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MIGRATION, ISLAMOPHOBIA, AND POLITICS: A STUDY OF THE CHANGING RELIGIOUS LANDSCAPE IN EUROPE

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Abstract: This article analyses how the growth of the Muslim population due to migration has changed the religious and political landscape in Europe while also fueling an increase in Islamophobia discourse in the public sphere. Through a qualitative approach based on literature studies and critical discourse analysis, this study examines political narratives, state policies, and media representations of Islam and the Muslim community. Secondary data was collected from international agency reports, scientific journal articles, policy documents, political speeches and mainstream media coverage in several European countries. The study found that rhetoric that stigmatises Muslims as "the other" has been used as a tool for electoral mobilisation by right-wing populist parties, as well as influencing increasingly exclusive immigration and secularism policies. The findings also show that Muslim communities face structural challenges in social, economic, and cultural integration due to stereotypes and systemic discrimination. In the face of this condition, this article recommends formulating more inclusive and human rights-oriented policies, such as increasing Muslim representation, strengthening regulations on hate speech, and education reforms to build diversity literacy. Thus, this study contributes to the academic discourse on the relationship between religion, migration, and politics in contemporary Europe.

Key words: islamophobia, muslim migration, right-wing populism, secularism, integration, European public policy.

1. Background of Muslim Migration to Europe

Migration of Muslims to Europe is part of a long history dating back to colonial times, when European powers expanded into Muslim regions, leading to population movement for work and military service (Moghissi 2006; Rzepnikowska 2016). After WWII, migration policies loosened, especially in France, Germany, and Britain, recruiting workers from Algeria, Turkey, Pakistan, and Bangladesh (Oberhauser 1991; Mandel 2013; Shaw 2004). This fueled the growth of Muslim communities in cities like Paris, Berlin, and London, shaping local social, cultural, and political life (Modood 2013). From the 1980s to the 1990s, Muslim migration flows increased as a result of political instability, civil wars, and human rights abuses in countries such as Iran, Afghanistan, and Somalia. Migration in this period was primarily political and humanitarian, driven by the need for international protection. Globalisation, advances in transportation technology, and relatively open international policies have all strengthened the intensity and complexity of Muslim migration to Europe (Castles and Loughna 2005; Castles 2006; O'Malley 2018).

In 2015, Europe faced its worst migration crisis since WWII, with conflicts in Syria, Iraq, and Libya causing over a million refugees, mostly from Muslim countries. This sparked debates on immigration, social integration, and security, with Muslim identities viewed as vulnerable or threatening secularism and national identity (Brubaker 2017a; Kaya and Tecmen 2018; Triandafyllidou 2018). This study analyzes Muslim migration to Europe, linking history, policies, and social perceptions shaping Muslim identity in the European public sphere. It aims to deepen understanding of social integration challenges and identity politics in multicultural Europe.

As the Muslim population in Europe grows, new dynamics emerge in the relationship between majority and minority groups, marked by rising social, political, and cultural tensions. In this context, Islamophobia discourse is increasingly emerging and gaining a place in the public sphere, primarily through the mass media and statements of political actors. The representation of Muslims as "outsiders" who find it challenging to integrate with European secular and liberal values becomes the dominant narrative that shapes public perception and state policies (Ameli et al. 2007; Allen 2010a; 2010b; Sa'di 2021; Haddad and Smith 2002). This narrative not only ignores the diversity of the Muslim community but also stigmatises them as a homogeneous group closely associated with radicalism and violence.

Islamophobia grew after terrorist attacks by Islamic extremist groups, such as 9/11, Madrid (2004), London (2005), Paris (2015), and Nice

(2016), reinforcing negative stereotypes and social anxiety. Muslims in Europe are increasingly seen as threats rather than citizens. The media often highlights Muslim involvement in crimes without providing sociopolitical context, leading to simplified narratives that reinforce fear and prejudice.

