

UDK 323.1:314.742(438)(049.3)

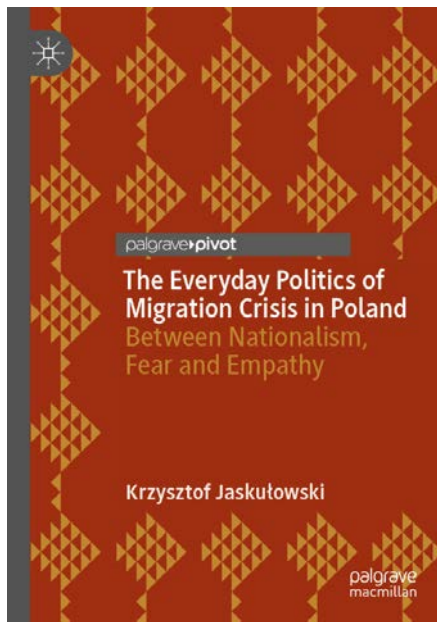
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.22182/spm.6422019.17>

Review

*Dejana M. Vukasovic**

Institute for Political Studies, Belgrade

POLAND AND “MIGRATION CRISIS”: THE EVERYDAY UNDERSTANDING OF THE CONCEPT OF NATION



Krzysztof Jaskułowski, *The Everyday Politics of Migration Crisis in Poland. Between Nationalism, Fear and Empathy*, Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2019, 139 p.

* E-mail: dejana.vukasovic@ips.ac.rs

One of the recently published books that should certainly merit scholars' attention is *The Everyday Politics of Migration Crisis in Poland. Between Nationalism, Fear and Empathy* (Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2019), written by the Polish historian and sociologist Krzysztof Jaskułowski, Associate Professor at SWPS University of Social Sciences and Humanities in Warsaw. The author of three books in Polish language (*Mythical Dimensions of Nationalism. History and Myth in Welsh National Ideology*, 2003; *Nationalism without Nations. Nationalism in the Anglophone Social Sciences*, 2009; *Symbolic Community. Toward Anthropology of Nationalism*, 2012), as well as numerous articles in international journals related to migration studies, politics of memory and nationalism, in his latest book aims to analyse the attitudes towards the migrants and refugees from Middle East and North Africa (MENA) in Poland in the context of the everyday understanding of the Polish nation and national boundaries (p. 1). The book focuses on how ordinary people from Poland perceive refugees from MENA, what are their attitudes towards accepting refugees and to what extent they reproduce, negotiate and contest the hegemonic Islamophobic discourse in Poland. More specifically, the book analyses their attitudes towards refugees from MENA in the light of understanding of the concept of (Polish) nation.

The book represents an original contribution to the existing body of literature dealing with the question of nation and nationalism, as well as to the research on anti-Islamic prejudices. On the one hand, by focusing on the bottom-up understanding of nation, the book fills the gap in existing research whose focus is primarily on the top-down construction of a nation. Although there is research on everyday nationalism, it is mainly centred on national practices, i.e., on the questions when and why people think and talk about nation, in what circumstances they implicitly invoke the category of nation. Krzysztof Jaskułowski's book is instead oriented to the various meanings people attach to the concept of nation, i.e., to the question what the nation signifies to the people. This analysis enables to trace how symbolic national boundaries are constructed and how and what categories of people are excluded from the nation (p. 18). On the other hand, in the scope of research on contemporary Islamophobia, the book contributes to a better understanding of the contemporary Islamophobia in Poland, by tracing its specificity

through the analysis of the attitudes of ordinary people towards refugees. Therefore, the book aims to link top-down and bottom-up approaches in analysing the concept of nation, whose connection remains undertheorised. Also, less attention in the existing literature has been paid to the question of Islamophobia in the post-socialist context of Central and Eastern Europe, mostly concerned with the Western European anti-Islamic discourse. Therefore, the book adds not only to a better understanding of the contemporary Islamophobia in Poland, but also to the research of anti-Islamic prejudices in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, which remains underexplored topic.

