

BETWEEN OTHERNESS AND BELONGING: STRATEGIES OF MITIGATING MUSLIM OTHERNESS IN PODLASIE

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JOANNA URBAŃSKA

Center for Migration Studies, Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań

The region of Podlasie is a historically diverse area where Catholic, Orthodox, and Muslim communities have coexisted for centuries. Since 2021, due to an increase in irregularized migration, the area has been experiencing a transformation into a militarized zone where racialized narratives about Polishness and Europeaness are highlighted and reproduced. Official discourses portray Muslim migrants as threatening the national identity, which affects all Polish and non-Polish Muslims in Podlasie. This article explores strategies adopted by different groups of Muslims in Podlasie in the face of racialization processes. The main focus is on a well-established group of Polish Tatars whose centuries-long presence on the Polish territory allows for claims of familiarity and sameness to be made. While Tatars tend to reference their bond with the state through their respect for the military and Catholicism, other Muslims strive for personalization to improve their subordinate position in the hierarchies of Polishness. Some of these strategies reinforce racialized notions of belonging, further perpetuating existing divisions. However, acts of solidarity are also present among the communities, irrespective of their social distance. This article illustrates how racialization practices impose hierarchies of belonging on different Muslim groups in Podlasie and showcases strategies of negotiation of their status within those hierarchies.

Keywords: Muslims, Podlasie, Poland, Islamophobia, racialization, migration

INTRODUCTION

In this article¹ I describe different ways in which Muslims in Podlasie² respond to the processes of their racialization. It is a complicated task, as this group is quite small and

¹ This work was supported by the Polish National Sciences Center grant no. 2020/37/B/HS3/01675 entitled "Othering and Racialization of Roma and Muslim in a Nation State".

² Historical region in today's Eastern Poland, which is now mostly contained within the Podlaskie voivodeship. It is one of the most diverse parts of the country with Belarusian/Orthodox, Lithuanian, and Tatar/

very diverse, consisting of communities of different national and ethnic backgrounds with various legal statuses in the country. In this study, I pay special attention to Polish Tatars, a well-established and largely Polonized community, officially recognized by the state as an ethnic minority.³ I also touch upon Muslim migrants with granted legal status in the country (refugees and visa-holders) and people on the move who have been crossing the border from Belarus since 2021. My research coincided with the beginning of the so-called humanitarian crisis on the Polish–Belarusian border and made this last group relevant in the study of racialization of Muslims in Poland, because – although these migrants were religiously and ethnically diverse – official discourses described them through a set of Islamophobic clichés. This situation heavily impacted all those perceived as Others and particularly Muslims, as the boundaries of Polishness were being increasingly and more explicitly proclaimed along “racial” and religious lines.

The intertwining of nationalism with Catholicism in Poland has been explored by many scholars, both in reference to historical national identity construction and its modern-day repercussions. For instance, Konrad Pędziwiatr argues that, as a result of mixing national and religious spheres in Poland, the state assumes characteristics of both the sacred and the profane, which in turn makes it threatened by the presence of cultural and religious Others (2019: 215). Similarly, Geneviève Zubrzycki points out that Roman Catholicism defines symbolic boundaries of the Polish nation (2006: 209), naturalizing the image of a Catholic-Pole. This image has not been very difficult to uphold, as the majority of the population in Poland declares to be ethnically Polish and of Roman Catholic faith.⁴

Although dominated by Catholics, the Polish landscape also contains places of multi-religious character. In her ethnographic study of one such community, Agnieszka Pasięka (2015) presented ways in which religious pluralism can be experienced in contemporary rural Poland. She observed a constant tension between “pluralism and horizontal relations [...] and hierarchy and vertical relations” (Pasięka 2015: 213), highlighting that while in some cases social relations might allow and acknowledge diversity, at the same time they make sure that the majority remains superior and normative. Pasięka calls this phenomenon “hierarchical pluralism” and claims that different religious and ethnic groups

Muslim minorities represented (albeit in small numbers). In post-communist Poland, Podlasie was often described as inferior, because of its peripheral location, poor economic status, and political conservatism. In this study, I use the terms “Podlasie” and “Podlaskie voivodeship” interchangeably.

³ According to the 2005 Act on National and Ethnic Minorities and on Regional Languages, an ethnic minority is a group that fulfills the following criteria: a) is numerically smaller than the rest of the population of Poland; b) differs significantly from the remaining citizens in its language, culture or tradition; c) strives to preserve its language, culture, or tradition; d) is aware of its own historical, national community, and is oriented towards its expression and protection; e) its ancestors have been living on the present-day territory of the Republic of Poland for at least 100 years; f) does not identify with a nation organized in its own state. Currently, there are four officially recognized ethnic minorities in Poland: Roma, Lemko, Karaim and Tatar.

⁴ According to the 2021 census more than 96 percent of the population identifies as Polish and more than 70 percent as Catholic (GUS 2023). The number of people declaring adherence to the Roman Catholic Church decreased significantly since the 2011 census. This is partly a result of changing socio-political orientations and growing dissatisfaction with the Catholic Church, but also because, in 2021, a very high number of people, over 20 percent, refused to answer the question about religion.

in today's Poland are always perceived as others "not because they are not Poles or not Catholic, but because they are not Poles *and* not Catholic" (Pasięka 2015: 217).

