

Why the fear of Islamization is driving populist right support – and what to do about it

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Mainstream parties need to begin addressing conservative whites' anxieties about the demographic growth of Islam, or populists will continue to thrive, writes [Eric Kaufmann](#). He argues that this demands a sustained programme for improving 'demographic literacy'.



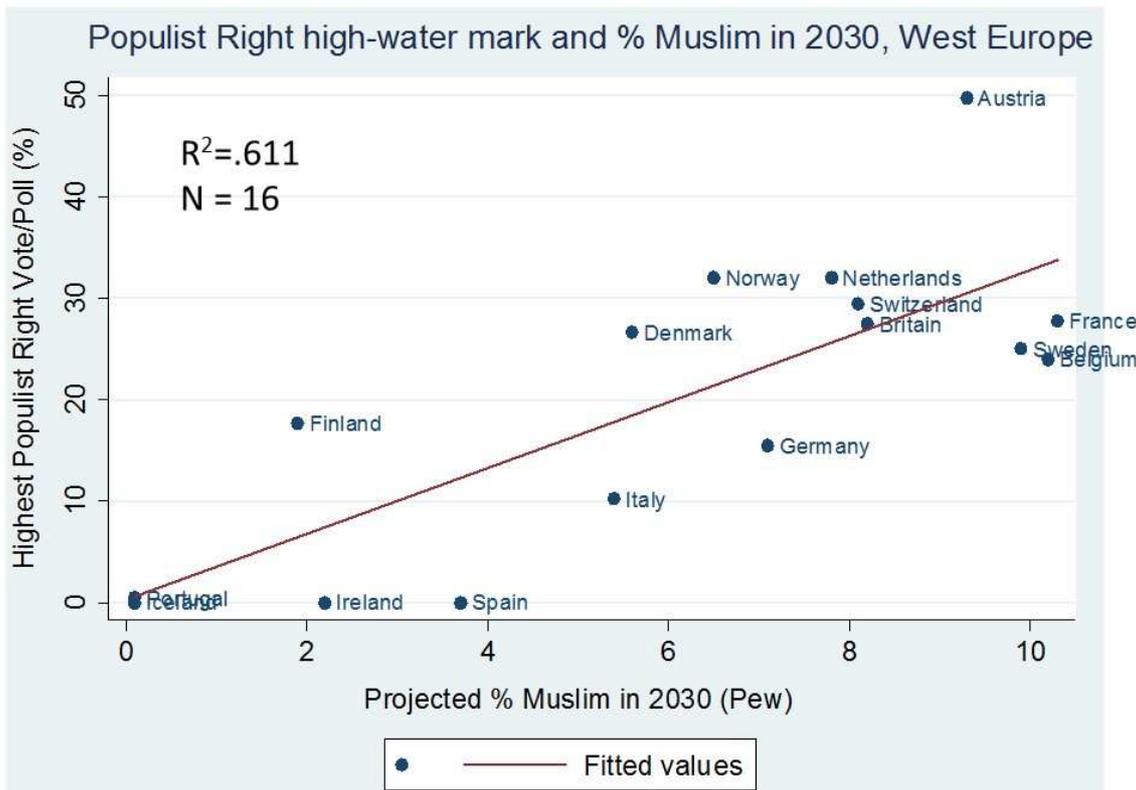
Geert Wilders may not have come first in the Dutch election, but he came second and forced his opponent, Mark Rutte, to tack closer to Wilders' Muslim-bashing position. Once again, the pundits will wring their hands and tell themselves the comforting story that economic policy can undercut support for right-wing populism. But, as with the [Brexit and Trump](#) vote, [ethnic change and values](#), not economics, better accounts for populist success.

Why Muslims matter

The Muslim share of the population, and its rate of increase, is an important barometer of cultural change. Raw immigration inflows aren't a good measure since they contain a large share of intra-European migrants – often from neighbouring countries – who evince little concern in most mainland EU countries. Muslims are not only culturally different to Europe's white majorities, but – because our brains are drawn to vivid images rather than representative data – evoke panic about terrorism and threats to liberty.

Figure 1 shows an important relationship between projected Muslim population share in 2030 and support for the populist right across 16 countries in Western Europe. Having worked with IASA [World Population Program](#) researchers who generated cohort-component [projections](#) of Europe's Muslim population for Pew in 2011, I am confident their projections are the most accurate and rigorous available. I put this together with election and polling data for the main West European populist right parties using the highest vote share or polling result I could find. Note the striking 78 percent correlation (R^2 of .61) between projected Muslim share in 2030, a measure of both the level and rate of change of the Muslim population, and the best national result each country's populist right has attained.

