LITHUANIANS' PERCEPTION ON TERRORISM: ARE MUSLIMS THE FOLK DEVILS FOR LITHUANIANS?

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ABSTRACT

A considerable amount of research in the West countries during the past 30 years has found a strong tendency to associate Muslims with violent acts. This has resulted in an increase of Islamophobia. I have examined Lithuania's media, politicians and public perceptions on Muslims-terrorism in order to understand the correlation between Lithuanian media and political discourse on Muslims and their connection with public discourses. I propose that the weaker the linkage between media and political portrayals of terrorism as associated with Muslims, is with public perceptions of terrorism and Muslims, the less likely the latter will see Muslims as folk devils. My analysis of the data supports this hypothesis and conclusively shows that media and political discourse do not have a hegemonic power to control the portrayal of Muslims and to create a sense of moral panic among Lithuanians.

Keywords: *Moral panic, Muslims, Lithuania, intolerance*

INTRODUCTION

Not all Muslims are terrorists, but all terrorists are Muslims – I heard this phrase during an interview I conducted regarding the connection between terrorism and Muslims.

During the past 30 years, a strong tendency among people in Europe as well as North America to link Islam with violent acts, especially terrorism has been found [1], [2]. The terrorist attack of September 11 acted as a catalyst for media in European countries and the United States to represent Muslims as *others* and prompted links between the Islamic religion, Muslims and terrorism [3]. The medias' tendency to link terrorism issues with Islam has not decreased and the tendency to link Muslims with terrorism resulted in an increase in Islamophobia, with different forms of expression – from hostile attitudes and intolerance to exaggerated fear and panic of Muslims [4], [5].

Exaggerated and excessive attention by the media, political stances, and popular discourse regarding terrorism and its linkage with Muslims can lead to a chronic form of fear referred to as moral panic.' One of the first and most influential moral panic theorists is Stanley Cohen. According to Cohen a core feature of moral panic is its reification in some anthropomorphic form. Cohen refers to the object of moral panic by the generic terms "*folk devils.*" *Folk devils*

are a socio-psychological phenomenon that reifies and gives a focus to those collective fears. (e.g. in this case Muslims are the folk devil).

The aim of this research is to examine if Muslims are the folk devil for Lithuanians in terrorism discourse and if so, does it produce moral panic in society. I will seek to answer this question by analyzing Lithuanian perceptions of terrorism and, if and how they link them to Muslims. I intend to use an ethnographic/emic approach to construct a normative, collective representation of how Lithuanians perceive terrorism in relation to Muslims and to answer the question of whether there is a strong, weak, or no correlation at all between Muslims as folk devils and moral panic. I propose that the weaker terrorism is linked with Muslims, the less likely Muslims will be seen as folk devils and, as a result, the more unfavorable the cultural environment will be for moral panic toward Muslims to establish roots. While not central to this research, it is important to note that such findings can contribute to national policies regarding how to treat and integrate Muslim immigrants to Lithuania as well as Muslim citizens.

Moral panic theory (1972) by Stanley Cohen

Press and other media coverage of current events serve as one of the most powerful tools for framing peoples' perception of high profile events. Studies [4], [5] show that the media's framing of particular terrorist events leads to excessive fear of Muslims and Islamophobia.

A kind of excessively exaggerated perception that some cultural behavior or group of people is deviant and poses a threat to society's values is called moral panic. The most widely accepted, used and most cited definition of moral panic is by Cohen: "A condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests; its nature is presented in a stylized and stereotypical fashion by the mass media; the moral barricades are manned by editors, bishops, politicians and other right-thinking people." [6].

For a successful moral panic to exist there must be a common, homogenous, widespread understanding in society about who are folk devils and why they are a threat to our society. Cohen has singled out four crucial agents that help to form an image of the folk devil and to rise and maintain moral panic about them: mass media, moral entrepreneurs, the control culture, and the public. When describing the elements of moral panic, Cohen pays notable attention to media's influence, especially in the first and second stages of moral panic. Mass media is described as the most influential when disturbing events are presented in detail exaggerating grossly the seriousness of the events.

In the symbolization stage, it is important to define who is our "folk devils" – a group of people who engage in a common deviant behavior as perceived from the outside by the general public. This is the basis on which moral panic revolves.

