

ON ISLAMOPHOBIA IN CEE COUNTRIES. INTERVIEW WITH PROF. IVAN KALMAR

*Přemysl Rosůlek**

Ivan Kalmar is Professor of Anthropology at the University of Toronto. Kalmar's work has focused on the image of "the Jew" in western cultural history, and how it is related to the image of "the Muslim." In addition to numerous articles on this subject, Kalmar co-edited with Derek Penslar *Orientalism and the Jews* (New England U Press), and is the author of *Early Orientalism: Imagined Islam and the Notion of Sublime Power* (Routledge). Currently he is the principal investigator in a five-year project on Islamophobia and populism in Europe, with a focus on relationships, differences and similarities between the East and West of the European Union (including between the East and West in Germany). Among the topics he and his research team have been studying recently is the adoption of right-wing Islamophobic rhetoric by mainstream politicians, and the spread, online, of conspiracy theories about George Soros.

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In CEE countries, the recent "migration crisis" has sparked scholarly discussion in a relatively new academic area. Unlike the Western academic environment, Islam and immigration is a relatively new phenomenon in CEE countries. Moreover, Western scholars can also rely on a much longer tradition of social science. How would you evaluate scholarly discourse on this issue in CEE countries?

Although the severity of the Islamophobia evidenced in the response of the political leaders and the public in CEE was recognized everywhere, very little academic research had immediately been done on it either in the East or in the West. It is in order to remedy this situation that I applied for and got a grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada to investigate the phenomenon. When we held a preliminary meeting in Prague in 2016, it was quite difficult to find scholars engaged with the issue. Since then, I've discovered that more work is being done in CEE than I had been aware of. The problem is that this work is often done for private consulting foundations and does not become widely known to academic colleagues. Either that, or it is done by academics but does not get published in the leading western journals that both western and eastern scholars know better than the local CEE ones. I do not, however, believe that there is a western and an eastern tradition of social science in Europe and North America, though there may be variations in individual countries and regions, and between the major languages. It is generally a mistake in my opinion to exaggerate the East-West difference.

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Do you have an explanation for why such a significant number of societies in CEE countries are so strongly against Islam, Muslims and refugees from Africa and the Middle East and why this happened without almost any experience with immigration from countries with a predominantly Muslim population and no negative experience with Islam or Muslims?

Here, too, it is easy to exaggerate the East-West difference. Expressions like “Islamophobia without Muslims” or “phantom Islamophobia” are only partly accurate. Although only a few Muslims live in CEE, the area as part of the European Union and indeed, historically as part of Europe belongs to a wider region that was involved in colonial exploitation and now its partial result, mass migration to Europe. Islamophobic politicians claim that the former colonizing powers should be the only ones responsible for alleviating the problems in the former colonies, and that Poland or Hungary, or the Czech Republic, are not liable as they were not colonizers. They forget that there is no Iron Curtain any more, nor was there one before communism. Austria-Hungary, of which most of CEE was a part, did not have overseas colonies, but it did expand into Muslim Bosnia-Herzegovina and, more importantly, benefited from the overall colonial exploitation by western powers. And no region benefitted more than the industrial hub of greater Austria, that is, today’s Czech Republic.

Nevertheless, it is of course true that East and West differ in the EU today in terms of the number of Muslims living there, and yet Islamophobic sentiment seems to be higher in the East (though some research statistics show that the difference is less than most people believe). But note that also within the West itself, Islamophobia is greater in areas with fewer Muslims; for example, there is more of it in the countryside than in the big cities where most Muslims live.

Moreover, even within CEE countries Islamophobic rhetoric seems to be much stronger in the countryside, where there are practically no Muslims, than in the big cities, where there are a few. I have said that in the Czech Republic, populist nationalists in the whole country see the West of Europe the same way that Czechs in the small towns and villages see Prague (or more precisely, the *pražská kavárna*). The explanation for Islamophobia in CEE is best sought, in my opinion, in understanding its peripherality vis-à-vis the rest of the EU and “Brussels,” and not in any distinctive characteristics of the region or the number of Muslims who may or may not live there. Islamophobes see the global big-city elites in their own country and their own continent as responsible for “inviting” alien Muslims, instead of focusing on the troubles of the “regular guys” at home who don’t share the alleged privileges of the *sluníčkáři*.