This multilayered book is divided into eight chapters. In the first chapter, the author explains the *rationale* of the book, its structure and its contribution to the existing body of literature dealing with the question of nation and nationalism, as well as with research on anti-Islamic prejudices. The second chapter lays out its theoretical and methodological framework. The book draws on the constructivist approach to nationalism and hence, considers nation as a social construction. The author does not embrace any particular theory on nationalism, choosing instead to rely on the work of different authors (e.g. Billig, Brubaker, Hall). Therefore, he understands nationalism as a “cultural construction of social reality focused on the concept of a nation” (p. 16). In line with this understanding of nationalism, the author rejects “definitional ontology” of the nation: the nation is not some really existing and clearly bounded social group with stable and unchangeable identity, but rather a cultural, discursive and affective practice (p. 16). In other words, the concept of nation represents a set of practices and discourses that construct social reality (p. 16). It implies a dynamic process of giving meaning to social reality, which is subject to constant struggle, contestation and negotiation in everyday life (Jaskułowski, Majewski 2017). Therefore, the so-called ordinary people are not seen as a passive agents reproducing the construction of a nation, but as active agents capable to challenge, negotiate and contest the powerful (hegemonic) discourses, i.e., to create counter-discourses (p. 17). Consistent with this theoretical framework, the book relies on qualitative research and is based on semi-structured interviews conducted in the period between 2015 and 2017 with Polish residents in seven Polish towns (p. 2,

21–22). Unlike quantitative research, this methodology allows for an in-depth analysis of often contradictory, inconsistent and fragmented views of the people, i.e., their everyday interpretation of social reality.

In order to explain the attitude of Polish citizens towards migrants and refugees from MENA, the author first reconstructs the broader political context, starting with the analysis of the so-called migration crisis and the role of the EU in dealing with it, as well as the reaction of the Polish governments to this crisis, leading to the emergence of hegemonic Islamophobic discourse in the Polish public sphere (chapter three). The author takes a critical stance towards the EU by showing the contradictoriness and inconsistency in EU action towards the “migration crisis”. By claiming that the concept of “crisis” is not a neutral and descriptive one, but rather the way of constructing reality that suggests that migrants and refugees “are a sudden and unexpected source of trouble” that requires “exceptional solutions” (p. 32), Jaskułowski convincingly presented how the rhetoric of “migration crisis” shaped the EU policy. He then explores the emergence of the hegemonic Islamophobic discourse in Poland. As he contends, although anti-Muslim prejudices existed before the so-called migration crisis as part of the public discourse in Poland, mainly during “war on terror”, it was not until 2015 that the anti-Muslim discourse took a central place in the Polish public sphere, triggered by the debate on the relocation plan demanded by the EU (pp. 39–40). In this part of the book, the author compellingly presents the discursive construction of migrants and refugees as identified with Muslims in the official political discourse, media and popular culture, naming this phenomenon the “pathological Europeanization” of the Polish public sphere (p. 38). The pathological effects of the Europeanization of the Polish public sphere are reflected in the discursive construction of migrants and refugees as a national threat, as a dangerous Other against “us”, i.e., Poles, thus making possible the representation of migrants and refugees in terms of inferiority and exclusion. The author argues that the right-wing official discourse drew on the concept of Huntington’s “clash of civilisations”, attributing to refugees identified as Muslims the characteristics of the dangerous, threatening Other who wanted to destroy European civilisation and especially Poland, discursively represented as the country at the centre of European

civilisation which preserved the Christian culture intact (p. 41). Thus, the discursive binary opposition between “us” and “them” was, according to the author, constructed in terms of cultural racism (p. 41) but also relied at times on biological differences (p. 48). He also points to the hegemonic status that the Islamophobic discourse has gained through its reproduction by the government-controlled media, right-wing press, the Church and popular culture.