On the basis of this assumption, it can be claimed that Muslims in Poland tend to be singled out because of their religious affiliation. However, other characteristics, especially those connected to appearance, also play a role in this process, as proven by a long history of associating Islam with "non-whiteness" (Meer and Modood 2019: 22). Similar racializing tendencies are present in Poland – and while some argue that Poles largely borrowed Islamophobic discourses from the West in order to highlight their belonging to the "European symbolic universe of problems and challenges" (Górak-Sosnowska and Pachocka 2019: 229–230) – negative attitudes towards Muslims remain high.⁵ Contrary to the impression given by intense Islamophobic narratives, Poland did not experience a significant influx in Muslim immigration and soon the persistent anti-Muslim sentiment became perceived as "a semi-peripheral rebellion against the EU core" (Górak-Sosnowska and Pachocka 2019: 229–230). This phenomenon shows that the racialization of Muslims in Poland might be seen as connected with the Polish struggle for belonging and legitimization within wider European hierarchies. There, Europeanness is understood as intimately tied not only with Christianity (Narkowicz and Pędzwiatr 2017: 7), but also with "whiteness" as "a moral-geopolitical category" (Böröcz 2021: 1125).

Bolaji Balogun states that Poles used racialization already during the inter-war period as a way to "flag [...] their presence as members of the European race" (Balogun 2024: 65) and solve the country's internal and external issues by advocating for participation in colonialism and embracing the eugenics movement. He demonstrates that Polishness, influenced by global ideas of "race", thus came to be understood as "white" and superior. Such hierarchy building is characteristic of the process of racialization, where those less powerful become racialized on the basis of essentialized and biologized notions of difference, by those more powerful (Garner and Selod 2014). In contrast, some scholars have argued that racialization may also be used for political mobilization and make it possible to resist racism and subvert the very hierarchies it creates (Omi and Winant 1986: 131).

In the following sections, I will demonstrate how racialization impacts the lives of Muslims in Podlasie through the construction of multilayered hierarchical structures, not only between Poles and Muslims, but also between different Muslim communities in the country. I aim to showcase strategies adopted by those communities in the face of the majority's racializing gaze, which increased during the humanitarian crisis at the Polish–Belarusian border. The first part of the text deals with Polish Tatars, their special status within the nation state, and the tension between their "sameness" and "otherness". The second part discusses strategies utilized by representatives of other Muslim groups in Podlasie, those with granted legal status, and those stripped of the possibility to legalize their stay. Based on ethnographic research, I explore the strategies of belonging and

⁵ According to the data published by the Center for Public Opinion Research, Muslims are the most negatively viewed religious group in Poland (CBOS 2019).

legitimization employed by Poland's Others. I argue that their struggles should be understood through the category of "stratified subalternities" (Aparna et al. 2025).

MUSLIM PRESENCE AND RACIALIZATION IN CONTEMPORARY POLAND

For centuries in Poland, the role of the internal "Significant Other" (see Triandafyllidou 2001) that represented an antithesis to Polishness was ascribed to Jews. However, due to the Holocaust and persistent post-war antisemitism,⁶ they were no longer present. Monika Bobako argued that after 1968 the only Others to be found in Poland that the state could use as proof of its progressivism, tolerance, and solidarity were Third World nationals – mostly Arabs, Africans, and the Vietnamese (2021: 116). Official state narrations about a common internationalist struggle might have been well-meant, but they did not address racism and discrimination present in the socialist era, nor manage to uproot the legacy of "racial" thinking in the country.

Arabs thematized in narratives from the Polish People's Republic were primarily mentioned in the context of anti-colonialism and foreign policy.⁷ As part of its political program, the Polish government offered scholarships to students from the Middle East and Africa (for example, Syria, Yemen, Iraq, Sudan, Egypt, Palestine) who started arriving to the country in the late 1950s. Their religious affiliation did not play a significant role for two reasons: on the one hand, they were often devoted communists and thus atheist, and, on the other, they generally tended to ignore Islamic rules while in Poland. Students' attempts at self-organization within explicitly religious structures, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, were not tolerated by the authorities (Pędziwiatr 2020: 97). These non-European students often met with discrimination and acts of racism (Gasztold Seń 2012: 67), but it seems that at the time religion was not at the core of the processes of their racialization.

Polish integration into the West after 1989 brought a change of the political and economic system along with new ideas, hopes, and fears. These included Islamophobic discourses,⁸ which – in the context of near absence of Muslims in Poland – came to be

⁶ Most notable manifestations of post-war antisemitism in Poland were the pogrom of Kielce in 1946 and the antisemitic campaign of 1968, which was followed by the expulsion of about 15,000 Jews from the country.

⁷ Although the notion of the Arab usually lacked the religious dimension during socialism, the division into righteous Christians and evil infidels/Muslims was one of the building blocks of Polish nationalism, preceding the creation of the independent state. Poland's self-given label of *Antemurale Christianitatis* has been a prominent trope since Romanticism and is still often mobilized in ways described by Andre Gingrich as "frontier Orientalism" (Gingrich 1998).

