



Dear Michał,

To what extent the European refugee crisis has dominated (or 'cannibalised') the entire election campaign? Why are the Poles that we hear in the media so reluctant (or scared) by the perspective to welcome even a small number of political refugees?



The current European refugee crisis is highlighting a very complex issue. Over the last seventy years, due to the contingencies of history, Poland has become one of the most ethnically and religiously homogenous societies in the world.

A traditionally multi-ethnic and multi-confessional country was turned into a uniform society, and on top of this was levelled socially by the Communists. The party's propaganda was unfavourable to all minorities, an attitude that was somehow legitimised by the history of the region.

For many, this homogeneity has become a value in itself. According to their argumentation, such a high degree of uniformity was decisive in avoiding ethnic conflicts similar to those in the former Yugoslavia or in other parts of Central and Eastern Europe (the Baltic states, Ukraine, Transylvania, etc.). It has also helped to preserve unity and prevent the dislocation of the state, as in the case of the Soviet Union or Czechoslovakia.

Against this backdrop, several groups in Polish society have become cultural racists and support a kind of 'cultural apartheid' based on the firm belief that it is better not to mix different cultures. Some extremists refer spontaneously to what Samuel Huntington described in a scholarly way as an inevitable 'clash of civilisations'. In this view, Muslims are not only alien, but actually hostile to Christianity, so incompatible with our society that we need to protect ourselves from them. Every contact, even minimal in the case of a quota of political refugees, can potentially lead to an avalanche that endangers our identity.

Obviously this attitude is close to hysteria. Today there are very few immigrants in Poland. They are no more than approximately one per cent of a nation of thirty-eight million people. The number of Muslims is estimated at 20 000. The refugees to be accepted this year will amount to roughly 7000. These are very low figures. So far 'the Muslim threat' is as real as the invasion of extra-terrestrials.

These facts do not keep media reports on the issue from giving the impression that millions are besieging the country. It is clearly a case study of 'phantom Islamophobia'. Many Polish citizens are shocked by the hysteria and ashamed of the degree of racism and chauvinism shown not only by radical nationalists, but also by academics and 'intellectuals'.

It is not surprising that the topic has become important in the election campaign. Many politicians openly used anti-Muslim and anti-refugees slogans. Kaczynski warned even against diseases that immigrants would bring. Sadly, due to these dominant attitudes, politicians – with some notable exceptions – are reluctant to voice their support for refugees. Their statements vary between hostility and cautiousness.

Only a few intellectuals and groups voice openly their resistance to xenophobia and the radicalisation of language. Recently, for instance, the Polish Ethnological Society warned against the danger of tolerating such intolerance. History, especially in Poland, should have taught how quickly this can lead to the full 'dehumanisation' of other groups.

Michał Buchowski is professeur of anthropology at Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań and holds the chair of Central European Studies at the Viadrina University in Francfort/Oder.