Right-wing and populist parties exploit Islamophobic sentiments for electoral gain, with leaders like Marine Le Pen, Geert Wilders, and Viktor Orbán promoting anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant rhetoric. Islam is often portrayed as opposite to European values like freedom, democracy, and gender equality, shaping public opinion and influencing policies such as stricter immigration, surveillance of Muslim communities, and restrictions on religious rights (Wodak 2015). Islamophobia exists at structural and daily life levels—muslim communities face discrimination in employment, education, and services. Laws banning religious symbols, closing mosques, and restricting religious centers reinforce social exclusion under the guise of secularism and integration (Bowen 2007; Amiraux 2004; 2006).

It is in this context that it is essential to examine how the Islamophobia discourse has developed and has a concrete impact on the Muslim community in Europe. Using a critical approach to media representation and political discourse, this study explores the links between migration, Muslim identity, and social exclusion in contemporary European society. This research not only contributes to the academic understanding of Islamophobia but also reflects on the challenges of multiculturalism in the 21st century. Studying the link between migration, religion, and politics in Europe is crucial to understanding current social changes and policy directions. Recent demographic shifts due to migration from Muslim countries affect Europe's economies, social order, intercommunity relations, and debates on identity and cohesion (Favell 2016; 2018). Understanding Muslim migration's impact on religious and political frameworks is vital for political sociology and multicultural policies. Islamophobia is not just religious discrimination but also reflects identity politics, nationalism, and fears of social change from globalization. Populist and nationalist parties often exploit immigration and Islam to mobilize voters, framing Muslims as incompatible with

This study highlights the paradox between EU principles of promoting democracy and religious freedom and the rise of Islamophobia and discriminatory regulations. It critically examines how liberal democratic values are applied to the Muslim community in policy and daily life (Bowen 2007). Additionally, it contributes to debates on European social integration and multiculturalism, comparing models like Germany's assimilation and the UK's multiculturalism to assess practices that support or hinder social inclusion and the effectiveness of integration strategies (Joppke 2017a; 2017b; Modood and Ahmad 2007).

As this issue continues to evolve globally and locally, a deeper understanding of Muslim migration's social and political dynamics is crucial for more inclusive, equitable, and sustainable policy formulation. This research, therefore, is expected to make an empirical and theoretical contribution to the effort to build a European society that is more open to diversity while reaffirming its commitment to human rights principles in the context of contemporary democracy. This article explores how Muslim migration has changed Europe's religious and political landscape. By tracing historical data, public policy dynamics, and the development of political discourse, this study seeks to identify patterns of change in the relationship between the majority and minority Muslim communities. This study sees migration as a physical and social movement that shapes the identity, perception, and structure of power relations in multicultural societies. Furthermore, this article aims to analyse how Islamophobia developed in response to the growing Muslim population in Europe. In particular, this study examines how the issue of Islam and immigration is mobilised in electoral politics by populist and nationalist actors and how such rhetoric influences exclusive policy formulation.

This research examines how mass media shapes perceptions of Muslims, uncovering negative stereotypes and how media representations contribute to the social construction of the 'other.' It evaluates European policies on Muslim migration, including integration, religious symbols, and religious institution regulations, and their impact on social, economic, and cultural life, emphasizing inclusivity and equality. The findings aim to inform policies promoting a more inclusive, harmonious, and rights-based European social order.

2. Theoretical Debate: Migration, Islamophobia, and Politics in Europe

Muslim migration to Europe is a complex social and political issue, sparking debates on integration, identity, and security. While seen as part of globalization enriching cultural diversity, it is also linked to threats to national values and democracy. These debates highlight social dynamics and how migration is used in identity politics and populism. Academic theories to understand this include Migration Theory and Multiculturalism, which explain migration's impact on society and policy; Identity Politics Theory, viewing Islam as politicized within European nationalism; and Islamophobic Theory, revealing how prejudice against Islam develops in politics and public discourse. This approach helps us understand how Muslim migration shaped European social and political landscapes and the rise of Islamophobia.

2.1. Migration, Multiculturalism, and the Challenges of Integration

The debate over the integration of Muslim immigrants has become one of the central issues in contemporary migration studies in Europe. As the number of Muslim populations increases, Western European countries implement various integration policy models that reflect their respective national political and cultural orientations. The assimilationist model, as applied in France, requires individuals to give up their original cultural and religious identity to adopt the values of Republican secularism (Freedman 2004; Jansen 2013). This approach assumes that national unity can only be achieved through homogenising social values and practices, which often ignore the complexities of immigrant identities.

