

#PolskaMieszkamTu:
Fostering Muslim-Polish Dialogue to Combat Online Islamophobic Hate Speech

Marta Siwka
Maja Lepieszka
John Esteban

I. Introduction

Recently, and with the surge in the radicalization of Muslim youth in Europe¹ as well as the widespread belief that Muslims pose a cultural and political threat to European identity and have mostly failed to integrate,^{2,3} efforts to shed light on and understand the experiences of Muslims living in Europe have gathered steam in the past decades. However, given that most sizeable Muslim populations live in Western European nations with deep colonial ties to the Muslim and Arab worlds (namely, the UK and France) or in countries with a history of robust waves of Muslim immigration (such as Germany), Muslim communities that are less visible and certainly less well-organized in terms of political representation and activism in the Central and Eastern European (CEE) nations have, by and large, been overlooked and sidestepped in the literature. Only in the past few years has a concerted determination on the part of researchers, journalists, and academics to engage with Muslims and understand their lived experiences in these countries begun to accumulate and gain strength.

Against this backdrop of neglect, misunderstanding, lack of contact and disengagement on the part of dominant groups vis-à-vis minority Muslim populations in Poland, the #PolskaMieszkamTu (#PolandILiveHere) campaign wishes to stage an intervention by engaging with Muslims currently living in Poland and providing a platform for them to lift their voices, with the overall aim of increasing their visibility as an enriching thread of the larger fabric of Polish society. We recognize that the Muslim population presently in Poland only numbers between 25,000 and 40,000,⁴ but with a large percentage—50% according to a Pew Research poll⁵—of Poles expressing Islamophobic sentiments and harboring negative attitudes towards Muslims, it is clear that stereotypical images of Muslims are circulating within Polish society, producing a hostile environment that is to the detriment of a healthy and inclusive democracy. Further, and foreseeing potential future waves of immigration from the increasingly unstable Near and Middle East into Poland and other CEE countries, we see our campaign as laying the foundation for future prosperous, more reflective, and more fruitful collaborations and relations between Muslims and Poles. It is our hope that by giving voice to Muslims and their lived experiences here in Poland, this campaign will have positive ripple effects of humanizing, adding dimension to, and exposing the great diversity of Muslims to therefore spark conversations and

¹ Bizina, M., and David Gray. “Radicalization of youth as a Growing Concern for Counter-Terrorism Policy.” *Global Security Studies, Volume 5, Issue 1*. 2014. 1.

² Ramdani, Nabila. “European poll: An Islamic threat?” *AlJazeera*. 6 Jan 2011. Web. 28 June 2015.

³ Kern, Soeren. “‘Different and Threatening’: Most Germans See Islam as Threat.” *Gatestone Institute*. 3 May 2013. Web. 29 June 2015.

⁴ Rozdeba, Suzanne. “Muslims at Home in Poland?” *Krakow Post*. 4 Aug 2011. Web. 30 June 2015.

⁵ Pew Research Center. “A Fragile Rebound for EU image on Eve of European Parliament Elections.” *Pew Research Center*. 12 May 2014. Web. 28 June 2015. 30.

foster dialogue between Muslims and Poles. By so doing, our campaign envisions a Polish society wherein hate speech will no longer have the supporting framework for its toleration and proliferation.