⁸ Although Islamophobia was typically associated with globalizing forces that appeared in Eastern Europe only after the fall of communism, scholars argue that the socialist world developed its own trope of the "Islamic threat" in the 1980s, which can be traced back to events such as the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the expulsion of Muslims from Bulgaria or the repression of Muslim activists in Yugoslavia (Rexhepi 2023: 20).

known as “phantom Islamophobia” (Buchowski 2020). Phantom Islamophobia became apparent in 2015 parliamentary elections, with the winning Law and Justice Party (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość) basing its campaign on invoking the fear of Muslim refugees and convincing voters that all migrants were criminals, religious fanatics, and carriers of diseases (Buchowski 2020: 79). Shortly thereafter, the Polish–Belarusian borderland became a site of increasing state violence exercised over those perceived as Others – refugees from North Caucasus republics, who were repeatedly denied the right to apply for asylum. It was already then that this disregard for the Polish and international law was framed by government officials as the necessary means of protection against “the Muslim threat” (Szczepanik 2018: 80).

Islamophobic clichés were again mobilized on a large scale in 2021, as more and more people from the Global South started crossing the border from Belarus into Poland. What human rights organizations and activists termed a humanitarian crisis, the government described as an invasion or assault, which “allowed violence on the border to be transformed into a heroic fight against an enemy threatening the country’s independence and security of its citizens” (Straczk 2023: 4240). Numerous law violations by the uniformed services, including denying asylum applications, in-kind and medical aid, physical and verbal violence (We Are Monitoring 2024), were accompanied by a (dis)information campaign portraying people on the move as criminals, sexual deviants, and tools of the Russian and Belarusian regime in their hybrid war against Poland (Buchowski 2024). The border area was also completely closed off for visitors, the media, and humanitarian organizations for ten months, with some no-entry zones still remaining.⁹ Despite a government change in 2023, dehumanizing narratives remained. These discourses were also accompanied by further legal changes concerning Poland’s border with Belarus, such as the removal of any liability from uniformed personnel using firearms and a suspension of the right to apply for asylum.

People on the move were racialized not only through their imagined cultural difference, but also with reference to essentialized and naturalized features connected to their physical appearance and religion. In the Polish context, these categories conflated into the notion of a racialized Muslim with an innate inclination towards violence and the agenda of a hostile takeover of the state. Processes of racialization are closely connected with invoking “demographic panic over the reproduction and multiplication of racialized bodies” (Rexhepi 2023: 28), which imagines migration as a fundamental threat to the existence of Europe(an homogeneity). Under such circumstances “non-white” and non-Christian

⁹ The first “state of exception zone” (*strefa stanu wyjątkowego*) was introduced in September 2021. It effectively banned entry to 183 towns and villages along the Polish border with Belarus, and stretched as far as three kilometers into the country in some places. Numerous checkpoints were introduced in and around the zone, with the police monitoring entry and exit. People without a registered permanent residence inside the zone were not allowed to enter. After the official zone was removed in June 2022, the authorities issued a ban on approaching the border closer than 200–300 meters, which was later renamed a “buffer zone” and upheld by the new liberal government elected in 2023.

migrants came to represent a collective alien body, an antithesis of Polishness understood as a conflation of certain religious, cultural, and “racial” characteristics.

However, Muslims have been present in Poland for much longer than the 2021 “humanitarian crisis”, the early 2000s migration from North Caucasus, or communist-era students. Polish Tatars, whose identity has been described as a combination of national, ethnic and religious elements, have lived in the country for as long as four centuries.¹⁰ The first Tatar settlers came to the Grand Duchy of Lithuania in the 14th century and later spread into other parts of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, including today’s Poland. Since then, Tatars have been undergoing processes of Polonization, abandoning their language and traditions in favor of local ones. However, they remained faithful to Islam and passed it onto their descendants. Today, according to the 2021 census (GUS 2024), the Polish Tatar community consists of around 5,000 individuals,¹¹ living in the Podlaskie voivodeship and larger cities throughout the country. The Polish Tatar community owns two historical wooden mosques in the villages of Kruszyniany and Bohoniki (in the region of Podlasie), which serve as places of worship and have become popular tourist destinations over the years.

METHOD AND POSITIONALITY

This article is based on one year of ethnographic fieldwork I conducted between 2022 and 2023 in the Podlaskie voivodeship, relying mostly on participant observation. I also conducted semi-structured interviews with Muslim and non-Muslim residents, at first focusing primarily on a village with mixed Tatar/Muslim and Catholic population. Later I turned to smaller cities along the border, as well as the capital of the voivodeship – Białystok, where more Muslims with a recent migration background reside. In villages and smaller towns, I tended to meet people in their gardens and homes, and in Białystok participants were mostly found by contacts with religious authorities and NGOs working with foreigners. The snowballing technique was adopted. Interview questions touched upon the role of religion in everyday life, interreligious relations, and the experience of the “humanitarian crisis” on the Polish–Belarusian border. The atmosphere of uncertainty and fear surrounding the “crisis” made people cautious and reserved, especially at any mention of “Muslims”. Because of the tense situation, my presence as a stranger from Greater Poland and my questions were sometimes seen as suspicious. My Polish-Catholic

¹⁰ Another native group of Muslims are, of course, ethnic Poles who converted to Islam, but their experiences are outside the scope of this study.