The UK and Canada adopt multiculturalism, allowing minorities to defend their culture within an inclusive framework that aims to promote diversity and social cohesion. Critics, like David Goodhart (2013), argue this creates separate lives, hindering a shared identity and civic solidarity, especially after terrorism incidents involving Muslim communities, seen as failures to integrate. Edward Said's (1978) Orientalist approach explains how Western cultural power shapes Muslim identity as the 'Other" (authoritarian and traditionalist) perpetuating stereotypes and policies like banning religious symbols or restricting foreign funding for Islamic institutionsKlik atau ketuk di sini untuk memasukkan teks..

At the policy level, the dilemma facing European countries lies in the tension between defending the principles of democracy, religious freedom, and human rights with domestic political pressure to tighten controls on migration and cultural diversity. Castles and Miller (2009) note that overly restrictive policy approaches risk deepening social and economic marginalisation, which can ultimately exacerbate intergroup tensions and reinforce narratives of extremism(Castles and Miller 2009). On the other hand, inclusive policies are often politicised as a form of state weakness in maintaining national identity, especially amid the strengthening of populist parties that carry an anti-immigration agenda.

Thus, the European integration model debate is not just an administrative issue or technocratic policy but part of an ideological contest about the future of a multicultural European society. In this context, this research positions itself to understand these dynamics more deeply through historical approaches, discourse analysis, and policy studies to uncover how the social construction of Muslim identity is formed, maintained, and resisted within contemporary European public spaces.

While often viewed passively in public discourses—either as needing integration or as a threat—the Muslim community in Europe has made significant strides in political agency and participation. Over the past decade, many Muslims have taken key roles in politics, media, social

activism, and academia, serving as both a form of resistance to stereotypes and a sign of integration. Muslim politicians like Sadiq Khan and Khadija Arib demonstrate that Muslim identity is no longer a barrier to power in non-Muslim majority countries. Yet, Muslim candidates face obstacles such as negative campaigns accusing them of radicalism or disloyalty, highlighting ongoing resistance to identity pluralism in mainstream politics.

Beyond formal politics, the Muslim community also shows agency by constructing religious, educational, and alternative media institutions (Hefner 2007; Eickelman and Anderson 2003; Turner and Nasir 2016). Many Islamic organisations are active in social activities, economic empowerment, and interfaith dialogue to build a positive image and strengthen community solidarity. Such initiatives are a form of counter-narrative to the dominant discourse that often places Muslims as passive, backward, or problematic groups.

Furthermore, the younger European Muslims played an essential role in shaping new identity, citizenship, and diversity narratives. Through digital media, art, music, and popular culture, they express a hybrid identity that combines Islamic values with European nationalism (Vertovec and Rogers 1998; Kabir 2010; Imre 2009). This phenomenon proves that integration does not always mean assimilation but rather a dynamic negotiation process that produces new forms of inclusive Europeanness. In this context, it is essential to see that Muslims in Europe are not just objects of policy or discourse but also active subjects that contribute to shaping the contemporary social and political landscape. Thus, The study observes how most countries and societies respond to Muslim migration and how the Muslim community responds, adapts, and contributes within the framework of multicultural democracy in Europe.

2.2. Islam as a Politicized Identity

The politicisation of Islamic identity is also reflected in the debate over religious symbols worn by Muslims in public spaces, such as the hijab and niqab, and the construction of mosque towers. In some European countries, these symbols are the object of legislation and prohibition, which not only impacts religious freedom but also reinforces the social exclusion of Muslim communities. For example, the ban on the hijab in educational institutions and workplaces in France or Switzerland reflects an approach that normalises the dominance of the majority culture while stigmatising the expression of Muslim identity(Piela 2021; Arjana 2017; Thompson 2019; Furseth 2011).

These policies are often claimed to be neutral but tend to favor Europe's secular Christian values. Joan Wallach Scott (2007) argues Europe's secularism is a tool of exclusion, especially targeting Islam, creating a less inclusive public space (Knibbe et al. 2018; Scott 2019). Islamic

identity is politicised both by non-Muslims and Muslims, sometimes as resistance to cultural and social marginalisation. This includes stronger Muslim solidarity, community education, and social mobilization (Amer 2020).