Firstly, when a word, for example, "immigrant" or "terrorism" becomes symbolic of a certain status (delinquent or deviant); secondly, when there are objects or observable indicators that symbolize the word— for example, it could be dark skin color or Islamic clothes; the third stage is when the objects themselves become symbolic of the status (and the emotions attached to the status) [6]. For example, when someone sees a person dressed in Islamic clothes, s/he immediately relate that person with Islam and terrorism.

In seeking to answer the question of whether moral panic of Muslims exists in Lithuania and whether we can call Muslims "folk devils", I will examine the main agents – Lithuanian mass media and the moral entrepreneurs, that is, politicians; and lastly the Lithuanian public.

The construction of folk devils by Lithuania's media

Research on Lithuanian media coverage of Muslims is sparse; research by Kumpikaitė-Valiūnienė et al. [7] on Lithuanians' perceptions of refugees (*from Islamic countries*) revealed that Lithuanians see refugees as a prominent threat in large part because they associate them with terrorism. Fear of terrorism increases fear and intolerance toward Muslims. This fear is part of the initial symbolization stage Cohen views as necessary for the collective construction of a folk devil. Terrorism itself is perceived as an extreme form of deviant behavior and is then linked to an observable indicator – Muslims. This results in a holistic construction of the category of a folk devil, in this case as Muslims.

European Islamophobia reports in 2017, 2019 revealed, that Islamophobic media content in Lithuania is quite insignificant. The report of Repečkaitė [8] concluded, that "Mainstream media continued providing a platform for Islamophobic speakers and statements with little editing and no disclaimers". Blažytė [9] reported that Islamophobic statements in the Lithuanian media are usually contextualized as related to public discussions on the so-called global refugee crisis and the challenges of refugee integration on a national level, however due to the decline of refugee flows in Europe, the attention to this issue was decreasing in national media as well.

According to a 2019 report of Lithuanian media monitoring by the *Media4change.lt* [14], "The majority of journalists' work concerning Muslims is neutral (87%), 8%. negative, 5 % positive". However, among negative reports on Muslims, a theme of terrorism remains high – Lithuanian media reporting most part of terrorism content and in that way contributes to and maintains Muslim – terrorist image. To conclude I would agree with Repečkaitė [8], that Lithuanian media is only a platform and tool to spread various information which is mostly influenced by global tendencies and events such as terrorist attacks or the refugee crisis.

The construction of folk devils by Lithuania's moral entrepreneurs - politicians

Along with the media, politicians are noticeable agents in shaping perceptions of Muslims. During 2015, individual Lithuanian journalists and politicians expressed their opinions on Muslims and refugees as "folk devils" and potential threats using "them" versus "us" images, however, the highest tendency was seen among the latter.

In 2016, right before the elections to the Lithuanian *Seimas* [i.e., *Parliament*], a series of political commercials by the Labor Party concerning the immigrant crisis appeared. The participants in the commercials were talking about refugees as a potential threat, linking past and present-day problems allegedly caused by refugees and Muslims and then asserting the likelihood that more refugees and immigrants will cause still more future problems [10]. Most concerns were related to deviant behavior (e.g. bus explosion, women abduction, terrorist attacks).

In 2019 the Lithuanian politician Arvydas Juozaitis was portraying *refugees as a coming threat*. In a video *Refugees push Europe to destruction* of his political campaigns Juozaitis speaks about refugees - mostly Islamic states residents - as an upcoming threat destroying European culture, identity, soul, that will "kill us". From the 9 candidates who ran for President, Juozaitis was in fifth place, far behind the leaders. He received 4,69% of the vote and didn't get to the second round of elections.

From the discussion above, it is clear that in Lithuania there are media and political attempts to portray Muslims and refugees as "folk devils," and to raise a collective moral panic that also could increase readership and political vote banks for parties promoting such advertisements. However, despite the volatile political commentaries about Muslims, it can be concluded that the discourse around Muslims, refugees and its relation with terrorism or other deviant behavior exists and is prevalent in the media as well as politics.

METHODS AND METHODOLOGY

In order to answer the question if Muslims are folk devils to Lithuanians on the basis of terrorism, I intend to analyze if images on Muslims' relation with terrorism, promoted by the media and moral entrepreneurs reflected in public opinions and attitudes on terrorism.

