responses to them can and should be addressed. Rather than through coercive security measures, this should be at the political level and through public engagement. Crucially, this also means providing security for minority populations such as Muslims, rather than encouraging perceptions that frame these minorities as a threat to the security of the majority.

Spectacular police actions, such as the [raid on a Prague mosque](#) during Friday prayers in April 2014 reinforce the divisive messages of anti-Islam and anti-immigration groups, leading some Muslims to feel alienated from the state, which used coercive force against them in an insensitive manner, raising rather than reducing the level of potential grievance and potentially creating conditions for radicalisation. While anti-Muslim actions in CE have thus far been peaceful - mainly comprising rallies and derogatory public statements - there is no guarantee that this will continue to be the case. The violent far-right campaign against Roma people in Hungary and recent developments in Germany, where the growth of PEGIDA has been accompanied with the [rising level of assaults](#) against Muslims and immigrants present a worrying picture in this regard and one which CE political elites cannot afford to ignore.

Recommendations:

- ◆ The **governments and law enforcement authorities of Central European** countries should refrain from heavy handed or showy responses to perceived threats posed by Muslim communities and should not engage in actions that could inflame rather than soothe tensions
- ◆ While maintaining appropriate levels of monitoring and surveillance, **CE law enforcement authorities** and security services should take steps to avoid creating the impression that they are targeting the Muslim community as a whole.
- ◆ At the same time, **local and national governments** should create fora for inclusive inter-community discussion in which the concerns of anti-Muslim or populist movements can be aired and acknowledged and through which genuine grievances, which are compatible with liberal democratic societies, can be addressed. However, these fora should also be used by government and civil society to point out the aspects of these concerns, such as those based on racist thinking, that are not compatible with liberal democratic societies.
- ◆ **National political and civil society leaders** should set the tone for these discussions by clearly outlining the state and society's commitments to security, but also to liberty and justice for all communities, rather than ignoring inflammatory and divisive populist rhetoric.

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