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Islamophobic Right-Wing Populism? Empirical Insights about Citizens' Susceptibility to Islamophobia and Its Impact on Right-Wing Populists' Electoral Success: Eastern Europe in a Comparative Perspective

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ABSTRACT: Understanding the electoral success of right-wing populist parties has sparked the interest of many scholars. One factor receiving less attention in these debates is the role of religious affiliation as a cultural marker of allegedly dangerous out-groups. Right-wing populists often portray themselves as defenders of a Christian Occident that is allegedly under threat by an invasion of Muslims. We argue, in accordance with the cultural-backlash thesis, that the mobilization of right-wing populists would not have been possible without the widespread perception of Islam and Muslims as a threat. To test this assumption, we analyzed data from the European Social Survey (2014). Our results show that support for a ban against Muslims increases the likelihood of voting for right-wing populist parties, and the percentage of Muslims in the total population has no moderating effect. The individual linkage between anti-Muslim prejudices and the support of right-wing populist parties is a pan-European phenomenon. Interestingly, right-wing populists profit from anti-Muslim prejudices in places where few Muslims live. Thus, the absence of Muslims seems to favor a social climate in which anti-Muslim sentiments prevail. "Islamophobia without Muslims" offers right-wing populists a political window of opportunity to join government coalitions or even to win elections.

KEYWORDS: Eastern Europe, Islam, Survey, Prejudice, Islamophobia.

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1. Introduction: The Success of Right-Wing Populism—What Does Religion Have to Do with It?

The electoral success of populists, particularly the rise of right-wing populism, is currently the subject of heated debate in Europe. The newly gained visibility of right-wing populism has given rise to considerable fears among politicians and the public and has left scholars and non-academics alike wondering how these developments could have come about.

Right-wing populist parties are, of course, not a new phenomenon. The history of the Vlaams Belang in Belgium, the National Front in France, and the Freedom Party of Austria, along with the early successes of populists in Latin America, illustrate this point (de la Torre 2015). It is undisputed, however, that the electoral success of right-wing populists in Europe has gained momentum since the increased refugee-movement to Europe 2015 (Kriesi and Pappas 2016; Pickel and Pickel 2018). Right-wing populist parties as well as right-wing extremist parties gained a foothold in more European countries, and the proportion of those voting for these parties reached a new and unexpected all-time high (Arzheimer 2018; Taggart 2000). Additionally, some argue that the presence of these parties seems to produce a contagion effect on established conservative parties that adapt their migration policy agendas to the positions of right-wing populists (Abou-Chadi 2016).

The situation in Eastern Europe is somewhat different from that in Western Europe. Parties and politicians were so successful with populist slogans that they could win majorities in elections or convert to populist while in office to secure their grip on power (Krekó, et al. 2019; Stockemer 2019). A pessimistic mood and even doom scenarios abound in the social sciences: A "populist revolution" is sweeping the globe (Moffit 2016), and this populist wave threatens the existence of liberal democracy (Pappas 2019).[1] Although different styles of populism are evident in these developments, right-wing populism seems to be the element that propels the current wave of populism in Europe.[2]

Nonetheless, no consensus exists on the appropriateness of the right-wing populist label. Eatwell and Goodwin (2018) criticize it as misleading and advocate labeling these parties as nationalist-populist. Cas Mudde (2019) cautions that the term *populism* could trivialize the ideological agenda of these actors and prefers the term *right-wing radicalism*. While these objections are justified, such movements nevertheless feature characteristics that research associates with populist parties (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017).

What is it that fuels the electoral success of right-wing populists? Imigration and the so-called refugee crisis are often mentioned as an important catalyst (Pickel and Pickel 2018). Although the temporal proximity of the influx of refugees and the electoral triumphs of right-wing populists cannot be denied, this very popular answer sounds as simplistic as explanations that refer exclusively to socioeconomic and sociostructural determinants.

One factor that has so far received too little attention, from our point of view, is religion[3]—more precisely, the religious affiliation of migrants—against which right-wing populists agitate so harshly. A closer look reveals that right-wing populist movements do not dedicate

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[1] Notable parallels to developments in Europe can be observed, for example, in the USA and India.

[2] Syriza, an example of a successful left-wing populist movement, is now an established player in the Greek party system. However, due to a massive loss of votes in the last parliamentary elections, the sustainability of its success can be called into question (Pappas 2019).

[3] When we discuss the influence of religion in this article, our focus is on threat perceptions towards Islam as a source for the electoral success of right-wing populist parties. The religiosity of individuals as an independent variable, and its impact on the intention to vote for a right-wing populist party (cf. Pickel 2018) plays only a subordinate role in our analysis.

their protests to immigrants per se, but above all to Muslim immigrants. The posters, slogans, symbols and popular tropes of right-wing populist movements become increasingly similar: Crossed-out mosques, the defamation of Muslims as rapists, the idea of a planned and orchestrated population exchange, and the call to defend the Christian Occident have become their pan-European trademarks (cf. Betz 2016; Hafez 2014; Kallis 2018; Pickel and Yendell 2018; Zúquete 2008).

In essence, we argue that Islam as a religion and the ascriptive feature of religious affiliation became a signature of cultural difference vis-à-vis allegedly dangerous immigrants. Our thesis of a strong nexus between Islamophobia and the electoral successes of right-wing populists is fully in line with the observations of Norris and Inglehart (2019). Their analysis shows that the success of right-wing populists can be traced back to a cultural backlash, suggesting that this is a reaction to social modernization processes or neoliberal globalization (de Wilde, et al. 2019). In a nutshell, their study suggests that *cultural threat perceptions*, rather than economic factors, propel the current wave of populism. The Muslim background of many migrants, who left war-torn countries to seek protection in Europe, occupies a key role in the threat perceptions of many citizens (Ciftci 2012). Throughout Europe, Islam, more than any other world religion, is perceived as a threat (Pickel 2018). This feeling of threats importance and significance within a whole set of explanations requires empirical exploration.

This brings us to our central question: In which way does religion—or, to be more precise, threat perception towards Muslims—have an impact on the success of right-wing populism in Europe? We shed light on this question from a comparative perspective, offer a structured comparison of right-wing populist parties' pillars of support, and explore its varying prevalence in European societies. What should become clear is that we do not turn the spotlight on the motives, arguments, political style, and strategies of the right-wing populists, but on the citizens, because without their support, the rhetoric of right-wing populists would have little effect. Drawing on social-psychological theories and research on populism, we test the Islamophobia–right-wing populism nexus and control for alternative explanatory factors that rank high in the literature. Finally, yet importantly, we turn to the specific situation in Eastern Europe, emphasizing that any claim of regional peculiarities presupposes a comparative perspective. Our thesis is as follows:

> *As an identity marker, religious affiliation is of central importance for the support of right-wing populists. The problem with this identity marker, which could not operate without the ascriptive feature of religious affiliation, is that it enables a friend/foe distinction directed against Islam accompanied by an othering of its followers, namely, Muslims.*

We have analyzed the European Social Survey (2014) to assess the plausibility of this claim.