¹¹ According to the data collected by the Main Statistical Office, the number of Tatars in Poland has been growing constantly. This might be partly a result of erroneous data, a growing interest in celebrating one’s ethnicity, or the arrival of other Tatar groups (e.g., from Crimea) into the country. What is more, in the latest census, the number of declared Muslims in Poland is lower than the number of declared Tatars (GUS 2024). Therefore, it is difficult to believe the official data in this matter. Scholars estimate the number of Polish Tatars to be between 3,000 and 6,000 individuals (Gołębiowski et al. 2024: 16).

background and the usage of the standard language positioned me clearly outside the realm of local histories – at best as an oddity and at worst as someone looking for a scandal to write about or – as was the case with Polish Tatars – as just another researcher trying to exploit their uniqueness.

MITIGATING OTHERNESS: POLISH TATARS AND THE RACIALIZING GAZE

The topic of Polish Tatars has been on the academic agenda for many years, attracting researchers from various disciplines. However, the most elaborate take on the identity of this group was proposed by a sociologist, Katarzyna Warmińska, who pointed out the relevance of religion (Muslimness), common origin (Tatarness), and national affiliation (Polishness) in the process of Tatar identity construction (1999: 219). According to Warmińska, Polish Tatars see the latter two elements as complementary rather than oppositional. Polishness is expressed in terms of choice, which translates to a deep connection with the Polish state. However, as the dominant discourses in Poland see national belonging in ethno-religious terms, Warmińska also observed that Tatars constantly “balance on the boundary between separatedness and familiarity” (Warmińska 2020: 96). They strive to position themselves as non-threatening Muslims, different from other groups. One of the ways to achieve this is an overemphasis on their contributions to Poland, presenting the members of the group as loyal and devoted defenders of the state and nation (Warmińska 1999: 225).

Many of my Tatar interlocutors underlined this historical bond between their community and the Polish national cause, most notably expressed through a sentiment towards the uniformed services and references to military traditions of their ancestors. Although Tatar patriotism is currently presented as always having been there (Pawlic-Miśkiewicz and Czachorowski 2018), scholars argue that this narrative emerged among Tatars only after the creation of the sovereign Polish state in 1918, in order to consolidate the community and strengthen its ties with Polishness (Wróblewska 2009: 260). At that time, Polishness was seen as simply one of the variants determining affiliation in a multiethnic state (Warmińska 2020: 94). The situation is different in modern-day homogenous Poland that imagines itself as threatened by religious and cultural Others. Polish Tatars cultivate their bond with the nation through various expressions of belonging, for example an annual custom of inviting representatives of the Polish Armed Forces to a special prayer in the mosque in Białystok.¹² This custom was described to me by one of its attendees, a middle-aged Polish Tatar woman:

¹² There are two mosques in Białystok, one belonging to the Muslim Religious Union in Poland (Muzulmański Związek Religijny w RP) that is a predominantly Polish Tatar organization, and one run under the auspices of the Muslim League, attracting a more international crowd. Although many Muslims simply

Recently we held an intention prayer, for the intention of the army, because it was Army Day. And then soldiers always come to the mosque, not a lot of them, a few. They stand in the hall during the prayer and afterwards... Now more and more foreigners are coming to pray and one person asked me if something bad was happening. And I totally did not think that someone could perceive it that way! For me it was somehow obvious – Army Day and they [soldiers] come. (Maria)¹³

As Maria's reaction shows, for the Polish Tatar community the presence of the Army was seen as denoting a positive and festive occasion. However, migrants who attend prayers in growing numbers interpreted the sight of the Polish soldiers in the mosque as disturbing and scary. This situation clearly showed the cleavage between Polish Tatars, who are part of the Polish national community and as such feel protected by the army, and other nationals whose encounters with the uniformed services were most likely a reminder of the hierarchies of belonging in the nation state and the conditionality of their "tolerated" presence. At the same time, representatives of both groups share a religion, which is often considered antithetical to Polishness. This makes Polish Tatars vulnerable to othering and racialization practices by the majority population.

Thus, they strive to draw boundaries between themselves and other Muslim groups, especially those seen as dangerous. For instance, in 2015, when the topic of Muslim migrants was put on the political agenda and used to invoke fear among citizens, a Podlasiak news portal published an article citing one of the leaders of the Polish Tatar community, who expressed fear over the "wave of immigrants" and warned that it was Tatars who had the most to lose with the planned resettlement of Muslim refugees in Poland. The author concluded the article by saying:

Poles, as well as the inhabitants of Białystok, fear that immigrants will bring a faction of Islam that is also feared by Polish Tatars. It is necessary to add here that they [Polish Tatars] have never demanded the introduction of sharia, nor have they formed closed communities. They abide by the Polish law and have always stood by the Republic of Poland during various armed conflicts. (Siewiereniuk-Maciorowska 2015)

During my research I heard many words of praise about the historical loyalty of Polish Tatars, their amicability and "normality", with frequent positive descriptions of their assimilation into the Polish culture. It seemed that Polish Tatars were widely accepted as familiar and "safe" Muslims in Podlasie. On the one hand, this was caused by careful cultivation of their bond with Polishness and Polish state intuitions, and, on the other, their favorable attitude towards the Catholic Church, a bond which is still considered "an inescapable feature of modern Polish nationalism" (Zubrzycki 2006: 76). This was also brought up in a conversation I held with three persons working in the field of regional development: Kamil – a Polish Tatar as well as Agnieszka and Małgorzata – two Christian women:

attend prayers in the mosque that is closer to their home, the first one mostly caters to Tatars and the second one to foreigners (i.e. Chechens, Ukrainians, Arabs).