II. Background: Muslims in Poland and the Issue of Hate Speech

In order to explain why we as social activists need to combat online hate speech against Muslims and Islam, we must first delve into history and provide the context for the 600-year-old relationship between Muslims and Poles. The presence of Muslims in Poland dates back to the 14th century, when Tatars began settling in what was then the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth.⁶ During this period, Poland was characterized by relative economic and social growth; additionally, it expressed tolerance and acceptance for non-Catholic religious groups—a fact remarkable for a country whose national identity has been rooted in the origin story of Polish ruler Mieszko I's Christianization in 966. Inclusion of Tatar Muslims into the then complex, multiethnic, multi-religious social fabric of Poland had both positive and negative effects: while Muslims were not structurally and ideologically excluded from society, their integration worked so well that they began to lose their cultural and religious traditions, this itself facilitated by the lack of Islamic educational institutions.⁷ Following Poland's partitioning and eventual disappearance from the map, complemented by the socioeconomic decline of its erstwhile parts, minorities such as Muslims began to suffer under the pressure to mobilize a mono-ethnic definition of Polish identity. Whereas pre-WWII Poland was more ethnically and religiously diverse, "contemporary Poland is one of the most religiously homogenous countries of the European Union," a fact which often aligns Polishness with Catholic identity.⁸ This monolithic version of ethno-national identity intensified and culminated with the mass deportation of Tatar Muslims out of Poland and into Siberia under the auspices of the Communist regime in the late 20th century. Today, there are only around 5000 Tatars in Poland.⁹

Yet, even throughout the Communist period, contact with other Muslim nations and nationals contributed to the revival of a dilapidated and floundering Muslim ummah and therefore the establishment of Islamic activities in Poland. This rapport should by no means be overestimated, but it was, at least, the beginning of renewed relations and negotiations between Poland and Muslims. After the fall of Communism and especially after Poland's accession into the EU, immigration to Poland from the Middle East (and the world over, in general) has picked up moderately, despite Poland's status as a more peripheral and less powerful European nation whose socioeconomic and cultural capacities to absorb immigrants from the Orient are limited. Indeed, according to the scholarship, Poland has relatively little appeal for those wishing to immigrate to the European continent.¹⁰

Notwithstanding slight increases in immigration from the Arab and Muslim worlds and better contact with Muslims, it remains, at this time, important to stress that the overwhelming

⁶ Rozdeba, Suzanne. "Muslims at Home in Poland?" *Krakow Post*. 4 Aug 2011. Web. 30 June 2015.

⁷ "Muslims in Poland." *Islam Web*. 17 Sept 2009. Web. 28 June 2015.

⁸ Pędzwiatr, Konrad. "Muslims in Contemporary Poland." *Muslims in Visegrad Countries*. Ed. J. Bureš. Prague: Anna Lindh Foundation and Visegrad Fund. 2011. Print. p. 10.

⁹ "Muslims in Poland." *Islam Web*. 17 Sept 2009. Web. 28 June 2015.

¹⁰ Górak-Sosnowska, Katarzyna. *Muslims in Poland and in Eastern Europe*. University of Warsaw: Warsaw. 2011. Print. p. 16.

majority of Poles (88%) do not know any Muslims.¹¹ Breaking it down further, only inhabitants from bigger cities (with their universities that attract students from the Middle East and the Islamic world) and educated people have the opportunity to meet Muslims. This social distance or disengagement, combined with the general post-9/11 Western perception of Islam and Muslims disseminated and made hegemonic by the media, has led to an atmosphere of what one scholar calls “Platonic Islamophobia” or a “negative attitude towards non-existent Muslims.”¹² The scholar emphasizes the negative impact of the indirect and, indeed, *only* exposure most people have in countries such as Poland as providing the general guidelines for understanding the Muslim Other: “The media discourse on Islam focuses on international politics and situation in the Western Europe. Only seldom is there any counterbalancing information on local Muslim communities. The CEE discourse on Islam is therefore in most cases transplanted, that is, it refers to peoples and events from outside the CEE, with no relation to local reality.”¹³ There is an extraordinary imbalance in the representation of Muslims from the outside world vis-à-vis the representation of Muslims in the local community; as such, most people base their opinion of Muslims on what they see or hear in the media.