2. Why Religion Matters: A Theorization of the Islamophobia-Right-Wing-Populism--Nexus

What are the central characteristics of right-wing populism? What is behind the term Islamophobia? Why do we insinuate a nexus between the two phenomena? From the outset, we stress that defining right-wing populism is no easy task. Attempts to define the phenomenon (cf. Mudde and Kaltwasser 2007; Priester 2007) vary greatly. A one-dimensional equation of populism with a political style is characterized by a rigid rejection of the political establishment. The portrayal of populism as a political strategy to attain or consolidate power hardly differs from the previous approach. A third group of authors perceives it as a discourse practice. Others ascribe a strong resemblance to approaches that perceive populists as popular agents that tackle social and political deficits. Some socioeconomic approaches, in turn,

portray populism as a reaction to an increase in social inequality throughout Western societies. Finally, the ideological or idealistic approach emphasizes the content of populist parties and its politicians (Mudde und Kaltwasser 2017, 2-4).

We observe that all these elements contribute to a definition of populism, i.e., the tendency of politicians to behave in an extreme manner in order to grab attention, dissatisfaction with the paternalism of politicians, and a greater demand for a radical democracy, but none of these elements is the sole defining characteristic of right-wing populism per se. Likewise, the ideological or idealistic approach stresses that populists of any kind share a thin ideology, that is, one that claims an opposition between the people and the elite. The role of host ideologies plays a more central role in this approach, however, highlighting the thematic substance of the alleged antagonism between the people and the elite.

The assignment of the label *right-wing populist* is not impossible, either. Following the approach of Mudde and Kaltwasser (2017), parties can be described as populist if they advocate the idea that two antagonistic groups in society, namely, the "true people" and a "corrupt elite," are irreconcilably at odds with each other. Populists regularly claim that politics must be an expression of the will of the people, and they pretend to be the only ones who can safeguard the interests of the so-called silent majority. When a nativist host ideology occupies a place in this rhetoric, the right-wing populism label applies. Such a manifestation of populism seems to have a very strong nationalist component (Eatwell and Goodwin 2018), in which out-groups are radically excluded because they are perceived as a threat to the homogeneously imagined nation-state (Mudde 2007; Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017; but cf. Moffit 2016; Müller 2016; Priester 2007; Taggart 2000).

The combination of populism and a nativist host ideology turns right-wing populism into a challenge, if not a danger, to liberal democracy (Bonikowski 2017; Müller 2016; Mudde 2007, 2019). This does not imply, however, that populism must be undemocratic as such. If a sizeable section of the population distrusts political elites, perceives them as unresponsive, and aspires to a more direct participation in politics, then populism points to a crisis of representative democracy. The criticism voiced by populists could, then, be interpreted as a warning signal serving as a corrective to democracy (Eatwell and Goodwin 2018; Huber and Ruth 2017). The issue is that populists claim to be the only ones capable of representing the will of the people because democratic institutions thrive on the pluralism of ideas and the ability to achieve compromise. This tendency is often a central argument of right-wing populists. They define "the people" in an ethnic and thus excluding fashion, which implies that the protection of minorities is sacrificed for the sake of the majority principle. What follows is a tension between right-wing populism and representative or liberal democracy (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018; Müller 2016).

At its core, populism thrives on a rigid antiestablishment discourse and a demonization of the "others" who need to be excluded. In practice, it combines both discourses. Populists portray themselves as defenders of the true people who are exposed to external threats of epic dimensions, dangers tolerated or even promoted by the cosmopolitan elites. Tactically, right-wing populists rely on fear discourses that are directed against immigrants but, above all, against Muslims and Islam (Wodak 2015). Nativist entrepreneurs create threat scenarios and do not hesitate to use conspiracy theories to accomplish their goals. The specter of the alleged Muslim invasion or "Eurabia" bear witness to this (Zia-Ebrahimi 2018).

The motivation of right-wing populists is self-evident: They anticipate support for their nativist policies, and they bet on widespread fears of Islam and Muslims among the population (Pickel and Öztürk 2018a). Unlike the blatant racism of the new right in the 1960s and 1970s, contemporary Islamophobia extends into the mainstream of society (Kallis 2018). Some authors have gone as far as calling hostility towards Muslims an accepted form of racism (Hafez 2014).

Nowadays, Islamophobia is fed by a nativist rejection of Muslim migrants, strongly rooted in old stereotypes but cashing in on some new fears. It even comes in the guise of an enlightened critique of religion, in which Islam is depicted as being intolerant, dogmatic, misogynistic, homophobic, anti-Semitic, or simply antiliberal (cf. Benz 2017; Brubaker 2017; Kallis 2018; Said 1978).

In its essence, Islamophobia refers to generalized derogatory attitudes towards Muslims, based on the identification of their religious background, to which negative attributes are ascribed (cf. Bleich 2011; Kaya 2015). It goes without saying that ideological and cultural factors play an important role when it comes to hostility towards Islam and Muslims. Many citizens view Islam as a foreign culture. In addition, Muslims are perceived as a non-assimilable group of immigrants. Social psychology theories reveal that religious affiliation plays a crucial role in these processes.

Social psychology offers a long tradition of describing the mechanisms involved in this process. At a basic level, anti-Muslim prejudice arises from a process of categorization: Individuals attribute negative characteristics to a large human group—in this case, Muslims—based on their perceived religious background. In this vein, social identity theory (SIT) is a good starting point for identifying the factors that determine the emergence of Islamophobia, as this process of categorization is closely interlinked with the construction of collective identities (Tajfel 1982). From the perspective of SIT, prejudice is the result of an "actor's identification of themselves and the others belonging to different social categories" (Tajfel and Turner 1979, 40). Two preconditions decide whether Islamophobia arises from this categorization process. First, individuals "must be subjectively identified with the relevant in-group" (Tajfel and Turner 1979, 41). Second, "the in-group must be perceived as positively differentiated or distinct from the relevant out-groups" (Tajfel and Turner 1979, 41).

As we see it, both conditions are fulfilled. First, national and religious identities provide historically powerful anchors for exclusive group identities that separate us from the Muslim others (Ben-Nun Bloom, et al. 2015; Brubaker 2017; Gat 2012; Hunsberger and Jackson 2005; Huntington 1997). Second, negative stereotypes towards Islam are so pervasive that an affirmative connotation of the in-group and a degradation of the Muslim out-group seem to go hand in hand. The driving force behind these processes is rooted in the desire of individuals to boost their self-esteem, and the devaluation of others is an easy way to satisfy this need. We cannot stress enough the importance of this psychological function of prejudice; after all, right-wing populists find strong support primarily in times of rapid modernization and globalization (de Wilde, et al. 2019; Moffit 2016). In such times, economic pressure and the perception that traditional norms and values are losing their significance extend to the middle class (Bremmer 2018); the knowledge of belonging to a (superior) collective may then serve as a relief in uncertain times.

The categorization process described above is particularly successful as Islam and Muslims have emerged as objects of fear in recent decades (cf. Ciftci 2012; Pickel and Yendell 2016). The impact of fear on prejudiced attitudes occupies a central position in integrated threat theory, which assumes that an in-group's realistic and symbolic perception of threat is the core driver of prejudice (Gonzalez, et al. 2008; Jonas and Fritsche 2013; McLaren 2003; Stephan and Stephan 1996; Quillian 1995). If the in-group considers the very existence of an out-group to be a risk to its physical and material well-being, this indicates a realistic threat (Stephan and Stephan 1996). The 9/11 attacks and a series of Islamist-motivated terrorist assaults in European cities (including London, Paris, Madrid, Berlin, and Marseille) have strengthened such perceptions. For many Europeans, Muslims appear to be fundamentalists who are ready to use violence

(Cinnirella 2012). Discourses in which Muslims are portrayed as a burden for welfare systems serve as a further pillar of realistic threat perceptions (Pickel and Öztürk 2018b).