¹³ To ensure anonymity, the names and some personal details of all my interlocutors have been changed.

Kamil: We [Polish Tatars and other Poles] have good relations... It's not that they consider us like these different refugees... Because we are Polish, brought up in the Christian tradition...

Agnieszka: Polish Muslims

Małgorzata: [They] celebrate Christmas with us and at the border [with border guards]...

Kamil, Agnieszka, and Małgorzata all agreed that one of the reasons that Tatars could be considered Polish was because of their positive attitude towards Christianity and familiarity with its rituals, allowing them to participate in the symbolic universe of Polishness, such as shared Christmas celebrations. However, if interpreted through the logic of hierarchical pluralism, Polish Tatars' profound knowledge of Catholicism and participation in its religious traditions only highlights their (occasionally) subordinate position in relation to the Christian majority.

Declarations of Polish Tatar familiarity mentioned above do not mean, however, that knowledge about their identity and history is widespread among Poles, especially outside of Podlasie or that they are unilaterally accepted as fellow citizens by the majority population. On the contrary, incidents that targeted the Tatar community in the last twenty years can be interpreted as proving otherwise. In 2013 someone set fire to a Tatar mosque in Gdańsk, and in 2014 a historic wooden mosque and a Tatar cemetery in Kruszyniany were vandalized. The perpetrators were never found. In 2015 a local branch of the National-Radical Camp (Obóz Narodowo-Radykalny) in Białystok put up fake road signs with crossed out Muslim symbols (a crescent, a star, and a mosque) containing the slogan "Stop Islamization of Poland". At the time, a significant number of the city's Muslims were Polish Tatars. Most of my interlocutors still vividly remembered these events and some of them admitted taking personal preventive measures, such as hiding their religious affiliation in everyday contexts. This was the case with Karolina, a young Polish Tatar woman:

I don't brag, I don't say [that I am a Muslim], because I'm afraid. I didn't admit it at school either. And I think aggression is growing all the time. (Karolina)

The aggression mentioned by Karolina may be interpreted as individual acts of xenophobic behavior as well as systemic discrimination. Although Polish Tatars feel a strong sense of affiliation with the state, they were targeted by the Polish authorities in 2002, when an amendment to the Animal Protection Act was proposed by the government. The Act banned any slaughter without prior stunning (also including slaughter for Jewish and Muslim religious purposes).¹⁴ Sociologist Karolina Radłowska noted that many Polish

¹⁴ The conflict that arose around this amendment was complicated and went on for many years. Between 2002 and 2004 ritual slaughter of animals was banned. In 2004, the Minister of Agriculture issued a decree that permitted slaughter without prior stunning, which was overturned by the Constitutional Court in 2012. Effectively, the practice of ritual slaughter was again banned between 2013 and 2014. In 2013, the government tried to pass a law that would legalize slaughter without stunning for religious purposes, but met with fierce societal objections. This period was the most intense in the history of the conflict, until the Constitutional Court ruled in 2014 that the ban on ritual slaughter violated the freedom of religion and conscience granted by the Constitution, thus legalizing the practice.

Tatars regarded the disputes and scandals surrounding this issue as “the first and the most severe conflict with the Polish state” (2017: 130). As the issue gained considerable media attention, Tatars were positioned on one side of the debate opposing organizations fighting for animal rights and the state on the other. The tactics employed by Tatars to argue for the exercise of their religious freedom included mobilizing notions of centuries of harmonious cooperation between Poles and Tatars, shared history, and national and religious values.¹⁵ As noted by Ludmiła Janion, such positioning of patriots (Tatars and Poles) vs. atheists (animal rights defenders) symbolically excluded other Muslim communities who could not argue for the reinstatement of ritual slaughter based on nationalist discourse or ancestral devotion to the state (2014: 44).

Therefore, highlighting similarities with one group sometimes means increasing distance from others. In choosing references to common tradition (military or culinary), shared “normality”, and abiding by the rules of the majority society, Polish Tatars present themselves as unproblematic and familiar to the Polish majority. Their language skills, appearance, and profound knowledge of national and Catholic symbols allow them to make the claim of sameness. The “problematic” issue of their religion is also resolved by references to familiarity that present “Tatar Islam [as] being compatible with the Polish society, while non-Tatar Islam not necessarily fitting in. Moreover, the Tatars reproduce dominant discourses of Muslims as the enemy” (Górak-Sosnowska et al. 2024: 2051). Strategies aimed at emphasizing Tatar compatibility with the Polish culture and showcasing their distinctiveness can be described as “performative strategies” (Górak-Sosnowska et al. 2024). An acknowledgement of the success of these strategies can be found in Maria’s half-joking answer after I asked if the long presence of Polish Tatars in Podlasie somehow influenced the general opinion about Muslims and Islam among the majority population. She replied: “Not really, just that the Tatars are good and all the others are bad”.

Similar strategies could be seen among Polish Tatars in reference to discourses on Muslim migrants at the Polish–Belarusian border. At the beginning of the crisis, when the topic of the “Muslim threat” fueled public debate, the fence surrounding the mosque in Bohoniki was decorated with a banner in support of the uniformed services. It contained a photo of the Polish flag patch on a military uniform and the words “Thank you for your service and protecting our border”, together with the hashtag “we stand behind the Polish uniform” (*murem za polskim mundurem*). Similar banners could be spotted all over the Podlasie region as they were part of the government-supported campaign to express solidarity with state servicemen and to draw attention away from their law violations and cruelty at the border. Highlighting positive attitudes towards the institutions of the state was accompanied by the emphasis on its symbolic “owners” – the Polish nation – and securing the place of Polish Tatars among them.