In this environment of hostility fostered by a “transplanted” (and, yes, narrow and often racist) view of outside Muslims contributing to a “Platonic Islamophobia” wherein prejudice, preconceived notions, and lack of social or cultural contact act as the paradigm for any interaction, it is no surprise that campaigns of hate have sprouted in Poland in an attempt to harness sentiments of fear and animosity towards the Muslim Other and to mobilize the far-right, nationalist fringes around a common target—although it is necessary to point out that these campaigns also revolve around hatred of Jews and migrants who are perceived to threaten some aspect of Polish identity.¹⁴ Indeed, according to a research study carried out by Bilewicz et al. (2014) anti-Muslim hate speech relates not so much to religious differences between Polish Catholics and Muslims as much as the threat and danger level Muslims are perceived to pose to Polish national and cultural identity, particularly as immigrants.¹⁵ Around 15% of adult Poles and 19% of young people support iterations of hate speech, and the main vehicle for disseminating hate speech in today’s contemporary Poland is the Internet. According to a 2015 CBOS poll, 44% of Poles have a negative attitude towards Muslims;¹⁶ regarding preferences that Poles have for other nationalities and minorities, Arabs have consistently fared as the least liked and least warm people, with figures so low they parallel attitudes Polish people have towards Roma.¹⁷

¹¹ CBOS. “Polish Public Opinion.” *Public Opinion Research Center*. March 2015. Web. 28 June 2015.

¹² Górak-Sosnowska, Katarzyna. *Muslims in Poland and in Eastern Europe*. University of Warsaw: Warsaw. 2011. Print. p. 18.

¹³ *Ibid*, p. 17-18.

¹⁴ Feffer, John. “Islamophobia in East-Central Europe.” *Foreign Policy in Focus*. 31 Mar 2015. Web. June 28 2015.

¹⁵ Bilewicz, M., et al. “Hate Speech in Poland 2014: Summary of the national opinion poll.” *Public Opinion Research Center (CBOS)*. 2014. Web. 23 June 2015. p. 4.

¹⁶ Feliksiak, M. “Postawy wobec Islamu i Muzułmanów.” *Public Opinion Research Poll (CBOS)*. March 2015. Web. June 23 2015. p. 3.

¹⁷ Górak-Sosnowska, Katarzyna. *Muslims in Poland and in Eastern Europe*. University of Warsaw: Warsaw. 2011. Print. p. 18.

III. Campaign Strategy

Given the aforementioned ambience in which hatred towards Muslims takes root and out of which instances of hate speech sprout in Poland, we identified as our main goal to counteract the narrative that Muslims threaten or endanger Polish society by showcasing Muslims *already* living and contributing to a vibrant, healthy, pluralistic, and democratic Polish society—thus heeding the call of one expert to help establish a “normative framework in which Muslims feel treated the same way as others.”¹⁸ This is why the title and hashtag of our campaign is #PolskaMieszkamTu (#PolandILiveHere), because it helps bring visibility, presence, and attention to the Muslims who come from different walks of life, different nations, different cultures, different professions, and different ethnicities and who are all in different stages in their integration within the greater Polish social fabric. What the title and vision of our campaign celebrates is the diversity and plurality of Muslims and the differences in relationships each Muslim has to their own religion and to their identity in Poland. This campaign is about highlighting the negotiations and dialogues that must take occur when a member of a group outside of the majority or the dominant narrative faces difference in the form of discrimination, hate speech, or prejudice. Implicit in this hashtag is also the goal that not only will this campaign bring visibility to this very small and marginalized group of society, but that, moreover, it will increase curiosity and a sense of understanding on the part of Polish people. We thus recognize that engaging with Muslims, providing them a platform to voice their own experiences, and thereby bringing visibility to their narratives and their stories is but the *first* step in neutralizing this structure of hostility that Muslims face, both in the public sphere and in the virtual sphere. The second step, we believe, is actually fostering a different kind of environment where relations, dialogue, conversations, and negotiations take place between Muslims and Poles.