However, a large part of the right-wing populist rhetoric against Muslims attempts to evoke symbolic perceptions of threats, as well. The use of such symbolic fears is aimed at enhancing sharp "group differences in morals, values, standards, beliefs and attitudes" (Stephan and Stephan 1996, 418). These attempts to portray the very existence of Muslims as an invasion of the Occident must be interpreted as an effort of right-wing populists to spread such fears. This claim cause consequences: In particular, symbolic threat perceptions have been deemed to be the driving force of anti-Muslim prejudices (Ciftci 2012). Whatever the sources of Islamophobic attitudes are based on (cf. Pickel and Yendell 2016), they offer right-wing populism a fearful and receptive mainstream audience to which they can campaign for their programs, well beyond their loyal constituents. This means that merely by highlighting any distinctive feature of the group in question, the fear discourse can be used as a tool to gain new followers. Moreover, considerable consensus exists that the electoral success of right-wing populist parties would not have been possible without widespread resentment against Muslims (cf. Betz 2016; Hafez 2014; Kallis 2018; Pickel and Yendell 2018; Zúquete 2008).

The goal of our study is to test these claims empirically. To this end, we focus not only on anti-Muslim resentments as an individual attitude pattern, but also on the magnitude of an anti-Muslim social climate in European societies. We examine the different contextual conditions under which this nexus is operating, given that societies in Europe vary a great deal in the proportion of Muslims in the total population. In Western Europe and Scandinavia, Muslims are an increasingly visible minority, while in Eastern Europe their presence is the exception rather than the rule (PEW 2011). We wonder whether these very different contextual conditions also make a difference. Is Islamophobia primarily a winning issue for right-wing populists in Western Europe and Scandinavia, or can right-wing populists in Eastern Europe also capitalize on Islamophobia even though (or perhaps even because) Muslims make up less than one percent of the population? (Hamid, et al. 2019).

Research Design, Data, and Methods

Theoretical assumptions must be confronted with empirical evidence, as this is the only way to provide answers to the questions discussed above. We used the European Social Survey (ESS) for this purpose. In particular, the seventh round of the ESS (2014) is a suitable instrument because it placed a strong focus on migration-related questions. As such, it offers a unique opportunity to examine the relationship between Islamophobia and the electoral success of right-wing populist parties, as citizens were asked about their support for a Muslim immigration ban and their party choice in the last national election.[4]

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[4] For more information see: https://www.europeansocialsurvey.org/.

Country	Acronym	Party	Populists	Government participation?
Austria	FPÖ	Freedom Party of Austria	14% (N = 153)	Yes. FPÖ is in a coalition with the Austrian People's Party.
	BZÖ	Alliance for the Future of Austria	1.2% (N = 13)	
Belgium	VB	Flemish Interest	2.1% (N =29)	No
	FN	National Front	0.3% (N = 4)	
Czech Republic	SPD	Freedom and Direct Party	3.9% (N = 44)	No
Denmark	DF	Danish People's Party	12.1% (N = 43)	No
Estonia	EKRE	Conservative People's Party	1.0 % (N = 10)	Yes. The Conservative People's Party is in a coalition with the Estonian People's Party.
Finland	Ps	Finns Party	13.9% (N = 187)	Yes. The Finns Party is in a coalition with the Center Party of Finland, the National Coalition Party, and Blue Reform.
France	FN	National Rally	11.9% (N = 126)	No
Germany	AfD	Alternative for Germany	4.6% (N = 97)	No
Hungary	FIDESZ	Hungarian Civic Alliance	48.7% (N = 416)	Yes
	Jobbik	The Movement for a Better Hungary	18.6% (N = 159)	
Netherlands	PVV	Party for Freedom	8.1% (N = 109)	No
Poland	PiS	Law and Justice	33.5% (N = 261)	Yes
Sweden	SD	Sweden Democrats	4.9% (N = 71)	No
United Kingdom	UKIP	UK Independence Party	7.4% (N = 104)	No

TABLE 1: Overview of Right-Wing Populist Parties in Countries Surveyed by the ESS 2014. Source: European Social Survey 2014 and Rooduijn, et al. 2019, Populists = Proportion of right-wing populist voters in population.

The survey contains data for 18 member states of the European Union (EU), Switzerland, Norway, and Israel. As the so-called immigration crisis triggered serious political conflicts within the EU (e.g., resistance to a quota-based, equal distribution of refugees), we limited our case selection to EU member states. Our focus on right-wing populist parties led to a further restriction of the sample, as they have not (yet) been able to establish themselves in all EU member states (e.g., such parties are not active in Portugal, Ireland, Spain, Slovenia, and

Lithuania). In addition, we followed the practice of Lubbers and Coenders (2017, 104) and excluded cases in which voters for right-wing populist parties fell below 20 respondents (e.g., Estonia). The sample thus comprises 12 EU member states in which at least one right-wing populist party was able to gain a foothold (see Table 1).

This small number of cases creates a problem for comparative research. Nevertheless, the ESS (2014) is suitable for testing our research-guiding hypothesis, as we compare societies that differ substantially in their social wealth, geographical location, the existence of Muslim communities, and their historical experiences of democracy. In this respect, our empirical approach resembles the idea of a most-different research design: We assume a general individual-level linkage between approval of a Muslim ban and support for right-wing populist parties, despite these different contextual factors (Pickel 2016). However, further research is needed to examine whether our findings travel beyond the cases examined in this study.

We believe the timing of the survey is not a serious problem. We acknowledge that the influx of refugees peaked after 2015, and we also are aware that quarrels about a quota-based distribution of refugees have escalated since the data were gathered. However, widespread anti-Muslim resentment is far from a new trend in Europe (Pickel and Öztürk 2018a), and right-wing populists have been able to capitalize on this resentment even before 2015 (Lubbers and Coenders 2017). The so-called refugee crisis activated and intensified pre-existing latent resentments against Muslims, and right-wing populists profited the most from this trend (Pickel 2019). The ESS (2014) offered another advantage in that it allowed us to account for well-established explanatory factors beyond Islamophobia that may favor the decision to vote for a right-wing populist party. These alternative explanatory factors include homophobic attitudes (Akkerman 2015), distrust of national institutions (Ziller and Schübel 2015), EU skepticism (Werts, et al. 2013), religiosity (Arzheimer and Carter 2009), ethnocentric versions of nationalism (Bar-On 2018; Brubaker 1996), and social-structural factors that relate to the so-called modernization loser thesis (Betz 1994). The operationalization of these constructs is shown in Table 2. As a further check for robustness, we controlled for the respondent's place of residence (urban/rural), gender, and age. Based on the work of Norris and Inglehart (2019), we distinguished between four age cohorts: interwar generation (born before 1945), baby boomers (born 1946–1964), Generation X (born 1965–1979), and millennials (1980-2000).

We applied a multilevel analysis (Gelman and Hill 2007; Hox 2010) as an appropriate statistical method to test our theoretical assumptions for two reasons. First, assuming a stronger individual linkage between anti-Muslim prejudices and the support of right-wing populist parties in societies with significant Muslim communities implies a cross-level interaction. Second, if we argue that higher voting shares for right-wing populist parties are favored by a social climate in which Muslims on average experience more hostility, then this implicates a macro-micro-relationship.