The politicisation of Muslim identity risks radicalisation if communities feel excluded and lack political representation (Abbas 2019). Inequitable access to rights, services, and media can foster alienation and distrust. European countries should promote integration that respects norms and provides space for participation and recognition of diverse identities, including Muslim identity. Understanding Islam's politicisation amid migration and nationalism emphasizes the need for a policy framework that goes beyond assimilation to be pluralistic and just. Such an approach is crucial for creating a truly inclusive society where religious identity is recognized as part of Europe's diversity.

EU policy case studies reveal varied responses to Muslim communities, balancing secularism and religious freedom. France's laïcité led to laws like the 2004 ban on religious symbols in schools and the 2010 face covering ban, aiming for neutrality but often targeting Muslims and women. Laïcité is sometimes used to control Muslims rather than restrict majority religions, showing its exclusivity. Germany adopted inclusive multiculturalism with platforms like the Deutsche Islam Konferenz (DIK) to foster understanding of Islam's role in Germany, though discrimination and limited Muslim representation persist. In the Netherlands, pillarisation supported separate but equal Muslim communities, but after Theo van Gogh's 2004 murder, policies became more repressive, limiting Islamic funding and education to curb radicalisation. Scandinavian countries like Sweden and Denmark, despite strong human rights commitments, are influenced by rising right-wing populism; Denmark, for example, tightened residence and citizenship policies and introduced "ghetto laws' targeting Muslim areas.

This case study confirms that domestic political contexts and perceptions of Islam strongly influence policies towards Muslim immigrants in Europe. Countries that balance secularism and religious inclusion tend to have better levels of social integration, while countries that implement exclusive policies face challenges in maintaining social cohesion.

2.3. Islamophobia and Public Policy in Europe

The concept of Islamophobia was first popularised in a report by the Runnymede Trust (1997), which defined the term as "unfounded fear or prejudice against Islam and Muslims." However, over time, Islamophobia has not only been limited to individual prejudices but has also become entrenched in public policy and political rhetoric that stigmatises Muslims as a "threat" in European society (Allen 2016; Awan and Zempi 2020;

Duderija et al. 2019). As a result, this phenomenon has permeated in many forms, from workplace discrimination to religious freedom restrictions and stricter immigration policies.

In the aftermath of 9/11 and a series of terrorist attacks that occurred in Europe, Islamophobia was increasingly legitimised in state policies. According to Arun Kundnani (2014), in his book The Muslims Are Coming!, the discourse of terrorism is often used as an excuse for justification for repressive policies against the Muslim community. Measures such as strict surveillance of Muslim individuals, discrimination in the labour market, and restrictions on immigration policies are increasingly tightened, while Muslims are often seen as a "domestic threat." This narrative not only leads to the marginalisation of Muslims in specific sectors but also undermines the social order that prioritises the values of inclusivity and human rights (Assiter 2019).

Chris Allen (2010) distinguishes two types of Islamophobia: structural and cultural. Structural Islamophobia involves discriminatory state policies, like France's hijab ban or mosque restrictions, which marginalize Muslims and limit their societal participation. Cultural Islamophobia appears in negative media portrayals, where Muslims are often depicted as fanatical or misogynistic, reinforcing fears of threat to Western values and fostering mistrust (E. Said 1997, 1991, 1978, 2014). Policies discriminating against Muslims challenge EU principles of democracy, freedom, and justice. Seyla Benhabib (2002) states that excluding Muslims from rights and religious freedoms violates EU core values of diversity and pluralism, harming individual rights and fundamental ideals.

The central dilemma European countries face is that balancing repressive policies towards Muslim communities can exacerbate feelings of alienation among them, as well as increase social tensions and polarisation. Therefore, a significant challenge for European countries is to design public policies that are not only responsive to the threat of terrorism but also safeguard the democratic values and religious freedom that underlie their political systems. The migration of Muslims to Europe has changed the political and social landscape significantly, making Islam not just a religious issue but a battleground for identity politics. The debate between multiculturalism and assimilation shows an unresolved dilemma of integration. Islamophobia, which is now institutionalised in state policy and rhetoric, marks the shift of European democracies toward exclusion in the name of secularism and security.