¹⁵ Shared values of Islam and Catholicism (or, more broadly, Christianity) included, for example, the supremacy of human rights over animal rights as expressed in all three big monotheist religions. Interestingly enough, the Catholic Church in Poland expressed its support for the legalization of ritual slaughter, understood as part of the right to religious freedom.

As these examples show, at times of crisis, logics of hierarchical pluralism and the current “xenophobic turn” (Buchowski 2020: 81) encourage negative attitudes and sometimes violent acts towards Others, deemed not Polish enough. In such circumstances even the status of Polish Tatars as good Muslims can be questioned. Through a constant reproduction of narratives that prioritize sameness, Polish Tatars – at least partially – manage to escape the racialized Muslim figure. However, acceptance into Polishness often comes at a price of (self-) silencing. Their precarious position was explicitly articulated by one of my interlocutors, who was actively involved in the fight against the ritual slaughter ban:

We should behave apolitically because we are a minority. The political or media upheaval regarding refugees, the image of Islam [...] it's all a matter of time. Time will pass at some point and we, as a small community, can't do anything. We are not able to do anything about it, and we can harm ourselves all the more. We are too small, we don't have political power, we don't have administrative power, we don't have a representative in the government or in the parliament, so this is a very hard issue. (Michał)

Despite some examples of the majority population portraying Polish Tatars as “safe” and familiar Muslims, other statements show that their inclusion into the national community is not stable but rather processual and fluctuating, dependent on many factors. Scholars observed that with the gradual rise of Islamophobic narrations in Poland, the Polish Tatar identity came to be increasingly pronounced in ethnic rather than religious terms in order to put further distance between Polish Tatars and other Muslim groups (Radłowska 2017: 159). Different mechanisms of highlighting sameness utilized by the Polish Tatar community were relatively successful, and today the group is regarded mostly in terms of a tourist attraction, an ethnographic curiosity, or proof of Polish tolerance and hospitality. However, they also fell victim to xenophobic acts and faced systemic discrimination, which shows that their special position cannot be taken for granted.

STRUGGLE FOR PERSONALIZATION: COUNTERING RACIALIZATION BY NON-POLISH MUSLIMS

The mentioned cases of Polish Tatar engagement in current affairs provoked discussions among community members, especially in relation to expressing solidarity with state authorities at the beginning of the crisis at the Polish–Belarusian border. A Tatar man, originally from Białystok, anonymously criticized the Bohoniki Polish Tatar community's leader on social media for openly declaring support for the uniformed services deployed at the border. The man pointed out that, in his opinion, decorating mosque grounds with any symbols other than religious ones was illegal under the Polish and Islamic law and accused the leader of using the space for his own political gain. The author of the appeal compared his opposition to the “human tragedy in the forests on the border between Poland and Belarus” to the way in which “our grandparents opposed the infamous activities

of blackmailers during the Second World War”¹⁶ This appeal sparked controversies among the community and reached the local media. One of the local media reports read: “A Tatar from the Russian Federation attacked the Muslim community in Bohoniki for helping the uniformed services at the border. He threatens punishment for breaking the sharia” (Jurkowska 2021). The author of the article mobilized rhetorically powerful concepts that were meant to spark fear and outrage. She decided to focus on the man’s supposed otherness and foreignness referenced in national and religious terms, not his Polish Tatar and local origin. This can be seen as an example of the conditionality of Polish Tatar sameness. Even though the group is generally regarded as harmless and “ours”, the moment its representative contradicted narratives that prioritize similarities and avoid taking a political stance, he was immediately seen as a threat to the Polish nation/state.

The division into “safe” and “threatening” largely depends on the level of compliance with a hierarchized set of traits that are considered crucial for Polishness. Differences are considered undesirable and might be naturalized and biologized through the process of racialization. In other words, they are transformed from “fluid categories of difference into fixed species of otherness” (Silverstein 2005: 364). However, scholars have cautioned against understanding racialization as a simple hierarchy construction between the oppressors and the oppressed and urged researchers to pay attention to its multidirectionality (Parvulescu 2015). This approach is crucial to understanding how racialized groups can participate in the exclusion or discrimination of other underprivileged and subordinate groups, creating “stratified subalternities” (Aparna et al. 2025).

In Poland, new Muslim migrants to the country face many challenges. In the case of refugees from Chechnya, official discourses presented them as harbingers of terrorist attacks and of a forced introduction of sharia law (Szczepanik 2018: 80). They had no claim to shared nationality or history with the Polish majority as Polish Tatars do, and strategies of countering racializing narratives about their cultural and religious foreignness proved to be limited. Dawid, a man who fled Chechnya in his early childhood, almost twenty years ago, recalled in our conversation:

When I was in the second grade of primary school, I was called “Murzyn” [racial slur],¹⁷ that I stink and to fuck off to Chechnya. [...] They [children] do not come up with this alone. This is what they learn at home, the hatred, the stereotypes come from home. [...] It all comes from the parents. I was not a “Murzyn”. In general, even if you go to the hospital to have a spirometry done and if they ask you about your race, you won’t say you are of Polish race. You won’t say you are of European race. There is only Caucasian

¹⁶ <https://www.facebook.com/Tataria.eu/posts/pfbid02u9VZf2tf7GK3k2g9EPYMsha23wx46qXNVnR5Z3eeDUfp8sgnLRQnqvkpJBMvhVctl>.