TABLE 2: Operationalization of Alternative Explanatory Factors. Source: European Social Survey 2014. (next page)

Theoretical Construct	Item	Original Scale	New Scale
Support for a right-wing populist party	Party voted for in last national election	List of parties	1 = right-wing populist party 0 = other party
Anti-Muslim prejudice	Allow many or few Muslims to come and live in the country	1 = allow many to come and live here, 4 = allow none	1 = allow none (…) 0 = allow many to come and live here
Homophobia	Gays and lesbians free to live life as they wish	1 = agree strongly; 5 = disagree strongly	1 = disagree strongly (…) 0 = agree strongly
Distrust of national institutions	Trust in country's parliament	0 = no trust at all, 10 = complete trust	Additive index: 1 = no trust and extremely dissatisfied (…) 0 = complete trust and extremely satisfied
	Trust in the legal system	0 = no trust at all, 10 = complete trust	
	Trust in political parties	0 = no trust at all, 10 = complete trust	
	Satisfaction with the national government	0 = extremely dissatisfied, 10 = extremely satisfied	
EU skepticism	Trust in the European Parliament	0 = no trust at all, 10 = complete trust	Additive index: 1 = no trust and unification gone too far (…) 0 = complete trust and unification go further
	European unification should go further or has gone too far	0 = Unification already gone too far 10 = Unification go further	
Religiosity	Belonging to particular religion or denomination	1 = yes, 2 = no	Additive index: 1 = highly religious person (…) 0 = not religious at all
	How religious are you	0 = not at all religious, 10 = very religious	
	How often do you attend religious services apart from special occasions	1 = every day, 7 = never	
Ethnocentrism	Some races or ethnic groups are born less intelligent	1 = yes, 2 = no	Additive index: 1 = ethnocentric worldview (…) 0 = no ethnocentric worldview
	Some races or ethnic groups are born harder working	1 = yes, 2 = no	
	Some cultures are much better or all equal	1 = Some cultures are much better than others 2 = All cultures are equal	
Education	Highest level of education	1 = less than lower secondary 7 = higher tertiary education	1 = higher tertiary education (…) 0 = less that lower secondary education
Financial deprivation	Feeling about household's income nowadays	1 = living comfortably on present income 4 = very difficult on present income	1 = very difficult on present income (…) 4 = very difficult on present income
Urbanization	Domicile, respondent's description	1 = a big city, 5 = farm or home in countryside	1 = big city (…) 0 = farm or home in countryside
Gender	Gender	1 = male, 2 = female	1 = male 0 = female (Ref.)
Age	Year of birth	Year of birth	Cohorts: Interwar generation (before 1945) Baby boomers (1946–1964) Generation X (1965–1979) Millennials (1980–2000)

Given that the rejection of Muslims is particularly pronounced where few Muslims live (cf. Górak-Sosnowska 2016; Marfouk 2019; Pickel and Öztürk 2018b; Pickel and Yendell 2016), right-wing populists would paradoxically benefit from the presence and absence of Muslims. However, with only 12 countries in our sample, this method could not be used effectively (Hox 2010, 233-234; Stegmueller 2013). We therefore used the two-step design as it provides a viable solution when the ratio of contextual units (meaning societies) to lower-level units (meaning individuals) is very small (Achen 2005; Lewis and Linzer 2005). This procedure inevitably leads to a simplification, since the analysis is divided at the individual level (first step) and at the societal level (second step). In the first step, we present individual-level logistic regressions for each of the 12 countries. Logistic regression is an appropriate procedure because our dependent variable has a binary character: Either citizens vote for right-wing populists, or they do not (Hosmer and Lemeshow 2004). This statistical procedure allows us to scrutinize whether the rejection of Muslims increased the likelihood that an individual voted for right-wing populist parties.

In a second step, we used the results of these logistic regressions for an analysis at the societal level. More precisely, we relied upon average marginal effects, as these provided us with comparable insights about the differing relevance of the Islamophobia–right-wing populism relationship within and between the cases we investigated (Mood 2010). As mentioned above, we expected a stronger individual linkage between anti-Muslim prejudices and the support of right-wing populist parties in societies with significant Muslim communities, and we used a scatter plot to visualize this assumed relationship.

Average marginal effects tell us whether the support for a Muslim ban is likely to affect an individual's decision to vote for a right-wing populist party. However, this does not allow us to say anything about the average support for a Muslim ban in the societies we study. It would be premature, in our view, to conclude that right-wing populist parties cannot benefit from a social climate that is anti-Muslim. Yet, how can we demonstrate that widespread prejudices against Muslims coincide with a dividend for right-wing populists? For us, the involvement of right-wing populists in government is a key indicator of their success. This points to a normalization of right-wing populist discourses and shows that right-wing populist parties can exert far-reaching influence on the political agenda. To be sure, we decided to distinguish between right-wing populists in positions of power and those in opposition (see Table 1). We expected higher average support for a Muslim ban in societies where right-wing populists hold government responsibility, and we used grouped box plots to visualize the plausibility of this assumption.

3. Results

Does Islamophobia pay off for Europe's right-wing populists? The results in Table 3 underpin our research-guiding hypothesis: Islamophobia is a driving force behind the electoral success of right-wing populists. Aside from Poland and the Czech Republic, we observed that support for a Muslim ban increases the likelihood of voting for right-wing populist parties (the average marginal effects range from .059 in Belgium to .224 in Austria). The anti-Muslim rhetoric of right-wing populists does not fall on deaf ears, and the so-called refugee crisis turned out to be serendipity for them—at least the election results of recent years can be interpreted that way.

Moreover, it turned out that anti-Muslim panic mongering is more conducive than homophobia to the maximization of votes. The only countries in which the rejection of equal rights for gays and lesbians is a clear incentive to vote for right-wing populists are France and Poland. This finding corresponds to the ultraconservative profile of the PiS government, which has been in power since 2015. For its chairperson, Jaroslaw Kaczynski, the demands of

the LGBTQ movement for equality mark an "imported attack" on the institution of the family that threatens the identity of the Polish nation (Gera 2019).

Jean-Marie Le Pen, the founder of the National Front, is known for a similar rhetoric. He insinuated a resemblance between pedophilia and homosexuality and referred to the latter as "a biological and social anomaly" (Dearden 2017). From his daughter, Marine le Pen, the new figurehead of the National Front, openly homophobic statements of this kind are not to be expected. In general, homophobic statements have become a rarity among right-wing populists in Western Europe and Scandinavia. On the contrary, right-wing populists increasingly portray themselves as defenders of sexual minorities who are to be protected from allegedly dangerous, intolerant, and homophobic Muslims (Siegel 2017). Several motives play a role here. One is that some sexually modern nativists are among those voting for right-wing populist parties. They are in favor of equal rights for gays and lesbians but harbor prejudices against migrants and Muslims in particular (Spierings, et al. 2017).[5]

Islamophobia is an integral part of a right-wing populist host ideology and has possibly even evolved into a distinct ideology. But what about the thin ideology of the populist zeitgeist? (Mudde 2004). Does elite criticism drive voters into the arms of right-wing populist parties? Our results clearly show that mistrust towards political elites and democratic institutions is an important push factor that increases the likelihood of voting for right-wing populist parties (the average marginal effects vary from .093 in the Netherlands to .516 in Poland). An exception to this pattern exists in Hungary, the only country in our sample in which a right-wing populist party had been in power when the survey was conducted. In this case, it is rather the opposite. Opposition voters have lost their trust in the legislative, executive, and judicial branches of power, and for good reason: Viktor Orbán's FIDESZ dominates the political institutions, and democratic principles are no longer the only game in town (cf. Ágh 2016).