This article asserts that the politicisation of Islam is inseparable from the dynamics of right-wing populism, restrictive immigration policies, and biased media narratives. Thus, an inclusive and human rights-based policy approach is key to reducing social tensions and building a model of equitable integration amid the diversity of contemporary Europe.

3. Methodology

This study uses a qualitative approach to understand how Muslim migration to Europe shapes political discourse, government policy, and public perception of Islam. Using the critical discourse analysis (CDA) method, it examines statements from politicians, populist campaigns, and media coverage framing Islam and migration. The rhetoric of right-wing figures in France, Germany, and the UK was analysed to see how Islam was portrayed as a "threat" to European values. Mainstream and partisan media were also evaluated for shaping an Islamophobic narrative. Additionally, the study examines government policies on immigration, integration, and religious freedom. France's strict laïcité, Germany's pragmatic approach, and the UK's multiculturalism serve as case studies for understanding relations between these countries and Muslim communities. This approach explores how policies influence the Muslim minority experience and impact social and political stability. The study combines discourse and policy analysis, interviews with academics, activists, and Muslim leaders for insight on Islamophobia's impact. Scholars analyze Islamophobia as a political tool in populism, while activists from Amnesty International and the European Network Against Racism highlight discrimination faced by Muslims in Europe (Taschner 2023; Choudhury 2021; van der Valk 2020). Case studies in France, Germany, and the UK compare approaches to religious integration amid rising anti-Islamic sentiment. This methodology reveals Islamophobia as both social and politically constructed, reinforced by policies and media. Findings aim to deepen understanding of migration, identity politics, and policies, and propose inclusive, human rights-based solutions for Muslim migration in Europe.

4. Results and Discussion

Table 1. Discourse data analysis by the author

No	Main Themes	Description of the Phenomenon	Key Actors	Policy Impacts & Implications	Interesting Findings
1	Demographic Transformation & Religious Landscape	Increase in the Muslim population through migration and birth rates; changed the religious composition of the major European cities.	Muslim migrants; Recipient countries (France, Germany, UK); Pew Research	The tension between pluralism and secular nationalism; pressure on integration policies and multiculturalism.	Changes in demographic structure have actually prompted a rearticulation of national identity that is now overshadowed by a collective fear of "Islamization of Europe."

2	Secularism Policy and Religious Regulation	The difference in approaches to secularism in Europe: from exclusive laïcité (France) to limited tolerance of religious expression (Germany, England).	National government; European Court of Human Rights; Human Rights Groups	Prohibition of religious symbols (hijab, burqa); supervision of Islamic organizations; crisis of legitimacy against the universal value of human rights.	Secularism is a political tool to affirm the identity of the majority and not just the principle of state neutrality towards religion.
3	Islamopho-bia in Po-pulist Politics	Populist parties exploit fear of Islam to gain electoral support; To form the discourse of "Islam vs Europe."	right-wing parties (RN, AfD, PVV); Nationalist politicians	Exclusionary policy: restrictions on religious symbols, strict surveillance, restrictions on mosques.	Islamophobia serves as a new political language that normalizes exclusion in the name of security and culture.
4	Representat ion of Islam in the Media	The mainstream media often associated Islam with violence, radicalism, and backwardness	Mainstream media; Journalist; Alternative digital media	Increasing public prejudice; normalization of the narrative "Islam = threat"; influence on public policy.	Asymmetry framing: violence by Muslims is seen as an ideological crime, while violence by non-Muslims is often seen as an individual incident.
5	Muslim Community Strategy	The Muslim community uses strategies of symbolic resistance, legal advocacy, increased representation, and media literacy to fight stigmatization.	Muslim Organisation s (CCIF, Tell MAMA UK); Human rights activist	Increase public awareness; the push for anti-discrimination law reform; Advocacy of Religious Equality Rights.	The survival strategy of the Muslim community actually strengthens internal solidarity and religious identity in response to structural exclusion.