¹⁷ A large portion of the Polish population uses this word to describe people they perceive as “black”, especially persons of African origin. Through its presence in education and the public sphere, the word “Murzyn” has been normalized, but as Margaret Ohia-Nowak proved “it meant and still means dehumanization, and then objectification or gross animalization” (2025: 200). Thus, many Poles consider it racist and object to its use.

race. And I am from the Caucasus; how can I be a “Murzyn”? If I am a “Murzyn”, then all Europeans are too, because Europeans are of Caucasian race. (Dawid)

Dawid was clearly upset about these comments, he even made an argument for the unfairness of such treatment by showing me a photo of himself as a child to prove that his appearance did not match that of a “black” person. More self-confident than when he was in primary school, Dawid used racialization to explain both why his school bullies were wrong and why anyone making such arguments goes against common sense and science. He highlighted his Caucasian origin and then used it to include himself in the community of “whiteness”, based not only on physical appearance, but also proper (European) descent. Being a Chechen and a Muslim, both terms invoking mostly negative sentiments¹⁸ in Polish society (Gorlicka 2019), Dawid tried to navigate hostile social hierarchies by embracing them, at the same time raising objections to the way he was classified.

A similar conversation unfolded with a middle-aged man from North Africa who started a family in Poland. At first, he openly criticized racist discrimination and oppression, expressing support for those being subjected to it. Later, however, he tipped into religion-based tropes to create a hierarchy that placed “black” people at the bottom and argued for “whiteness” of his own folk.

Amir: Totally, this “Murzyn” is always a victim. For me, it’s the person that counts, they also have scientists! [...] In the Bible there is one son – a “Murzyn” – and they are a cursed nation. But God created us to be of different colors, to speak different languages. He doesn’t judge us by color, but by what you do in your life. Sem was cursed, gave birth to a nation for slavery until today.

Author: Well, the French in Algeria also probably said that Algerians are black, fit for slavery.

Amir: Algerians are white. Historically.

Although Amir at first presented a humanistic view, where an individual’s actions indicated their value, he later confirmed that this value was also influenced by racialized Otherness, thus reproducing existing hierarchies. In our conversations, both Dawid and Amir racialized themselves as part of “white” communities, drawing on physical appearance, descent, and civilizational achievements. This mechanism can be perceived as a kind of nesting Orientalisms – following a pattern that aims to shift otherness to those on the outside (Bakić-Hayden 1995). “Black” people and irregular migrants become an easy target, as they are often viewed through racialized clichés and have few opportunities for negotiating their position.

In Poland, the notion which has embodied an antithesis of Polishness since 2021 is represented by a Muslim migrant crossing the border from Belarus. Despite attracting considerable media attention in the first months of the crisis, the coverage of people on

¹⁸ Still, this has not always been the case. At the beginning of the Chechen migration to Poland, many people showed empathy towards Chechens as they were seen as victims of Russian aggression, a trope that Poles can strongly relate to (Buchowski 2020).

the move at the Polish–Belarusian border rarely portrayed individual stories, describing them as an anonymous and homogenous mass, by using numbers or abstract nouns (Wilkoosz 2025: 40). This rhetoric also fell in line with the state authorities' narratives of anonymizing and deprivation of agency, which led to the depersonalization of migrants in the media and in public opinion (Buchowski 2024: 295), and reaffirmed their low position in the hierarchy of sameness.

However, as Mateusz Krępa and Nasim Ahmed Mondal argued, individuals crossing the Polish–Belarusian border can also take part in influencing dominant discourses. Using different means of communication – letters, interviews, written statements, text messages, or art – people on the move are able to exercise power accessible to them amidst omnipresent violence by exposing oppressive practices of the Polish state to its nationals (Krępa and Mondal 2023: 34). In this way, they can try to transcend the categories of “enemies” and “victims” ascribed to them by the media and society (Krępa and Mondal 2023). To achieve this, their narratives also prioritize sameness, but rather than reinforcing hierarchized structures of belonging, they refer to a shared sense of humanity. European and Polish hypocrisy and racism are highlighted by those who have experienced them at its borders. A Kurdish man who survived a pushback from Poland in 2021 together with his family, stated in an article published by *Gazeta Wyborcza*:¹⁹

Believe me, I'm not happy if people of any skin color or religion have to flee from any country, but the Russian invasion of Ukraine is a fact, and it's strange to read posts by Poles, Danes, or Germans inviting Ukrainian families to their homes. We, people of a different skin color, don't even have as much value to them as a dog or a cat. Do they consider themselves human at all? I think that those who do not see the suffering of a Kurdish, Arab, Persian, or Chechen child as equal to that of a Ukrainian child should question their own humanity. Conversely, a Muslim who rejoices in the suffering of Europeans would have to doubt his faith. (Aliksandar 2022)

In a case described by Alicja Pałęcka (2023), a person openly expressed their anger and frustration as activists tried to explain why they cannot enter an area near the border, where five migrants were stuck. Their messages accused the activists of a lack of humanity, thus “going beyond subordination” that often appears in the relationship between those who provide humanitarian aid and people on the move (Pałęcka 2023). By references to shared human experience, demanding dignified treatment, and seeking that the standards of international law be upheld by the Polish authorities, people on the move reject the hierarchy of sameness or deservingness, putting themselves on an equal footing with Poles and Europeans, prompting being seen as such.