Thus, depending on the context, political dissatisfaction can favor the election of right-wing populist parties. Another key factor is the degree of right-wing populist parties' establishment in the political system: Do they act as radical opponents of the national political establishment, or have they become part of "the gang" and win elections and hold government positions? (Krause and Wagner 2019). One could argue that right-wing populists in positions of power are particularly inclined to shift their criticism of the establishment to the EU. In fact, in Hungary the impact of a Eurosceptic stance on the likelihood of voting for a right-wing populist party is most pronounced (average marginal effect = .459, p = .0001). Again, however, it is important to stress that this is a pan-European pattern. In general, mistrust vis-à-vis allegedly out-of-touch elites in Brussels and skepticism about the process of European unification is one of the strongest predictors of an individual's support for right-wing populist parties (average marginal effects vary from .069 in Belgium to .259 in Denmark).

The distinction between the host ideology and thin ideology of right-wing populists is academic in nature. Both elements are entangled in the discourses of right-wing populists (Wodak 2015). Whether in Western Europe, Scandinavia, or Eastern Europe, right-wing populists attack national governments and the EU because of their sluggish reactions in the face of an alleged Muslim invasion of the West. This rhetoric is a successful attempt to attract prejudiced voters and to portray themselves as the only credible guardian of the people (Bremmer 2018). In this respect, right-wing populists do not hesitate to present extremely shrill allegations. One illustrative example is the so-called Soros conspiracy. Viktor Orbán accuses George Soros (a Hungarian-born Jew and US-based financial speculator) and his co-

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[5] Right-wing populists are by no means allies of the equality claims of the LGBTQ movement. Criticism of what they call "genderism" also shows that right-wing populism is a reactionary backlash against the societal achievements of a progressive value change in Western societies (Norris and Inglehart 2019).

conspirators in Brussels of organizing waves of migration to Europe in order to accelerate the so-called Islamization of Europe.

DV	Vote for Right-wing Populist Parties in the last national election					
Country Party	Austria FPÖ & BZÖ	Belgium VB & FN	Germany AfD	France FN	Netherlands PVV	United Kingdom UKIP
Support for a Muslim ban	.224*** (.040)	.059*** (.019)	.061*** (.019)	.176*** (.034)	.115*** (.027)	.099*** (.027)
Homophobia	−.040 (.045)	−.009 (.018)	.023 (.021)	.073** (.034)	-.009 (.041)	−.024 (.037)
Distrust: National institutions	.191** (.077)	−.003 (.027)	.094*** (.034)	.060 (.070)	.093* (.048)	.146*** (.044)
EU skepticism	.181** (.073)	.069** (.027)	.130*** (.032)	.186*** (.056)	.166*** (.042)	.204*** (.048)
Religiosity	−.139*** (.044)	−.029* (.017)	−.040** (.017)	−.097*** (.033)	−.091*** (.027)	.030 (.026)
Ethnocentrism	.040 (.034)	.009 (.011)	−.007 (.017)	.068** (.030)	.012 (.027)	-.023 (.023)
Education	−.206*** (.058)	−.028* (.016)	−.011 (.019)	−.122*** (.037)	−.133*** (.031)	−.051** (.024)
Financial deprivation	−.007 (.049)	−.009 (.014)	−.019 (.020)	.047 (.039)	.001 (.026)	.003 (.028)
Urbanization	.015 (.037)	.013 (.015)	−.004 (.018)	.002 (.030)	−.045* (.025)	−.049 (.033)
Gender (Ref.: woman)	.038* (.022)	−.006 (.008)	.026** (.010)	.013 (.019)	-.000 (.014)	.010 (.015)
Interwar generation	−.058 (.038)	−.007 (.013)	−.052*** (.015)	−.181*** (.036)	−.055** (.023)	.014 (.034)
Baby boomers	−.030 (.031)	−.019 (.012)	−.059*** (.013)	−.096*** (.028)	−.048** (.020)	.018 (.032)
Generation X (Ref.: millennials)	.000 (.032)	.001 (.010)	−.016 (.013)	−.069** (.030)	−.015 (.020)	.043 (.032)
Likelihood-Ratio Test	138.10***	52.29***	155.78***	161.65***	187.58***	118.57***
Pseudo-R2	.215	.201	.199	.236	.296	.189
Observations	791	1.290	1.879	948	1.189	1.170

DV	Vote for Right-wing Populist Parties in the last national election					
Country / Party	Czech Republic SPD	Hungary FIDESZ & Jobbik	Poland PiS	Denmark DF	Finland Ps	Sweden SD
Support for a Muslim ban	.005 (.063)	.210*** (.074)	−.060 (.063)	.219*** (.039)	.161*** (.039)	.089*** (.020)
Homophobia	−.141** (.059)	.044 (.065)	.244*** (.058)	.048 (.048)	.009 (.036)	.029 (.031)
Distrust: National Institutions	−.096 (.112)	−.733*** (.081)	.516*** (.126)	.075 (.065)	.228*** (.069)	.105*** (.038)
EU-Skepticism	.009 (.098)	.459*** (.086)	.066 (.113)	.259*** (.054)	.232*** (.062)	.107*** (.036)
Religiosity	−.128** (.062)	.091 (.065)	.737*** (.135)	.037 (.040)	−.019 (.038)	−.009 (.026)
Ethnocentrism	−.002 (.042)	.043 (.049)	.027 (.060)	.033 (.033)	.038 (.031)	.107*** (.024)
Education	.018 (.072)	.164** (.081)	−.121** (.066)	−.040 (.037)	−.046 (.037)	−.029 (.022)
Financial deprivation	.052 (.066)	.267*** (.078)	.133 (.108)	.055 (.043)	.019 (.044)	−.011 (.023)
Urbanization	.090* (.054)	−.240*** (.078)	−.065 (.064)	−.026 (.031)	.017 (.028)	−.031 (.021)
Gender (Ref.: Woman)	-.026 (.031)	.052 (.034)	.026 (.037)	.012 (.019)	.085*** (.000)	.013 (.012)
Interwar-Generation	−.257*** (.065)	−.384*** (.060)	−.011 (.074)	−.021 (.030)	−.058 (.036)	−.035* (.020)
Baby-Boomers	−.147*** (.040)	−.286** (.048)	.028 (.054)	−.057** (.027)	−.012 (.028)	−.004 (.016)
Generation-X (Ref.: millennials)	−.021 (.040)	−.134** (.052)	−.015 (.054)	−.047* (.028)	−.023 (.031)	.001 (.017)
Likelihood-Ratio-Test	55.57***	157.52***	124.13***	167.42***	169.98***	133.70***
Pseudo-R2	.054	.197	.195	.221	.168	.308
Observations	842	623	515	1.007	1.235	1.121

TABLE 3: Individual-level Explanations of a Right-wing Populist Vote Choice Source: European Social Survey 2014. Note: Entries are average marginal effects. Standard errors in parentheses. * < .10, ** < .05, ***<.01.

In this rhetoric, populist criticism of the elites, which entails crypto-anti-Semitic connotations, and Islamophobia join hands, even though we must stress that Orbán does not overtly express anti-Semitic remarks himself and that he cultivates an ostentatious friendship with Israel (Hafez 2017; Kalmar 2018).