6	Identity Politics and Discourse of Exclusion	The binary opposition of "us vs them" dominates identity politics in Europe; Islam is constructed as a threat to European values.	Populist politicians; Nationalist elite; Conservative media	The crisis of multiculturalism; increased support for strict immigration policies; institutionalization of Islamophobia in the legal system and public administration.	Populist discourse creates a domino effect: Islamophobia from the discourse space enters the legislative and policy space, making discrimination a legitimate state practice.
7	Normalization of Hate Speech and Violence	Political and media rhetoric fuels an increase in hate speech and violence against Muslims, both verbally and physically.	FRA (EU); anti-discrimination NGOs; Security apparatus	An increase in racial crime; the Muslim community's distrust of the state; failure of social integration.	Islamophobia is no longer a marginal phenomenon, but has become part of the socio-political structure and civic practice in a number of European countries.

4.1. The Changing Religious Landscape in Europe

The religious landscape in Europe has undergone a profound trans-formation in recent decades, mainly influenced by the growing Muslim population. Based on projections by the Pew Research Center (2017), the Muslim population in Europe is expected to increase from about 4.9% in 2016 to between 7.4% and 14% by 2050, depending on the level of migration that occurs. This increase was driven by a combination of migration from the Middle East, North Africa, and South Asia, as well as a relatively high birth rate among Muslim communities compared to non-Muslim populations. Countries such as France, Germany, and the United Kingdom now have significant Muslim communities, especially in metro-politan areas such as Paris, Berlin, and London (Hackett 2017).

This demographic transformation has triggered diverse policy res-ponses from European countries, often reflecting the tension between a commitment to pluralism and a tendency to maintain secular national identities. France, through the principle of *laïcité*, adopted strict forms of secularism and expressed it in public policies such as the ban on the use of the hijab in public schools (since 2004) and the ban on full-face coverings in public spaces (since 2010) (Bowen 2007; Fernando 2014) On the other hand, countries such as Germany and the United Kingdom show greater flexibility towards religious expression in public spaces. However, both face the dilemma between religious freedom and security controls in the

aftermath of global terror attacks (Modood 2013; Modood and Ahmad 2007).

The 2015 refugee crisis marked a turning point, with over a million refugees, mainly from Syria and Afghanistan, prompting European countries to tighten immigration, naturalisation, and oversee Islamic organisations (Choudhury 2021). While justified by security concerns, these policies often marginalise Muslims. Despite inclusion efforts, Muslims face discrimination in education, work, and housing (Heath and Cheung 2007; Koopmans 2010). The dominant assimilationist approach demands full integration into Europe's secular norms, ignoring religious and cultural identities, which fosters social exclusion and reinforces views of Islam as the "other" (E. Said 1991; E. W. Said 1978; Allen 2010a; 2010b). As the Muslim population grows and identity politics intensify, European policies must move toward more equitable, pluralistic integration. Continuing policies based on Islam-European value incompatibility will deepen social tensions. Understanding demographic dynamics is vital for domestic policy and the future of multiculturalism and social cohesion in Europe.

4.2. Islamophobia in Politics and the Media

Islamophobia has become an increasingly prominent element in European politics, especially with the rise of populist right-wing parties that exploit fear of Islam and migration as a tool of political mobilisation. Parties such as the Rassemblement National (France) (Cremer 2023), the Alternative für Deutschland (Germany) (Grimm 2015), and the Independence Party (the Netherlands) actively use anti-Muslim rhetoric in their campaigns, emphasising the narrative that Islam is incompatible with European values.(Boogers and Voerman 2010) The discourse they use often creates a dichotomy between "*we*" (native European society) and "*them*" (Muslims and migrants), portraying Islam as a threat to Europe's national identity, security, and secular culture. In political speeches, many right-wing figures associate Islam with radicalism, social instability, and foreign influences that threaten the sovereignty of their countries.