Despite the potential of such statements, it is important to remember that they were made from the very bottom of racialized hierarchies, where mechanisms of inferiorization

¹⁹ Due to ethical concerns regarding research with people on the move, I have not conducted interviews with them and base my observations on the topic on the published works by other scholars as well as on publicly available statements of people who crossed the Polish–Belarusian border.

of other groups were mostly unavailable. Additionally, their authors were not in Poland (anymore) and remained anonymous, while other opinions were collected from Muslims who live and imagine their future in the country. Thus, although they might sometimes advocate for a wider acceptance of Muslims as a whole, claims to Polishness often come to the fore, and the idea of Islam as a connecting factor is rejected.²⁰ Despite this, some expressions of cooperation and solidarity among different Muslim communities in Poland can be observed. For instance, students from Muslim countries used to organize religion classes and summer camps in Poland for Muslim (predominantly Polish Tatar) children (Łyszczarz 2013: 147). Polish Tatars were actively engaged in helping Tatars from Crimea who fled to Poland after the Russian annexation of the peninsula (Łyszczarz 2023). Later, the same community organized funerals for migrants who died while crossing the border from Belarus at the Polish Tatar cemetery in Bohoniki. All these endeavors, however, were largely framed as apolitical and not oriented towards the creation of wider solidarity networks or opportunities for the marginalized to influence existing hierarchies.

CONCLUSION

This article described some of the strategies developed by different groups of Muslims in Podlasie in the face of their racialization fueled by Islamophobic discourses. An increase in such narratives could be observed in Poland since the beginning of the so-called humanitarian crisis at the Polish–Belarusian border. They confirmed the ethnoreligious understanding of belonging to the nation to be an organizing and hierarchizing principle that structures the Polish society today. Consequently, those able to make the claim of cultural (or “racial”) proximity utilized their position to secure their status within the society. Polish Tatars emphasized shared history, traditional values, and a deep understanding of Catholicism to construct their image as familiar and “safe” Muslims – sometimes in opposition to recent Muslim migrants. Dawid and Amir, who migrated to Poland in the last twenty years, put forward arguments that embraced racialized hierarchies, presenting themselves and their communities as sharing the claim to European “whiteness” with Poles. People on the move, who remain at the bottom of the social hierarchy, appealed to a shared sense of humanity and called for solidarity not only on the basis of religion or “race”, but rather the universality of human suffering. These different strategies demonstrate that racialized hierarchies in Poland are often composed of multi-layered processes of othering and being othered. However, as the examples of cooperation and help show, solidarities across hierarchies are also possible.

²⁰ It is also connected to the changing dynamics of the relations between different Muslim communities in Poland, especially Polish Tatars and migrants from Arab countries, later members of the Muslim League. Although Polish Tatars used to cooperate with the newcomers, with time they reported being instructed about their “improper” religiosity by the Arabs, which they did not like and feared losing their status as the main representatives of Muslims in Poland, leading to a split between the communities in the 1990s (Łyszczarz 2013: 148; Pędzwiatr 2011).

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IZMEĐU DRUGOSTI I PRIPADANJA: STRATEGIJE PREGOVARANJA MUSLIMANSKE DRUGOSTI U REGIJI PODLASIE

Regija Podlasie u Poljskoj područje je stoljetne koegzistencije katoličke, pravoslavne i muslimanske zajednice. Od 2021. godine, zbog porasta iregulariziranih migracija, ovo područje prolazi kroz transformaciju u militariziranu zonu, koju prate reaktualizacija i reprodukcija rasijaliziranih narativa o poljskosti i europskosti. Službeni diskursi muslimanske migrante prikazuju kao prijetnju nacionalnom identitetu, što utječe na sve poljske i nepoljske muslimane u regiji Podlasie. Ovaj se članak bavi strategijama razli-

čitih skupina muslimana u regiji izloženih procesima rasijalizacije. Posebna se pažnja posvećuje poljskim Tatarima, čija im stoljetna prisutnost na teritoriju Poljske omogućuje da se pozicioniraju kao Poljacima poznati i slični Drugi. Dok Tataari svoju povezanost s državom obično iskazuju kroz poštovanje prema vojsci i katoličanstvu, drugi muslimani teže individualizaciji kako bi poboljšali svoj podređeni položaj u uspostavljenim hijerarhijama poljskosti. Neke od tih strategija potenciraju rasijalizirane pojmove pripadnosti, dodatno produbljujući postojeće podjele. Unatoč tome, primjeri solidarnosti javljaju se i između zajednica, neovisno o njihovoj socijalnoj distanci. U članku se pokazuje kako prakse rasijalizacije različitim muslimanskim skupinama u regiji Podlasie nameću hijerarhije pripadnosti te se apostrofiraju strategije kojima te skupine pregovaraju svoj status unutar nametnutih struktura.

Ključne riječi: muslimani, Podlasie, Poljska, islamofobija, rasijalizacija, migracije