The fourth chapter deals with the question of understanding the “Polishness”, i.e., the meaning that it holds for Polish people, considering it as an important background for their attitudes towards MENA migrants and refugees. The author focuses on the analysis of different ways of understanding Polishness. First, he attempts to capture the importance of national identity for respondents and concludes that national identity is understood as a self-explanatory and natural category (p. 56). In other words, the nation is understood in primordialist terms, as a deeply embedded natural phenomenon which one simply has (p. 57). National identity takes precedence over other identifications, confirming the construction of the “self” of people as *homo nationalis*, i.e., the definition of their selves primarily in national terms (p. 58). Second, he tackles the question of how people imagine the Polish nation. Jaskułowski rejects the civic/ethnic dichotomy in nationalism studies deeming it too simplistic and identifies three ways of imagining the Polish nation – ethnic, civic and historical-cultural (p. 59). He points out that the interviewees understand nation primarily in cultural and historic terms (“cultural nationalists”), as a clearly bounded group with distinct cultural identity whose origins are projected into the distant past. In this context, the state is regarded as an emanation of a culturally understood nation (p. 61). Third, he analyses the criteria for inclusion and exclusion from the nation. This interesting part of the chapter is based on the understanding of nationality as a form of capital. Therefore, the author highlights that a high level of national capital, i.e., “cultural nationalism” is understood by the respondents as their right to determine who can be recognised as a Pole and under which conditions. Also, he observes that the respondents did not use term “migrant” but instead referred to “immigrants” and “emigrants”, thus reproducing the nationalist vision of social reality, emphasising the importance of the national borders. An interesting part of this chapter concerns the respondents’ division

of migrants into “desirable” and “undesirable”, pointing to the logic of not only cultural nationalism but also neoliberal discourse based on productivity, economic usefulness and human capital of migrants (pp. 68–71).

The next three chapters of the book (five, six and seven) are devoted to the analysis of the interviews in terms of attitudes towards migrants and refugees from MENA. The author distinguishes three groups of people based on their attitudes towards migrants and refugees, which he names “rejectors”, “welcomers” and “ambivalents”. Chapter five describes the attitudes of the so-called rejectors who oppose the admission of the refugees. The rejectors identified the refugees with Muslims and constructed them as the radically different Other that represents “a total threat to both Europe and the Polish nation” (p. 77). They reproduced the hegemonic right-wing Islamophobic discourse. For analytical purposes, Jaskułowski identifies different dimensions of threat (terrorist, threat to social order, threat to women, economic, demographic, cultural and religious, political), underlying their connection and mutual reinforcement. In so doing, the author shows that the rejectors’ attitudes towards refugees take form of cultural racism (p. 97). In the author’s view, the notion of culture in rejectors’ narratives has a similar function to the notion of race: it underlines Muslim refugees as the radical Other and creates a boundary between “us” and “them” following the cultural racist logic (p. 93). However, in addition to drawing a parallel between Islamophobia and the earlier anti-Semitic patterns of racism, the author also analyses Islamophobia with regard to anti-Tsiganism (p. 94). The latter is a novelty in the contemporary analysis of Polish Islamophobia. While many authors underline the resemblance between Islamophobia and anti-Semitism, little attention has been paid so far to the comparison of refugees with the Roma population. Jaskułowski argues that, although the Roma were constructed as radically different and thus excluded from the Polish nation, they were not treated by the interviewees as a threat to national or European identity aiming to destroy the European civilisation. Instead, the identification between refugees and Roma was constructed on the basis of projection of anti-Roma stereotypes on the refugees with predominance of biological factors, especially skin colour as a marker of cultural difference. The analysis sheds new light on the cultural racism in Polish Islamophobia, as well

as on the relationship between cultural and biological racism in Polish Islamophobia.

In contrast to rejectors, the so-called “welcomers” are at the other end of the spectrum of attitudes, challenging the hegemonic right-wing discourse by unconditionally favouring the acceptance of refugees (chapter six). Dominant within this group are civic nationalists and the nationally indifferent, with no ethnic nationalists, and only a small number of cultural nationalists. The author distinguishes three types of welcomers’ discourses (open borders, humanitarian approach and multiculturalism), simultaneously showing their overlapping and mutual reinforcement. He draws several conclusions from these discourses. First, welcomers shared the similar emotions as rejectors, i.e., fear, but not of Muslim refugees but of the response of the Polish government and society to the so-called migration crisis. Consequently, they detach themselves from their national and European identity, but their detachment is contextual and situational, i.e., linked to the PiS government and social reactions to refugees (p. 103). Second, welcomers constructed refugees as passive agents in need of humanitarian assistance, rather than active actors seeking rights and life prospects. Third, the author underlines that the pro-refugee discourse is secular in nature, showing the Catholicism is largely regarded as a marker of the national boundary, while its ethical dimension is disregarded.