We also wondered whether religious voters share populists' anxiety that Europe will be Islamized. Our results show that the self-declared defenders of the so-called Christian-Jewish Occident find little support among religious voters, especially in Western Europe, where they tend to elect conservative or Christian-democratic parties (Allen 2017; Arzheimer and Carter 2009; Norris and Inglehart 2004). However, another pattern can be observed in Poland. Other factors being equal, individual religiosity turns out to be the strongest predictor of voting for PiS (average marginal effect = .737, p = .0001). This result is hardly surprising, as the conservative wing of the Polish Catholic Church and the PiS maintain strong ties. Both actors pursue an extremely conservative social agenda, which includes their bigotry against homosexuals, the attempt to criminalize abortions, and giving the Catholic faith more weight in school education (Cienski 2016; Fomina and Kurcharczyk 2016; Pędziwiatr 2018). Beyond these national peculiarities, religion has generally moved into the foreground of the right-wing populists' communication strategies (Minkenberg 2018). Religion is, however, most often used as an identity marker to draw a sharp line between enlightened Europeans and "dangerous" Muslims (Roy 2016).

This generalized talk about Muslims comes with a rigid distinction between in-groups and out-groups and devaluation of Muslim communities and their culture. Surprisingly, however, it turns out that ethnocentrism is a weak predictor for the vote of right-wing populist parties. France and Sweden are an exception to this pattern, as individuals with an ethnocentric ideology are more likely to vote for the National Front and the Sweden Democrats. In most of the regression models presented here, the effect of ethnocentrism is partialized by the support of a Muslim ban. Ethnocentrism feeds anti-Muslim prejudices (Pickel and Öztürk 2018a) and thus indirectly influences the probability of supporting right-wing populist parties. A direct effect cannot be observed in most cases, since prejudices against Muslims are so commonplace that they are found among the mainstream public and thus among people without a closed, ethnocentric worldview.

Finally, we have shed light on the explanatory power of the modernization loser thesis (Betz 1994; Lengfeld 2017). Do low levels of education and economic deprivation make individuals more inclined to vote for right-wing populist parties? The results reveal different effects of citizens' cognitive and material resources. Right-wing populists face difficulty gaining the votes of citizens with the highest educational qualifications (Arzheimer 2012). Conversely, this does not mean that financial deprivation (the feeling of not making ends meet with one's income) is a draw horse for right-wing populists. Of course, we do not deny that, in modern knowledge societies, educational qualifications determine access to well-paid jobs, but, all in all, educational degrees seem to be more important than payrolls. Again, we stress that the context strongly determine whether these results can be generalized. In Hungary, where the right-wing parties FIDESZ and Jobbik managed to win more than 50% of the votes (see Table 1), a cross-class coalition of citizens inevitably supports them. In other words, they were able to reach both well-educated and financially deprived Hungarians and, presumably, well-educated Hungarians who nevertheless have difficulties making a living. Sociostructural factors should not be overestimated, however, either in Eastern or in Western Europe. The

central winning themes of the right-wing populists, such as their fierce criticism of political elites, are appealing to people of all walks of life and thus to the entire social fabric.

On balance, our results are in line with the cultural-backlash thesis. It is not so much economic deprivation, but rather diffuse cultural threat perceptions, mainly vis-à-vis Muslims, that ensure that European right-wing populists gain ground (Norris and Inglehart 2019; Rippl and Seipel 2018).

The effects of the control variables are unequivocal: Large metropolitan centers are not the strongholds of right-wing populists, as is particularly evident in Hungary. Moreover, their voters are mostly men and less likely to be found in the oldest age cohorts. The myth that most voters of right-wing populist parties are on the verge of blessing the temporal is therefore not true. Their lifeline will not dry up in the short term (Eatwell and Goodwin 2018). In a nutshell, we find that the right-wing populist wave is propelled both by a strong mistrust of citizens towards politicians in their own capital and also in Brussels, as well as by stereotypes and resentments against Islam and Muslims—all of which are attitudinal patterns that can be found beyond the lunatic fringe of European societies.

Table 2 also shows, however, that the strength of the Islamophobia right-wing populism nexus varies considerably across the examined societies. In statistical terms, a unit increase on the Islamophobia scale increases the probability of voting for the Belgian VB by 5.9%; in Austria the probability of voting for the FPÖ or BZÖ increases by 22.4%. Is the factual proportion of Muslims in the total population a moderating factor? A glance at Figure 1 rapidly reveals that the answer must be no. In Hungary, a country with a minuscule Muslim community, the strength of the effect of a strict rejection of Muslim migrants on the vote intention for a right-wing populist party is much more pronounced than in Belgium, Germany, Sweden, and Great Britain. We even find that this effect is bigger in Hungary than in France, the country with the largest Muslim community to be found in Western Europe (PEW 2011). Throughout Europe, Islamophobia is a tool that right-wing populists like to use to gain voters (Hafez 2014). The presence or absence of Muslims is, at first glance, of secondary importance.

One could now raise the objection that we have simply ignored the insignificant Islamophobia effect in the Czech Republic and Poland and that right-wing populists in Western Europe and Scandinavia are thus still the biggest beneficiaries of hostilities against Muslims. This interpretation seems too rigid and too technical; in terms of content, it implies claiming that Islamophobic attitudes are not a blessing for the Polish PiS or the SPD of Tomio Okamura in the Czech Republic. Blatantly racist statements against Muslims, such as Okamura's call to walk with pigs in front of mosques (Muller and Lopatka, 2017), do, of course, explain his popularity among segments of the Czech electorate.

Such statements are not Okamura's unique selling point, however. President Milos Zeman, former chairman of the Czech Social Democrats, declared that he considers Islam to be a religion of death and that the notion of moderate Muslims is a contradiction in terms, as there would be no moderate Nazis either (Trait 2016). It almost seems as if mainstream and right-wing populist parties want to outdo each other in Islamophobic propaganda (Hafez 2018; Slačálek and Svobodová 2018). A similar pattern has been observed in Poland: The perception that Islam presents a menace to society can be found across the entire political spectrum and not just among PiS voters (Dudzińska and Kotnarowski 2019; Pędziwiatr 2018). Fierce opposition towards Muslim immigrants is a prevalent opinion in Poland and more so in the Czech Republic (see Figure 2). Voters of right-wing populist and mainstream parties do not differ

much on this issue. The problem is that average marginal effects only provide information about the individual level and ignore the societal diffusion of the resentment.