I am using the anthropological method of free lists. I have chosen to use free list technique because, it provides a potent emic snapshot of the cultural domain, indicates things salient within the culture, should show what symbols are shared by members of the culture and how these symbols vary in relative saliency within the culture [11], [12].

The data was collected between January and February of 2019 via the online platform *Apklausa.lt.* I selected a convenience sample by sharing 5 free lists and 1 survey question to various online groups of students and non-students, and pages of communities of different cities. 41 Lithuanian citizens (age 17-84) participated and answered all 5 free lists; thus all questions were answered by the same participants. Most respondents were from the four largest cities of Lithuania – Vilnius, Kaunas, Panevėžys, Klaipėda.

It is important, that this emic ethnographic sample lets us grasp the range of cultural phenomena, but not the frequency distribution of those phenomena. Comparatively small ethnographic samples (usually less than forty and often as few as ten) are enough to comprehend what are main symbols or items common among members of a culture that constitute a cultural domain and to collect valid data for analysis [13]. The data saturation procedure showed that the sample of this research was ecologically valid.

Data Analysis

The free list started with a general question *List all the things that come to your mind when you hear the word terrorism.* Answers provide a cluster of concepts by which to grasp an overall understanding of Lithuanian perceptions of terrorism phenomena. Table 1 (as well as all free-list tables) presents the frequencies and saliency indices of the top terrorism terms. In the table that follows I only represent the first top terrorism terms, in terms of frequency, since they capture the main patterns of Lithuanians' approach towards the terrorism phenomena.

Table 1. *Top terms about terrorism. Source: own source*

Name	Occurrence	Frequency	Average Rank	Smith Index
Killing	12	28,57%	3,833	0,135
Unstable psychological state	12	28,57%	2,917	0,157
Muslims	10	23,81%	2,400	0,172
Guns	9	21,43%	3,444	0,128
Coercion	9	21,43%	2,444	0,169
Bombs	8	19,05%	2,125	0,131
Armed conflicts	8	19,05%	2,125	0,125
Death	7	16,67%	2,143	0,123
Fear	5	11,90%	2,000	0,086
Explosion	5	11,90%	2,200	0,079
Victims	5	11,90%	2,800	0,079
Islam	4	9,52%	4,250	0,050

Two terms on the top of the list have the same numbers of occurrence and frequency, however, the second term *unstable psychological condition* has higher salience. First, ranking term *murdering* shows that terrorism is comprehensible in peoples' minds as a physical act. The following term *unstable psychological*

condition primarily refers to an emotional state of a person than an act that could be described as a reason for terrorism itself. According to salience, it indicates that the informants, describing terrorism, primarily draw attention to the reasons which influence the terrorism phenomena and see *murdering*, a physical act, as an expression of the *unstable psychological condition.*

The third term, Muslims, has a lower number of occurrences, but the highest salience rating of all the terms. This suggests that any terrorist act is conducted by the agents of that act, in this case implying terrorism is mostly conducted by Muslims. The narrative around the Muslims as highly associated with terrorism is further supported by linking the term 'Islam' With terrorism, though it does have a lower salience than do the top terms. It is however, hard to ignore the triadic relationship of Islam, terrorism, and Muslims within this cultural domain.

The intent of the question was to change the focus from a respondents' personal opinion on terrorism to public opinion. The question also provides a way to test if the first free-list, based on personal beliefs, was biased toward more politically correct responses.

Table 2. *Top terms respondents' peers supposedly relate with terrorism. Source: own source*

Name	Occurrence	Frequency	Average Rank	Smith Index
Muslims	9	22,50%	1,111	0,213
I don't know	7	17,50%	1,000	0,175
Guns	5	12,50%	1,600	0,088
Bombs	3	7,50%	2,000	0,048
Islam	3	7,50%	1,000	0,075
War	3	7,50%	2,333	0,046
Terror	2	5,00%	1,000	0,050
Middle East	2	5,00%	2,000	0,038

As the first table showed, personally respondents relate terrorism with the agent (i.e. Muslims) who is responsible for the act. Data from the second table agrees with the data of the first table by linking terrorism with an agent – *Muslims*. The term *Muslims* (in the Table 1 and 2) demonstrates the highest salience rating. This strongly implies that the belief in a linkage between Muslims and terrorism is culturally shared.