Figure 1.



Source: Election and poll data and Pew Forum, 'The Future of the Global Muslim Population,' [interactive feature](#). Accessed Mar. 10, 2017.

Clearly, other factors matter: Austria's Freedom Party nearly won the election in 2016 when Norbert Höfer captured 49.7 per cent of the vote. This places the party well above the line of what we would expect on the basis of its 2030 Muslim population. Likewise, Germany's AfD or the Sweden Democrats underperform the regression line. The Front National's maximum poll of 28 per cent is also below what we expect, though this [could increase](#) to around 40 per cent if Marine Le Pen advances to the second round in France's upcoming election.

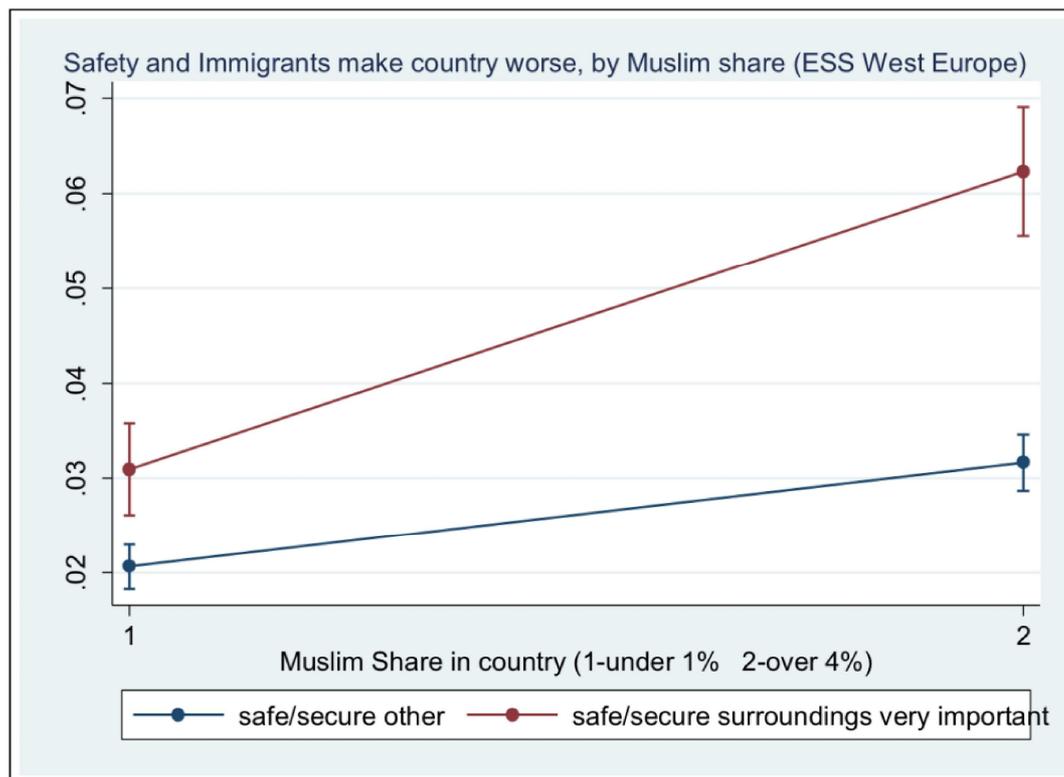
Why focus only on Western Europe? Because right-wing populism in established democracies differs in important ways from similar phenomena in the new democracies of the continent's East. There are two main types of nationalism: one focused on national status, pride and humiliation; the other on ensuring the alignment of politics and culture. East Europe's nationalism is more concerned with the former, West European nationalism with the latter. In addition, memories of an authoritarian golden age are fresher in the post-Communist world, where they continue to inspire revanchism. In western Europe, appeals to the halcyon days before messy democracy ruined everything carry little resonance.

Why use maximum populist right share? Because support for populist right parties is highly volatile over time whereas Muslim share is not. Any cross-country comparison using current polling data will therefore be noisy and inaccurate. Lacking an established brand, populist right parties are more vulnerable to leadership change, scandal, and splits than mainstream parties. Their high-water mark is therefore the best indicator of their potential support in a country's population. That is, the extent to which those who support populist right aims are willing to defy anti-racist norms to vote for them.