However, if we accept that Islamophobia is a tool for right-wing populists, then it becomes evident that populists can also capitalize on a social climate in which hostility towards Muslims has become a banality. If we focus on the macro level, a second glance reveals that the presence or absence of Muslims is by no means negligible. Islamophobic attitudes are particularly widespread in places where few Muslims live (cf. Górak-Sosnowska 2016; Marfouk 2019; Pickel and Öztürk 2018b; Pickel and Yendell 2016).
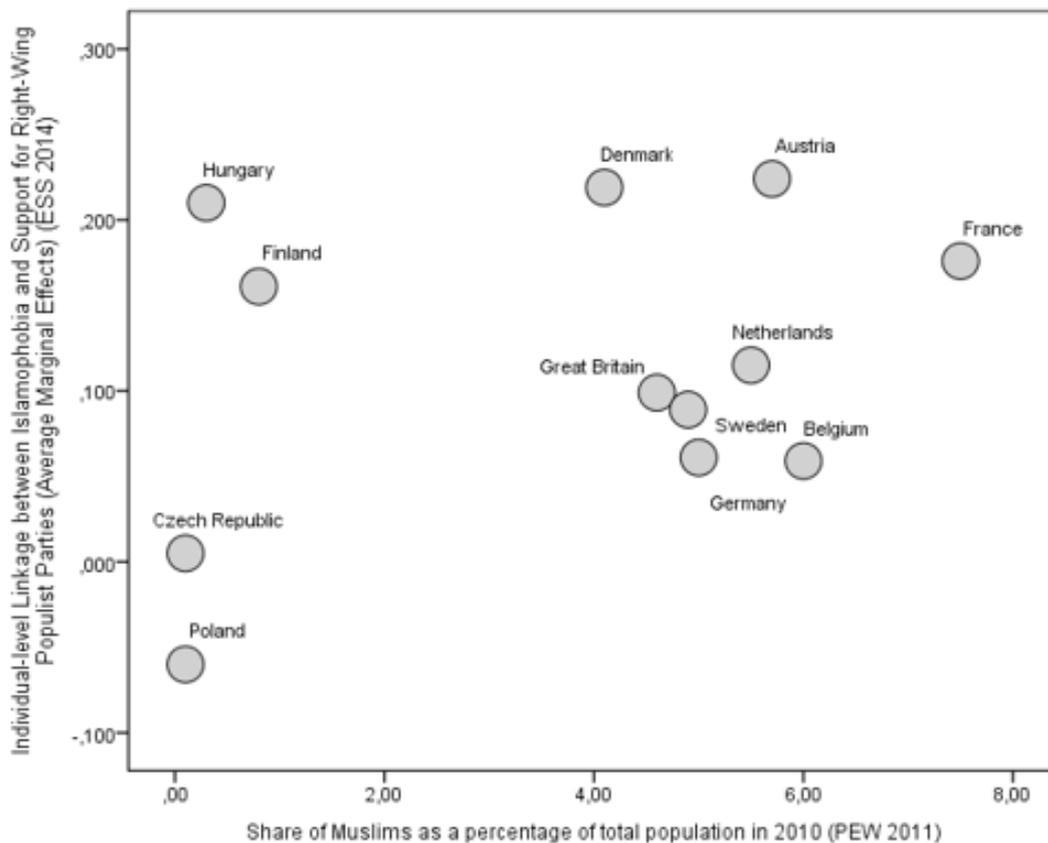
FIGURE 1: The Effect of the Factual Presence of Muslim Minorities in European Societies on the Individual-level Linkage between Islamophobia and the Support for Right-wing Populist Parties. Source: European Social Survey 2014 & PEW Research 2011.

This empirical pattern may seem paradoxical, but it is fully in line with the contact hypothesis that intergroup contacts can contribute to the erosion of prejudices under favorable conditions (Allport 1971; Pettigrew 1998; Pettigrew and Tropp 2006). If the premise of this hypothesis applies, then the lack of contact opportunities with Muslims accounts for the more pronounced anti-Muslim social climate in many Eastern European societies. Under such circumstances, resentments can flourish more easily. When para-social contacts predominate, people's perception of Muslims is largely influenced by media consumption (Horton and Wohl 1956). The negativity bias of the mass media only serves to exacerbate the situation.

The heavy rotation of news about conflicts in the Middle East, the coverage of terrorist attacks (e.g., in Paris, Berlin, Marseille, Stockholm, and London), and the image of no-go zones for whites in Muslim-dominated neighborhoods all serve to form an imaginary picture in which Muslims are perceived as extreme, violent, and dangerous (Ahmed and Matthes 2007; Kalmar 2018; Pickel and Yendell 2016, Saeed 2007). Moreover, right-wing populists spare no

expense and effort to spread Islamophobic discourses, be it in places with many or few Muslims (cf. Lean 2012). The important difference is that most citizens in Eastern Europe, except those living in the larger cities, have less opportunity to adapt their threat perceptions to the profane reality through regular contact with Muslims compared to their Western European compatriots (Pickel and Öztürk 2018b).
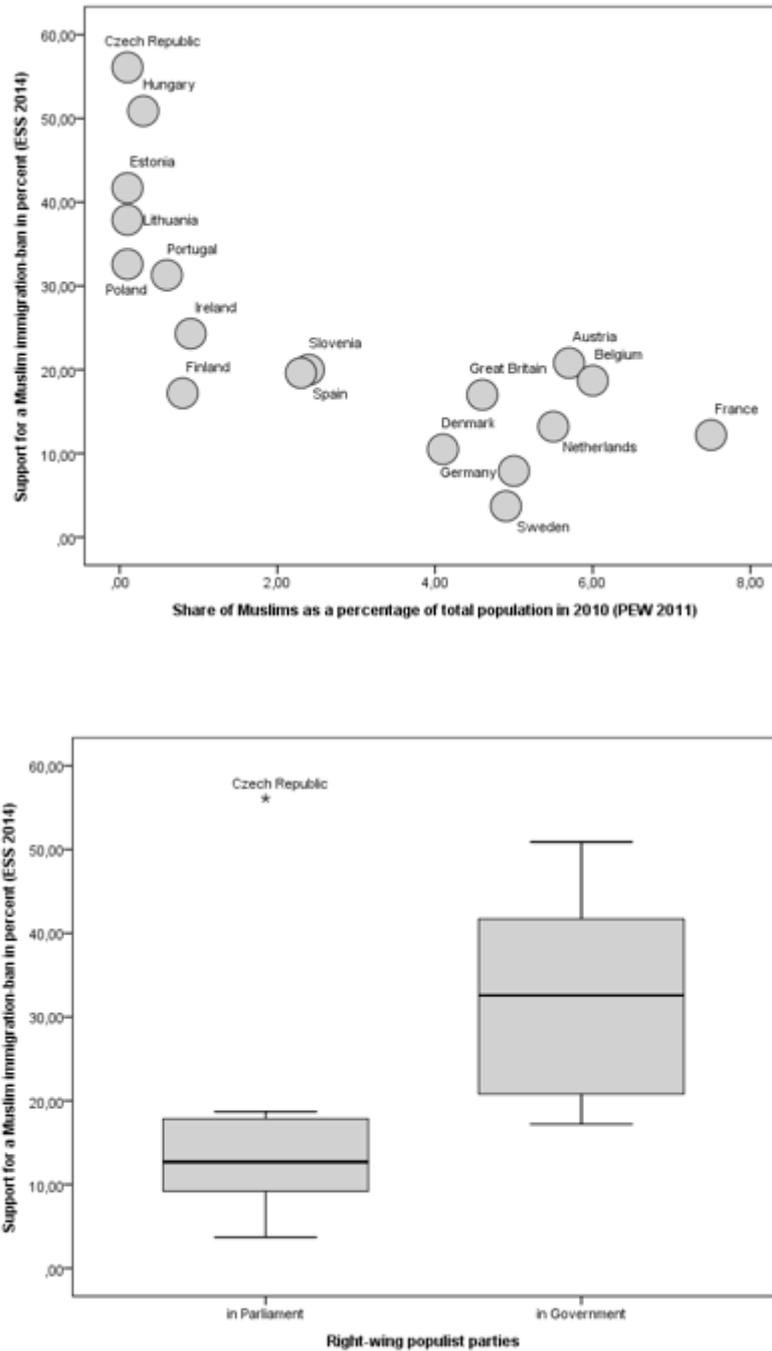
FIGURE 2: The effect of the factual presence of Muslim minorities in European societies on the average support for a Muslim ban and a comparison of the support for a Muslim ban in states with right-wing populists in opposition and in government. Source: European Social Survey 2014 and PEW Research 2011.