In the second free-list, the term Islam appeared with a low frequency just as was the case in Table 1. However, the saliency was significantly higher in the second free list. These data suggest that terrorism is closely linked with Muslims but not so closely with Islam for individuals but the link is perceived to be strong among peers.

This inference should be taken with a grain of salt because it is likely based on personal bias as explained above. The gap between saliency indices for Muslim and Islam in the free list asking for personal beliefs, implies that Muslims and

Islam can be seen as referring to distinct concepts that are not necessarily causally related. Much further research needs to be conducted to examine this relationship. On the other hand, Table 2 confirmed that the agency of Muslims could be based on Islamic beliefs.

This sample is important for understanding how Lithuanians portray a typical terrorist. Regarding data from the Table 1 and 2 it was expected, that a potential terrorist has certain religious features, indicating Muslims.

Surprisingly, most of the respondents stated, that it is not possible to recognize a potential terrorist – term *impossible to recognize* was the most common one. It can be assumed, that some people, who are eager to commit a crime want to remain unrecognized and do not stand out from the crowd to accomplish it successfully.

Table 3. *Top features of a potential terrorist. Source: own source.*

Name	Occurrence	Frequency	Average Rank	Smith Index
Cannot recognize	8	24,24%	1,250	0,217
Dark skin color	6	18,18%	2,000	0,111
Angry	5	15,15%	1,400	0,126
Beard	5	15,15%	2,000	0,096
Clothing	4	12,12%	1,500	0,101
Muslim	4	12,12%	1,250	0,106
Unstable psychological state	4	12,12%	1,750	0,091
Man	4	12,12%	1,750	0,091
Fanatic	3	9,09%	1,333	0,076

Three patterns to symbolize a typical terrorist can be traced. The first is based on race, relating a terrorist with symbols of darkness, such as *dark skin* and *beard*. The second is religious ethnicity as reflected in the term "Muslims and Islam; the third is through psychological features: angry, unstable psychological condition, fanatic.

It could be concluded, that culturally, terrorism is understood as a consequence of three features race, religion, and the psychological features mentioned above. It can be concluded that the prototypical image of a terrorist in Lithuania is comprised of these three "pillars" and that attempts to reduce Lithuanian biases toward Muslims should attend to all three factors.

Table 4. *Causes leading people to radicalize. Source: own source*

Name	Occurrence	Frequency	Average Rank	Smith Index
Environmental impact	10	25,00%	2,000	0,169
Personal lack	7	17,50%	2,286	0,119
Lack of money	7	17,50%	1,143	0,167
Psychological illness/traumas	6	15,00%	1,833	0,115
Anger	4	10,00%	1,500	0,088
Religious influence	4	10,00%	1,500	0,079
Lack of education	4	10,00%	1,500	0,081
Revenge	3	7,50%	2,667	0,043
Believing in something blindly	3	7,50%	2,000	0,052
Influence of the authorities	3	7,50%	2,333	0,046
Influence of the ideology	3	7,50%	2,667	0,029
Faith	3	7,50%	1,667	0,065
Family influence	3	7,50%	1,333	0,067
Personal tendency towards cruelty	2	5,00%	2,000	0,025

A pattern of external factors causing people to join a terrorist organisation is seen here. For example, the highest salience has a term *Environmental impact;* a considerable variety of other terms, related to external influences – *religion influence, influence of authorities*, *ideology*, *family* – complement the pattern. This demonstrates that a radical person, due to the influences, could be less personally responsible for his actions (see also Strauss 2007, discussed below).

Only two respondents mentioned *personal tendency to cruelty,* a term which has the lowest salience. The term describes a point of view seeing radicalization and joining terrorist organizations as arising from the personal agency – an agented feature that leads you to take actions without a clear motive.

From Tables 1, 2, 3 a cultural pattern to relate Muslims with terrorism could be observed. Tables 1 and 2 relate terrorism with an agent, who is very accurately described through his religion as being a Muslim. Despite a clear link between terrorism and Muslims in Tables 1, 2, 3, 4 revealed, that being a Muslim is not the cause of radicalism. This could be aptly illustrated by the phrase which one respondent wrote in his free-list answer – *not all Muslims are terrorists, but all terrorists are Muslims*.