Perhaps the biggest initial theoretical, ethical, and strategic hurdle we had to overcome was based on the question we asked ourselves, “How do we fight against negative stereotypes?” We were wary of further disseminating and propagating the idea that Muslims are terrorists, savages, violent, backwards, and so on, but what better way to bring the absurdity of these views, especially when contrasted with the sheer absence of Muslims in Poland, than by using these stereotypes in a humorous or ridiculous way? We threw around some ideas on how we could, for example, reclaim the “Muslims are dangerous” argument and load it on to the picture of falafel or kebab, but we soon realized this would put us in the territory of the unethical because we would still have to rely on a narrow, albeit more positive view of Muslims in Poland; rather, our goal was to smash down the mental monolith created by the media, and this could only be accomplished by way of diversifying the voices of Muslims in Poland.

Our strategy, then, was to disengage from stereotypes altogether and to engage instead with people. We had a contact and thus an entry point at the Islamic Cultural Center (mosque) in Warsaw, so we decided to pursue this opportunity. We quickly discovered that people were very hesitant to speak to us and less even to allow us to record their voices and take pictures of them with the #PolskaMieszkamTu sign. However, our efforts were slightly successful, and we met a number of people, including a Polish Muslim convert, the Imam at the mosque, the muezzin, and some travelers who were visiting Warsaw.

¹⁸ Feffer, John. “Islamophobia in East-Central Europe.” *Foreign Policy in Focus*. 31 Mar 2015. Web. June 28 2015.

Below are both screen shots of our films and our memes that we put out on our Facebook fan page, along with the total number of people reached. Following examples of our campaign material, we have also included the statistics as analyzed by the Facebook algorithm. In the span of one week, we had 200 likes, had a post reach of 3,375, and engaged 346 people. Overall, we found that films had a broader and wider reach than still photographs. These were accomplished completely organically.