In the context of CEE countries, how can be Islamophobia be linked to other forms of xenophobia as e.g. anti-Semitism?

I have written extensively about the connections between antisemitism and Islamophobia, which go back centuries. In Europe today, these are connected also to racism against Roma. Extremists articulate the connection in old-fashioned Nazi terms, but the more mainstream Islamophobes, who today rule every Visegrád country, have sanitized their racism and pretend that they are not antisemitic. In

Hungary, anti-Soros rhetoric has reached unheard of levels of stupidity, but the government who propagates it is careful not to use the old antisemitic tropes that associate the Jewish-American philanthropist with other “evil” Jews and Freemasons in the manner of the infamous forgery, the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. Anyone who listens to Orbán knows what those tropes are, but literally he is not using them and instead condemns antisemitism. Benjamin Netanyahu, who also hates Soros and the great Jewish tradition of supporting equality and human rights, comes to Budapest and shakes Orbán’s hand. This makes the champion of “illiberal democracy” feel that as a friend of Israel he surely cannot be an antisemite. I hope that no one is fooled by such nonsense.

Another discussed aspect is the level of the population’s media literacy. On one hand, it is a fact that in the current era – known also as post-truth politics – people are capable of believing in fake news, hoaxes and unverified reports. On the other hand, can we claim with certainty that the impact of media on the majority of the population is so strong?

There are different kinds of media. In our work, we study various kinds of social media and indeed many spread falsehoods, including about Muslims and those non-Muslims who fight for Muslims’ rights. People choose the media they believe in and don’t listen to the other side. This is a serious problem. At the same time, “media” can’t have an effect on people who are not susceptible to their message. I am not sure that I believe in censoring either mainstream media or social media. It would be more important to know why people choose media that don’t tell the truth, and to ask how we can reach them, without arbitrary measures.

What do you think the role of Russian official circles is in the CEE’s Islamophobia?

Not enough is known about this. In our work, we feel we can identify Russian social media posts by certain catch phrases, such as their reference to “color revolutions,” which is something no one outside of the former USSR cares about. I think the Russians are very active in spreading disinformation in order to destabilize the European Union, and they target CEE areas among others. Their activities in this area have been known somewhat before they were uncovered in the United States. Ondrej Kundra of *Respekt* is one of the people who has published some material on this in the Czech Republic, but there are some reports from elsewhere as well. We believe that connecting Soros to the Muslim “migration crisis” is something that began in Russia.

How would you explain that both leftist parties and many leftist intellectuals in CEE countries (e.g. Jan Keller, Slavoj Žižek) are strongly against immigration from Northern Africa and the Middle East?

I don’t know enough about this.

And, finally, do you think that Christianity has been misused against Islam?

Today's "Christianism" hardly even claims to have anything to do with the Christian faith and liturgy. It has everything to do with the alleged Christian identity of Europe conceived in purely racial terms (the less "extreme" people will call it "Judeo-Christian"). They just mean "white." One of my colleagues, Konrad Pedziwiatr, has written about Catholic seminary students who are extremely Islamophobic in spite of Pope Francis' disapproval of the views they hold. Images of Poles praying with rosaries at the country's western borders against the non-existent Muslim invaders must deeply disappoint, I would think, any Christian with either a brain or a heart. Orbán may privately be a convinced evangelical like his son, but in reality even for him this talk about "Christian values" is a thinly disguised excuse for ugly, un-Christian racism.

Do you personally think that Europe is under threat from different cultures and that, in the long run, the Islamization of Europe is an actual challenge?

I don't know what "Islamization" means. In places where there are many Muslims, like in my home city of Toronto, practically no one is converting to Islam. I think those who talk about "Islamization" simply mean the presence of Muslims. The Nazis talked of "Judaization" (*Verjudung*) in the same way. The goal was to get rid of people who are different. But the presence of diverse groups of people living and working together is not a danger, though there can certainly be challenges, often caused by discrimination. In Canada, most companies and universities believe that diversity increases efficiency because it's good when you get people with different experiences to work together. I have heard Czech Islamophobes talk about the Czech Republic's qualifications as the world's 6th safest country. They said that this was due because there were few non-European migrants here. This is nonsense. In the World Economic Forum ranking, Norway, Switzerland, and Austria are among the countries that beat the Czech Republic in terms of safety. All of them have plenty of non-white citizens and immigrants.