Apart from these two extreme poles, the author also distinguishes the group of respondents which he calls “ambivalents” and whose attitude is characterised by hesitancy, contradictory discourses and conditional acceptance of refugees (chapter seven). The ambivalents are positioned between fear and empathy. At the same time, they reproduce the Islamophobic stereotypes on migrants and refugees and refer to humanitarianism and empathy. Their ambivalence in attitude is marked by insistence on certain conditions under which the refugees could be accepted in Poland, such as the limited number of persons (priority is given to families, women with children or orphaned children), religious proximity, i.e. Christianity, usefulness of the refugees to the society, as well as on the concept of “normality”. The reference to the latter condition of being a “normal citizen” provides the opportunity for ambivalents to constantly question whether this condition is met by the refugees and enables the creation of the boundary between

“us” (Poles, Europeans) and “them” (refugees). In this sense, the ambivalents create a boundary between “us” and “them” implicitly invoking the Islamophobic image of the Muslims as a dangerous “other”.

This multilayered, originally structured book written in a clear and comprehensive style offers a valuable insight into the everyday understanding of the concept of nation. It shows us the full complexity of the views of ordinary people when it comes to their understanding of the concept of nation. It suggests that people are active agents who do not always simply reproduce the official discourse but are also capable of negotiating and contesting it. In other words, it enables us to gain a deep insight into how the hegemonic discourse works in everyday life. The book does not focus on individual differences and interpretations in the everyday understanding of a nation, but instead provides wider socially shared patterns of the reproduction, negotiation and contestation of the hegemonic discourse. Although focusing on the bottom-up approach of understanding nation, the book also connects it with the top-down approach of the construction of nation, thus providing a valuable contribution to the existing literature on nation and nationalism. Moreover, the book represents an insightful analysis of the understanding of the contemporary Islamophobia in Poland. While the bulk of literature deals with anti-Islamic prejudices in Western European countries, comparatively less attention is devoted to the issue of Islamophobia in the post-socialist Central and Eastern European context. The book’s added-value is its contribution not only to the better understanding of the contemporary Islamophobia in Poland, but also the possibility to detect similarities and differences in relation to the Western European countries.

In my view, the book offers two particularly interesting and valuable subjects for further research. The first one is the existing research on the relationship between racism and migration which pays little attention to the post-socialist Eastern European contexts (cf. Jaskulowski, Pawlak, 2019). Through its insightful and important analysis of this relationship, the book suggests the significance of whiteness within the Polish national identity. As the author sees it, whiteness is not a static feature of the Polish national identity, but a processual, dynamic and situational one (p. 130). The book clearly shows the references to whiteness as contextual and situational, in

the form of selective and hidden biological racism, directed at certain groups and in certain situations (refugees from MENA during the “migration crisis”). It thus paves the way for further research on when and under what circumstances this feature is invoked to exclude a category of people as radically different. The second is that it offers added-value to the still underexplored research topic of anti-Islamic prejudices in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. In this regard, it opens the door for further comparative research of the anti-Islamic prejudices in Central and Eastern European countries as opposed to Western European countries.

Overall, the book represents an original contribution to the existing academic literature devoted to the questions of understanding of nation and nationalism, contemporary Islamophobia, migration and refugee studies and a valuable study for all scholars interested in these topics.

REFERENCES

- Jaskułowski, K., Pawlak M. (2019). “Migration and Lived Experiences of Racism: The Case of High-Skilled Migrants in Wrocław, Poland”, *International Migration Review*, pp. 1–24. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1750698017741933>.
- Jaskułowski, K., Majewski, P. (2017). “Politics of memory in Upper Silesian schools: Between Polish homogeneous nationalism and its Silesian discontents”. *Memory Studies*. Advanced online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1750698017741933>.