Populist parties in several countries have pushed governments to adopt stricter policies targeting Muslim communities, such as banning minarets in Switzerland, restricting burqas in France and Belgium, and tightening scrutiny of Islamic organizations in Austria and Germany. Beyond policy, such political discourse fuels social discrimination and violence against Muslims. Research shows that Islamophobic rhetoric reinforces negative stereotypes and heightens anti-Muslim sentiment across Europe. The media also plays a key role by frequently framing Islam through the lenses of violence and extremism, portraying Muslims as outsiders who struggle to integrate. Terrorist acts by Muslims are often linked to religion, unlike similar acts by non-Muslims. Furthermore, populist media and digital platforms spread conspiracy theories like "The Great Re-

placement", claiming Muslims are replacing native Europeans through immigration and birth rates (Bracke and Aguilar 2024; Bergmann 2024; Ekman 2022).

With this dominance of negative discourse, the main challenge for Muslim communities in Europe is how they can deconstruct the stereotypes built by the media and populist politics. Several civil society organisations and human rights activists have worked to counter Islamophobia through public awareness campaigns, policy advocacy, and increased Muslim representation in the media and politics. However, as long as Islamophobia remains an effective political tool in winning votes in elections and increasing the popularity of populist parties, this discourse is likely to continue to be used and exacerbate social tensions in Europe.

4.3. Reaction of Muslim Societies and Strategies in Europe

Islamophobia has become a central component in the dynamics of contemporary European politics, serving not only as a discourse of exclusion but also as a highly effective political strategy in mobilising electoral support, particularly by populist right-wing parties. Parties such as *the Rassemblement National* in France, *the Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD) in Germany, and *the Partij voor de Vrijheid* (PVV) in the Netherlands, systematically construct the narrative that Islam is a foreign entity and are contrary to core European values such as as as secularism, liberal democracy, and gender equality (Brubaker 2017; Mudde 2021; 2019).

These narratives create a binary between "we"— indigenous European societies rooted in Judeo-Christian traditions and secular modernity — and "them"— Muslims and immigrants associated with backwardness, intolerance, and threats to social stability. This populist rhetoric links Islam to terrorism, patriarchy, and poor integration, fostering a sense of identity crisis amid demographic change (Cesari 2021). Pressure from right-wing groups has led to policy changes in Europe. The 2009 Swiss referendum banning mosque towers exemplifies anti-Muslim sentiment. In France and Belgium, banning the burqa is about security and marginalisation. Austria has closed mosques and expelled foreign imams to combat radicalisation. In Germany, surveillance of Muslim groups increased without evidence of extremism (Kundnani 2017; 2015).

The policies and rhetoric's impact extends beyond institutions, creating social fear, discrimination, and violence against Muslims. According to the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (Rights 2018), Muslims face more harassment, assault, and job discrimination than other minorities. Allen (2010) notes that anti-Muslim media rhetoric normalizes hate speech and increases hate crimes. The media plays a key role, often depicting Islam through violence and extremism, framing it as a problematic religion. Studies by Poole (2002) and Baker et al. (2013) show

Muslims' portrayal is more negative than other faiths. Digital media also spreads conspiracy theories like The Great Replacement, which claims Muslim immigration aims to replace native Europeans, fueling right-wing extremism (Camus and Lebourg 2017). Muslim communities in Europe fight stereotypes through activism, political representation, and media literacy, with groups like CCIF and Tell MAMA UK documenting abuses and pushing policy reform. The main challenge is Islamophobia's use as a political tool, threatening European liberal democracy by undermining values of freedom, equality, and tolerance. Overcoming this requires political courage, new narratives, and multicultural policies aligned with Europe's diversity.

5. Conclusion and Implications

The study highlights how the growth of Europe's Muslim population has transformed the region's religious, demographic, and political landscape. Migration driven by conflicts and inequality challenges secularism and national identity, politicising Islam as a symbol of fears from cultural loss to security threats. Right-wing parties exploit this by promoting Islamophobia, portraying Muslims as threats, which leads to restrictive policies and media stereotypes linking Islam with violence and terrorism. This increases discrimination and undermines democratic principles. Policymakers should adopt inclusive strategies that respect diverse identities, balance security with human rights, and redefine secularism for peaceful coexistence. Recommendations include stricter hate speech laws, greater Muslim representation, and education emphasizing tolerance and Muslim contributions. These efforts can foster social cohesion, making religion a unifying rather than dividing force.

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