This pattern promotes a social climate shaped by widespread reservations against Muslims, "Islamophobia without Muslims"[6] yields dividends for right-wing populists (Figure 2). Approval rates for a strict Muslim ban are much higher in societies in which right-wing populists exercise government responsibility (e.g., Estonia, Poland, and Hungary) compared to societies in which right-wing populists find themselves in the opposition (e.g., Sweden and Germany).[7] Widespread hostility towards Muslims thus offers right-wing populists a political window of opportunity to join government coalitions (e.g., in Estonia, Austria, and Finland) or even to win elections (e.g., Poland and Hungary).

How right-wing populists instrumentalize the conflict-potential of religious affiliations and convert it into electoral successes

We now come back to the initial question and draw a conclusion. Do right-wing populists need the religion factor for their success? Of crucial importance to the answer is the question about what exactly is meant by the religion factor. If it means that mainly religious individuals tend to vote for right-wing populists, then the answer must be a clear no. Ironically, one result of our study is that right-wing populists, who sometimes pitch themselves as defenders of Christian Europe, have little support among the devout, with Poland being the only exception to this rule.

The importance of religion manifests itself when attention is paid to the threat against which the Occident must supposedly be defended. Right-wing populists in Amsterdam, Paris, Berlin, Stockholm, Copenhagen, Helsinki, Warsaw, Prague, and Budapest offer the same answer: The danger is Islam and Muslims. Their obsession with Islam and its followers—even in places where hardly any Muslims live—should not surprise us: Islamophobia facilitates the pan-European electoral triumphs of right-wing populists. One might conclude that, if Muslims did not exist, right-wing populists would have to invent them, to rephrase Sartre's (1994) remark about anti-Semitism. Another point also became clear: The Muslim scapegoat only serves right-wing populists because hostilities towards Islam and Muslims are widespread in the population. Otherwise, their rhetoric would be doomed to fizzle. Right-wing populists prosper from entrenched, group-oriented prejudices against Muslims and an openly negative image of Islam. Many times, this is just some old wine in new bottles, given the long history of negative stereotypes about Islam in Europe (cf. Benz 2017, Said 1978). More recent threat perceptions activated, reinforced, and adapted these resentments to modernity. In this context, a key role is played by realistic threat perceptions that are triggered by Islamist terrorism, which is transmitted by the media directly into one's living room, but also by symbolic threat perceptions that result from the fear of a gradual Islamization of Western society.

The fear of an Islamization originates from the visible consequences of a Muslim presence in Europe, such as headscarves and long beards, but halal supermarkets, kebab shops, and mosques also play a role. The fear can also arise from a secular critique of the allegedly misogynistic, homophobic, or anti-Semitic behavior of Muslim communities. The problem is exacerbated when right-wing populists dramatize these fears and mingle them with their

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[6] "Islamophobia without Muslims" offers a concise phrase for the macro relationship shown in Figure 2. The rejection of Muslims is most pronounced in the European societies where the fewest Muslims live. The underlying individual context is the same throughout Europe. People with regular and positively perceived contact with migrants are less Islamophobic, whether in Eastern Europe or Western Europe (cf. Pickel and Öztürk 2018b).

[7] The Czech Republic seems to be an outlier in this respect, as Rooduijn et al. (2019) classify the Czech governing party ANO 2011 as populist, but not right-wing populist. The rhetoric of its chairman, Andrej Babis, who has been prime minister since 2017, is rather moderate compared to that of Tomio Okamura. However, Babis has spoken out strictly against hosting any refugees. In his speeches, he has repeatedly emphasized that the ANO movement pursues a strict antimigration agenda. This rhetoric did little harm to his election as prime minister, considering that one in two Czech citizens is explicitly in favor of a Muslim ban (Hafez 2018; Kim 2017).

attacks on the political elite. In this vein, right-wing populists more and more frequently employ conspiracy theories and insinuate that mass migration, managed by liberal elites, has the long-term goal of a great replacement. In the case of the alleged Soros conspiracy, anti-Semitic undertones were also present: a so-called "Jew from Wall Street" was accused of orchestrating the global flow of refugees from the Middle East to European countries. This idea flirts with the anti-Semitic imagining of a mighty Jewish string-puller. The Muslims, however, have a different role to play in this line of thought: They are portrayed as a barbaric horde that sweeps across Europe like a horrific natural disaster. During times in which such a conspiracy theory, which extends well beyond Hungary, is successfully used as an election campaign strategy, hostility towards immigrants and Muslims. fueled by nationalist collective identities and cultural threat perceptions, turns out to be a propelling force of right-wing populism. Yet Islamophobia does not only work as an individual attitude pattern. The magnitude of its societal penetration is what counts. A more pronounced anti-Muslim social climate enhances people's susceptibility to right-wing populists. Developments in Eastern Europe are particularly virulent. The population's reservations about Muslim immigrants are extremely high in this part of Europe.

Our analysis shows, in line with the contact hypothesis (Allport 1971), that it is precisely the minuscule size of the Muslim population that is conducive to widespread animosity against them. Citizens have little opportunity to engage in genuine encounters with Muslims to counter the nightmarish images spread by the media and politicians and thus remain fearful and drawn to right-wing populists' claims. The chances of meeting Muslims beyond the big cities are significantly lower than in many Western European societies. Islamophobia without Muslims has proven to be a blessing for right-wing populists. This social climate has made it easier for them to enter government coalitions or even to win elections. The developments in Poland and, even more so, in Hungary are a sign for alarm as they show that right-wing populists in power positions harbor the potential to harm democracy. Even if Islamophobic citizens cultivate a democratic self-image, both Poland and Hungary offer a blueprint to raise doubts. From our point of view, hostility towards minorities hints at anti-liberal understandings of democracy. A vote for Kaczyński or Orbán reflects satisfaction with a political status quo characterized by authoritarian transformation of state institutions. This, however, has not led to Poland or Hungary to be treated like a pariah within the European political discourse. On the contrary, conservative mainstream politicians such as Sebastian Kurz and Germany's Interior Minister Horst Seehofer are fighting shoulder to shoulder with Orbán in their efforts to create a "Fortress Europe" (cf. Kalmar 2018; Strolz 2018).

This mainstream rapprochement to right-wing populists is problematic, as their attempts to fuel social polarization bear the potential to erode democratic standards in Western Europe as well. A shift in the discourse and debate culture is evident. Striving for compromises and tolerance for pluralism gives way to friend-foe distinctions and a comeback of exclusive collective identities and nationalism. The democratic meta-norm of a mutual recognition of all society members as free and equal citizens (Habermas 1996) is thus under threat. As a marker for the identification of in-group and out-group, the category of religious affiliation plays a central role within these processes. Right-wing populists know how to instrumentalize this conflict potential of religious affiliations and convert it into electoral success. The dangers this can pose for democracy have become particularly evident in Eastern Europe. The Islamophobic oil on the wheels of European right-wing populists deserves more scholarly attention, but most importantly, social ostracism needs to be looked at and discussed. Islamophobia first hits Muslims, but an attack on them, or any group, is a declaration against the open society.

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