Video 1: Meet Greg

Reach: 992

Views: 291



Video 2: Portraits of Muslims in Poland

Reach: 661

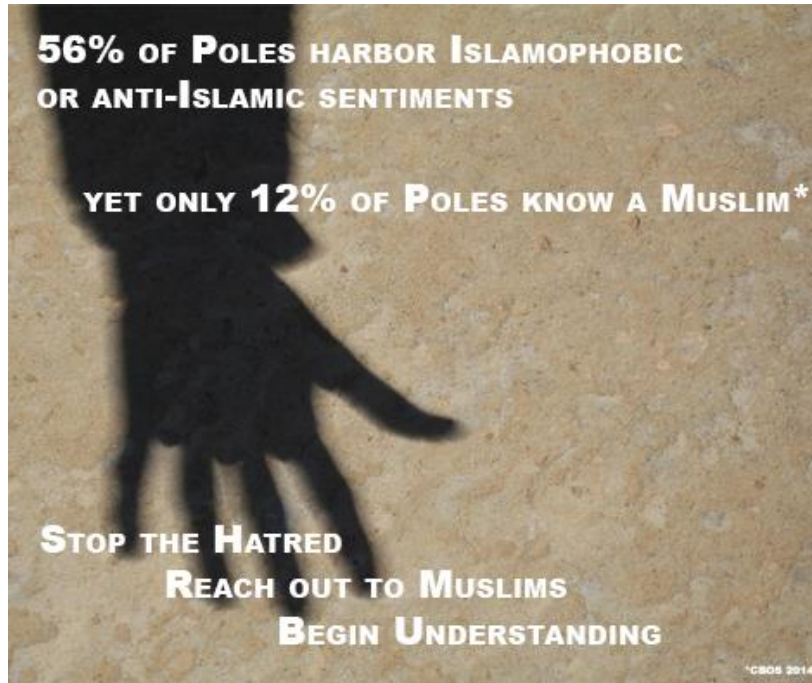
Views: 160



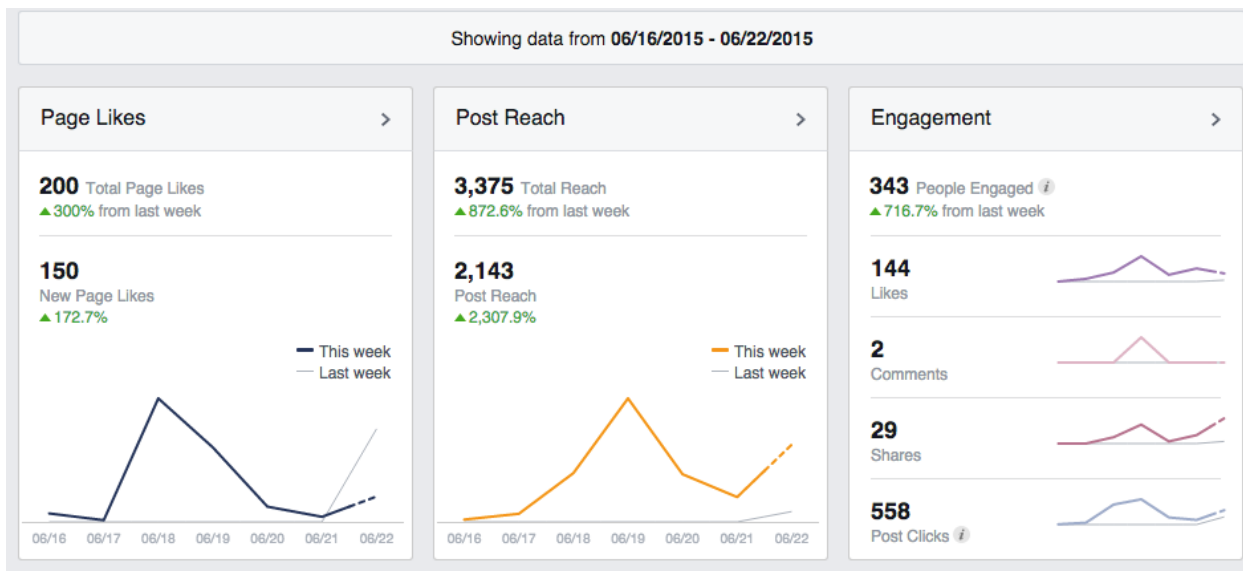
Meme 1: Meet Abu Bakr
Reach: 655



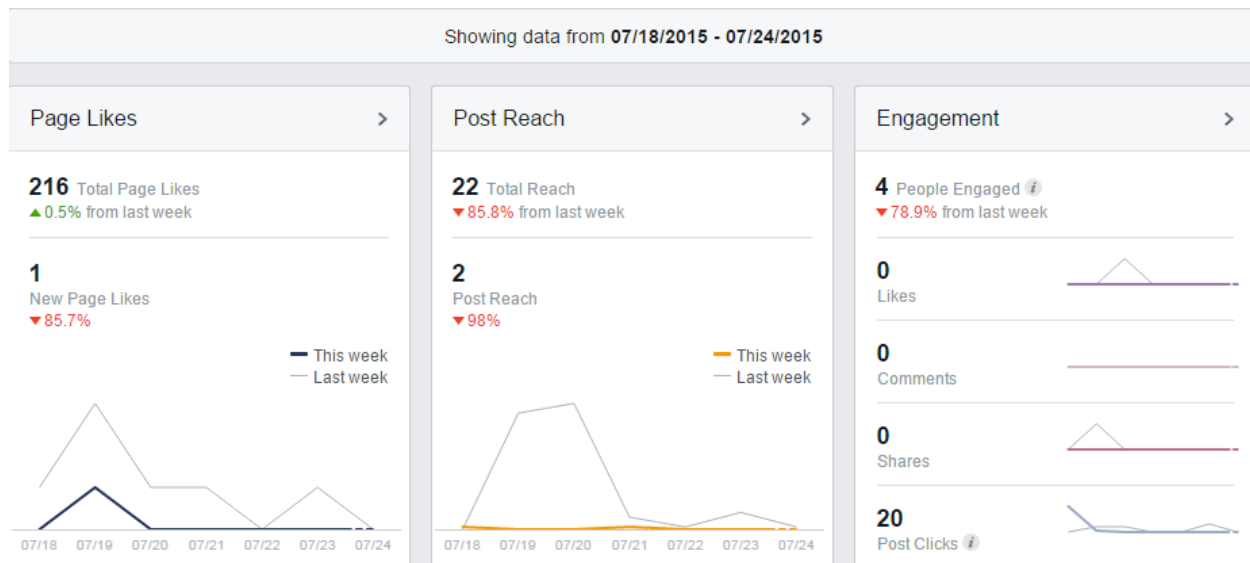
Meme 2: Meet Abdul Mohsen
Reach: 415



Meme 3: Reach out to Muslims
Reach: 225



Total Reach



IV. Lessons and Reflections

Throughout this process, we have learned and will take away several lessons. None of us had any video/film-making experience at the beginning of this process, or much knowledge on how to conduct a social media campaign with very limited resources, but we managed to pull through and use all our tools and instruments at our disposal to come up with positive, enriching ways of giving voice to Muslims in Poland. One challenging aspect about filmmaking, beyond its technical/logistical requirements, is that we often didn't know how exactly to tailor our footage toward our goal, so in the future it will be useful for all of us to have a more clear picture or template in our mind of what the footage should look like (re: the goal of the campaign) prior to shooting, that way we don't waste our time with unnecessary footage.

Obviously, the biggest obstacle in the way of our campaign is the general distrust or suspicion that Muslims have towards human rights activists or, really, anyone outside of the ummah, leading to lack of trust and thus a foreclosed conversation between activists and Muslim communities. We do not mean to attribute this lack of rapport merely to Islam, but, perhaps because our main point of contact to Muslims was the mosque, a lot of the Muslims that we met expressed great conservatism and reservation at the thought of being interviewed, much less being filmed, recorded, or photographed. We found, indeed, that most of the people we interviewed were more than willing to help, so long as we did not trespass their boundaries or ask