As with Brexit and Trump, education, and not income, is the critical demographic. This is because [values](#) rather than people's economic situation are critical to explaining the vote. And this change tends to polarize populations – radicalizing so-called 'authoritarians' who prefer safety and security to novelty and change.

Immigration attitudes are tightly linked to populist right support. With this in mind, consider the relationship between authoritarianism and immigration attitudes in figure 2, based on data for 16,000 native-born white respondents to the 2014 [European Social Survey](#).⁴

Figure 2.



Source: Data from [European Social Survey](#) 2014. N=16,029. Pseudo R²= .084. Controls for country income; also individual income, education and age. Countries: Austria, Belgium, Switzerland, Denmark, Germany, Finland, France, Ireland, Netherlands, Norway and Sweden.

Authoritarians' – those who place a high value on safe and secure surroundings, are more likely to perceive immigrants as making their countries a worse place to live. But in countries with low Muslim populations (i.e. Ireland or Finland, where Muslims are less than 1 per cent), authoritarians and others differ by only one percentage point: 3 per cent of those who say safety and security are important 'strongly agree' that immigrants make their country worse compared to 2 per cent for others.

Now look at the rest of the sample, from countries where Muslims exceed 4 percent of the population. The gap between the red and blue lines is now three times as large, with over 6 per cent of safety-conscious individuals now strongly anti-immigrant. If you are white and less concerned about safe and secure surroundings, the share of Muslims in your country has only a small impact on your view of immigrants. If you care about safety and security, Muslim share makes a big difference to those views.

This is no artefact of Irish and Finnish uniqueness: an interaction of Muslim share and safety/security across the full range of Muslim share and the security scale produces an even stronger effect. This tells us that ethnoreligious change interacts with authoritarian values to ramp up concern about immigration – which benefits the populist right.

Policy implications

What to do? To begin with, mainstream parties and the media need to acknowledge that demographic change increases anxiety over immigration among whites whose values are oriented toward security and order. Having isolated the real issue, they must then focus their efforts on raising people's awareness about the realities – not the fantasies – of Muslim demography in their countries. This will be much more effective than decrying worries as racist – which will only amplify fears that people are not being told the truth.

The belief that Muslims have sky-high fertility and will take over Europe is not confined to [viral videos](#) with over 16m views. At the European Commission, I was astounded to hear a member of the European elite ask whether

such claims were true. The extent of this demographic illiteracy makes it imperative to begin a concerted public information campaign.

Figure 1 shows that no country will be more than 10 percent Muslim in 2030. So in 2050, France is projected to be just 10.4 percent Muslim. Yet Ipsos-Mori's [report](#) shows the average French person thinks France will be *40 percent Muslim in 2020*, instead of the actual 8 percent. Across Europe, the average overestimate of 2020 Muslim share is 25 points. Previous work by Bobby Duffy and Tom Frere-Smith at Ipsos-Mori [shows](#) that people across the West routinely overestimate immigrant share by a factor of two or three.

But information can counteract these claims. A recent [survey experiment](#) finds that when people are given accurate information about the share of foreign born in their country then asked a month later what the share is, they adjust their estimates 12 points closer to reality. The Pew projections, based on the best immigration, fertility, and switching data we have, show that the rate of Muslim growth in Europe is tapering. In 2050, no West European country will be more than 12.4 per cent Muslim, far lower than most think is the case today.

Europeans should also be regularly told about what is happening with Muslim total fertility rates (TFR). These have dropped across much of the Muslim world. Among leading European source countries, many are at or below replacement. Turkey's is 2.06 (births per woman), Iran's 1.92 and Morocco's 2.12. Across Europe, the Muslim TFR is 2.1, precisely the replacement level. Finally, how many French voters are aware that half of Algerian-origin men marry out, or that 60 percent of French people with one or more Algerian-origin parents say they have no religious affiliation?

Europe's opinion formers have gushed about transformative diversity so much that people now believe it. My previous [work](#) on conservative White British voters shows that demographic reassurance, focusing on the idea that immigration can be absorbed with minimal change, significantly reduces anxiety about immigration and support for Hard Brexit. Europe's mainstream parties and the media need to stop skirting public anxieties and start addressing the mammoth problem of demographic illiteracy.

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Note: This article originally appeared at our sister site, [British Politics and Policy](#). It gives the views of the author, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics.

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