The data could lead to a further question – could these external influences be related to Muslims particularly? The data doesn't provide the answer to this question, so it could be only surmised, that specific external influences affect Muslims more than non-Muslims. For example, *religious influence* could be related to Islam (as Islam is the only religion mentioned among all the data examined). Yet, the limitation of this question is that only supposed interfaces can be made.

DISCUSSION

In this discussion I will cover two questions: What are Lithuanians' perceptions about terrorism; and is the linkage between Muslims and terrorists (or terrorism) weak, moderate, or strong? Regarding the question about Lithuanians' perceptions about terrorism, three patterns could be observed from the data collected which are presented below.

The first pattern is related to race and ethnicity. A race pattern is described mostly through symbols of darkness (e.g., *dark skin color* in Table 3). Such a symbol lacks clarity, as, e.g., *Spanish people* have darker skin color too. I would state, that dark skin color is related with Muslims and Middle Easterners firstly as terrorism and terrorists were related exclusively to Muslims and Middle Easterners (mentioned in Tables 1, 2, 3, 4) and not with other ethnicity and/or religion (as we already have seen from the data presented).

The second relatable pattern is religion, particularly using Islamic symbols through the terms mentioned like *Muslims, Islamic clothes.* The data has shown that indeed there are linkages between Islam and terrorism in the minds of Lithuanians. According to Tables 1, 2 and 3, the frequency-count linking Muslims with terrorism/terrorists is average and varies between 12 – 23%. However, the salience rating for this link was significantly high. Surprisingly, confessors of the religion (i.e. Muslims) but not the religion itself were most frequently cited and with the higher saliency when Lithuanians were asked to list terms related to terrorism. To conclude, Lithuanians perceive terrorism through the actors – Muslims, but being a Muslim is not the cause of radicalism.

The third pattern demonstrates that cultural radicalization and becoming a terrorist is seen as an outcome of various negative environmental influences, e.g., *personal lack, environmental impact, lack of money*, resulting in particular psychological well-being, such as *unstable psychological condition, angry, fanatic.* Only a few respondents saw the personal agency as leading a person to become a terrorist. This is quite interesting, having in mind that most western cultures, as well as Lithuanians, are individualistic and emphasize a person's agency – free will to act according to their own understanding and make choices.

Claudia Strauss [15] in her article puts this question to light. She wrote that agency for most modern western societies is a highly valued virtue, however, she expands this idea claiming, that agency is just one of various cultural models to explain human actions. Strauss researched public commentaries in the United States about the Columbine school shootings in order to find out the place of agency versus social causes for this terrorist act. She showed, that agency was not perceived by Americans to be a hegemonic discourse explaining the behavior of the two boys Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold.

CONCLUSION

From the examined data, a weak-to-moderate *Muslim – terrorist* linkage can be traced as terms linking Muslims to terrorism appeared in all four tables in a direct, explicit or indirect, implicit way. It reflects a successful symbolization process, according to Cohen, since a group (i.e., Muslims) becomes perceptually attached to a deviant act or behavior (i.e., terrorism). Thus, Muslims could be called "the folk devils", however, could moral panic around them be apparent in Lithuania?

As examined in the theory section, Lithuanian media cannot be blamed for disproportionately portraying Muslims as terrorists as no systematic intention to create or publish Islamophobic content could be observed. There were attempts by some Lithuanian politicians to apply the "the folk devils" discourse to Muslims and/or refugees in order to gain political prominence and power. However, political campaigns target Muslims and try to create a sense of moral panic ended with limited success. Despite neither Lithuania's media nor politicians had no hegemonic power to raise the moral panic of Muslims, yet, Lithuanians may well be primed by public narratives and images of Muslims as a deviant group, spreading by media and politicians.

After examining public perceptions on terrorism, as long with Lithuanian politicians' and media's discourse around Muslims, it could be concluded, that the efforts by the Lithuanian media and politicians to deliberately or unconsciously develop the Muslim/refugee – terrorist discourse helped to create a *Muslims as folk devils* cultural script. However, according to my hypothesis, the failure to raise moral panic and direct it towards Muslims using a terrorism discourse by the Lithuanian media and entrepreneur is clearly reflected in the weak to the moderate linkage between terrorism and Muslims in Lithuanians' perceptions.

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