too much of them. This might be a testament more to cultural differences regarding how people construct their narratives in the East as opposed to West; for example, one might say that in the West, and especially in our neoliberal, social media saturated world, we are more comfortable expressing our individuality through confessionalism, a tradition heavily rooted in the Catholic tradition. In *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault argues for the centrality of the confession in Western societies: "Western societies have established the confession as one of the main rituals we rely on for the production of truth."¹⁹ The West, in its affinity for social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and so on, has largely inherited this confessionalism, whereby

¹⁹ Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality Volume 1: An Introduction*. New York: Vintage Books. 1978. pp. 56.

individuals put into practice their subjecthood in a social order through autobiographies and other methods to achieve self-fashioning (e.g., selfies). Given the entrenched iconoclasm within the history and conceptualization of Islam, confessionalist image-making is, depending on the beliefs of specific practitioners, sometimes at odds with Muslim beliefs²⁰ of whereas Easterners are less concerned and indeed care less about their public image. We have thus learned of a gap with respect to what we wanted of our interviewees and what they could provide for us, based on their principles and cultural values.

Strategically, we had to change our foundational idea once we discovered that most Muslims we interviewed were not experiencing hate speech or overtly aggressive statements in their daily interactions; rather, most of these occurrences were limited to the virtual world, which is a public sphere of its own accord but should be treated differently than the natural world. Our group had to be flexible enough to absorb this shock.

On an interpersonal level, we were all initially ecstatic to be placed in the same group, working on a topic that was near and dear to our hearts. None of us are Muslim, of course, but each of us have had intimate proximity and relationships with Muslim people in the past, so we felt compelled to work on this topic in Poland. We were a bit surprised when others would tell us that this is not an important topic or a relevant topic at the moment, but, given that we see this campaign as fostering future prosperous and deep connections between Poles and Muslims, it addresses a problem that we think Poland and other Central and Eastern European nations will face: immigration from the Middle East and North Africa and other parts of the Muslim world and the subsequent integration problems of these immigrants to the social fabric of Europe at large. While all three of us were adamant about the relevance of this issue, we all wanted to approach it differently. The problem of how best and most ethically to address negative stereotypes kept coming up and our ideas differed. Our definitions of success differed as well—someone was more preoccupied with reaching the goal of Humanity in Action, while someone was more preoccupied with the ethics of how we got there, particularly our tactics for interviewing and for developing sustainable rapport with our interviewees and to not violate their trust. In the end, as much as we were concerned with encouraging an arena of negotiations and collaborations between Poles and Muslims, the three of us, too, learned how to communicate with each other (sometimes after breaching good conduct of communication) and how to negotiate with each other (not imposing our ideas on the group, compromising, and so on). In fact, we think this conflict was necessary and indeed productive for our campaign, and we hope that it serves as evidence for the importance of having conversations that are sparked by conflict. Conflict resolution, then, is another important lesson we have taken away.

What, then, would our advice be for human rights activists and social media campaign organizers who follow our footsteps? First, have a clear but flexible goal that you know will be kneaded and massaged into something more concrete as you go along. Second, get to know your teammates, how they work, get into arguments and conflicts, take deep breaths, and never let your working relationship interfere with your friendships with them. These are people who are invested in the same work you are doing, so why spoil a great relationship simply because of aesthetic, creative, or managerial differences? Third, do not get discouraged when you fall short of your goals, and keep at it. Don't see this as a failure but as a stepping-stone towards bigger and greater goals! Putting content out is important enough because it means you are engaging. Always, always, be convinced in the value of your work. As C.S. Lewis once said, "Failures,

²⁰ King, G.R.D. "Islam, Iconoclasm, and the Declaration of Doctrine." *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*. London: Cambridge University Press. 1985. Vol. 48, No. 2. pp. 267.

repeated failures, are finger posts on the road to achievement. One fails forward towards success,” but as we all have different definitions of success, we might need to compromise on that, too.

V. Works Cited

- Bilewicz, M., et al. "Hate Speech in Poland 2014: Summary of the national opinion poll." *Public Opinion Research Poll (CBOS)*. 2014. Web. 23 June 2015.
- Bizina, M., and David Gray. "Radicalization of youth as a Growing Concern for Counter-Terrorism Policy." *Global Security Studies, Volume 5, Issue 1*. 2014.
- Feffer, John. "Islamophobia in East-Central Europe." *Foreign Policy in Focus*. 31 Mar 2015. Web. June 28 2015.
- Feliksiak, M. "Postawy wobec Islamu i Muzułmanów." *Public Opinion Research Poll (CBOS)*. March 2015. Web. June 23 2015.
- Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality Volume 1: An Introduction*. New York: Vintage Books. 1978.
- Górak-Sosnowska, Katarzyna. *Muslims in Poland and in Eastern Europe*. University of Warsaw: Warsaw. 2011.
- Gotev, Georgi. "Council of Europe criticises racism in Hungary, Poland." EurActiv.com. 9 June 2015.
- Kern, Soeren. "'Different and Threatening': Most Germans See Islam as Threat." *Gatestone Institute*. 3 May 2013. Web. 29 June 2015.
- King, G.R.D. "Islam, Iconoclasm, and the Declaration of Doctrine." *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*. London: Cambridge University Press. 1985. Vol. 48, No. 2. pp. 267-277.
- "Muslims in Poland." *Islam Web*. 17 Sept 2009. Web. 28 June 2015.
- Pew Research Center. "A Fragile Rebound for EU image on Eve of European Parliament Elections." *Pew Research Center*. 12 May 2014. Web. 28 June 2015.
- Ramdani, Nabila. "European poll: An Islamic threat?" *ALJazeera*. 6 Jan 2011. Web. 28 June 2015.
- Rozdeba, Suzanne. "Muslims at Home in Poland?" *Krakow Post*. 4 Aug 2011. Web. 30 June 2015.