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Refugees and the politics of memory: Political discourses of religious toleration and peace

Laura Galián, John Maiden, Stefanie Sinclair and Árpád Welker

Introduction

This chapter tackles one of the key research questions that the RETOPEA project set out to address: How are key issues of religious coexistence presented in contemporary culture and media? While this is a very wide-ranging question, this chapter focuses on representations of these issues in the specific context of political discourses. In particular, it explores how political discourses draw on history and mobilize national and transnational memories when presenting issues related to religious diversity and migration in contemporary society.

While the fact that political discourses aim to shape public opinion cannot be denied, there are ongoing debates around the extent to which political discourses actually influence public opinion (Leruth and Taylor-Gooby 2019), including the views of young people, especially since these discourses are often filtered through media coverage. When the RETOPEA team conducted focus group interviews with teenagers across Europe (see Chapter 2 in this volume), it became apparent that there are a wide range of factors at play that can influence the views of young people, such as not only different kinds of media (including social media) but also peers, parents and school. This corroborates findings of various other research in this field (see e.g. Middaugh et al. 2016; Weiss 2020). Many of the young people we interviewed as part of the RETOPEA focus groups demonstrated considerable awareness of bias, particularly in news coverage within mainstream TV news. They frequently mentioned how often they consulted social media and other internet sources for information. To encourage and develop young peoples' critical engagement with political discourses, the RETOPEA team included extracts from political speeches in the educational materials we developed for the RETOPEA project, that is, the selection of curated primary sources presented on the project website that young people use for the production of short documentary films, or 'docutubes' (see https://retopea.eu/s/en/page/clippings).

This chapter is based on background research conducted for the RETOPEA project. In particular, it considers how contemporary political discourses on religious toleration and peace draw on the past. It focuses on political discourses used in the

specific context of the 'refugee crisis' between 2013 and 2017, when large numbers of refugees, predominantly from Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan started arriving in member states of the European Union (EU). We chose this focus as these debates offer good examples of how notions of history and transnational memory have been utilized to discursively frame contemporary understandings of toleration and peace. While *religious* toleration was not always explicitly at the forefront of these debates, the fact that the vast majority of these refugees came from Muslim backgrounds was frequently perceived and presented as a source of controversy within these discourses. These debates also highlight differences in perceptions of Europe's cultural and religious history and of its perceived relevance to contemporary society.

We chose to draw on examples of political discourses employed in Hungary, Germany, Spain and the UK, given that these four national contexts offer important contrasting perspectives within different parts of Europe. This chapter explores how the past and notions of a collective, shared memory have been interpreted, framed and deployed in these debates. First, we will set out our understanding of notions of 'transnational memory', followed by the provision of some contextual background about how the refugee crisis unfolded in Hungary, Germany, Spain and the UK. Drawing on examples from each of these four countries, our chapter then goes on to identify similarities, specificities and divergences in approaches to the politics of memory and considers how notions of national, European as well as religious history and identity have been discursively constructed and mobilized in these debates.

Theoretical framework and methodology

Our chapter is embedded within the framework of memory studies. We are drawing on notions of 'collective memory' as coined by Maurice Halbwachs ([1925] 1992) in that we understand collective memory as shaped through 'narratives, recall, and communicative exchange' (Assmann 2016: 16) and in terms of shared memories mediated through many different spaces and means of communications, including the media, institutions of the state, politicians and other social actors (Rothberg 2009: 15). However, our study goes beyond the 'methodological nationalism' (De Cesari and Rigney 2014: 1) that has tended to dominate the study of collective memory in previous decades. Traditionally, approaches to memory studies have predominantly associated collective memory with the nation state. However, processes of globalization, colonialization and migration have highlighted the transnational reality of mnemonic processes. As far as people move, so do memories. So, in order to understand mnemonic processes that have been discursively mobilized during the 'refugee crisis' in Europe, we draw on the notion of 'transnational memory' as a concept that transcends the perceived static, self-contained framework of national memories (De Cesari and Rigney 2014; Erll 2011).

Discursive constructions of collective and transnational memories have undoubtedly shaped understandings of Europe and of its religious history and have played an important role in supporting the development of a sense of European identity, unity and homogeneity. However, there are also many different and

conflicting understandings of European memory (Trimçev et al. 2020). Scholars, such as Macdonald (2013), Karlsson (2010) or Pérez Baquero (2021), claim that the idea of Europe has been discursively shaped by transnational memories and argue that the European project relies on transnational memories of different historical events, including the Holocaust, which is identified as the event of greatest significance.

As Astrid Erll (2011) points out, the production of cultural memory is a fluid, continually evolving process that is in perpetual motion and involves the dynamic interplay between people, media, mnemonic contents and practices. Given the wide range of countries included in our analysis and their different positionalities within the history of Europe, we believe it is necessary to go beyond the idea of the 'national' in order to understand how the different memories mobilized during the 'refugee crisis' have been encountered, negotiated, cross-referenced and have borrowed from each other in the public sphere, within national and trans-European spaces and contexts. 'Transnational memories' have, however, not yet silenced national collective memories. Memories – whether local, national or transnational – coexist and adapt to each other in a fluid and hybrid way.

The main goal of our study is to highlight complexities, similarities and differences of the discursive construction of memories in relation to notions of religious toleration and peace in the context of political debates about the 'refugee crisis' (2013–17) in these four European countries. For that purpose, we will be adopting a multidisciplinary perspective, drawing on Cultural Studies, History, Religious Studies and Memory Studies. We 'approach "memory" as a discursive phenomenon: as acts of interpretation which repeat, alter or contest a shared meaning of something understood "as past"' (Trimçev et al. 2020: 52) and are inspired by a discursive-historical approach (as developed by Wodak 2015) in that we consider broader sociopolitical and historical contexts in which discursive practices are embedded. We understand that a comparative, critical discourse analysis would require a more subtle, detailed and multifocal perspective than we are adopting in this chapter. However, an in-depth analysis of specific 'speech acts' would go well beyond the scope of this chapter. Instead, we aim to establish common themes and broad trends of ways in which national and transnational memories have been discursively constructed in the context of debates about this 'crisis', which captured 'worldwide political attention and [produced] diverse and contradictory discourses and responses' (Holmes and Castañeda 2016: 13).

Background: The refugee crisis in the different national contexts

In the broadest terms, the refugee crisis can be regarded as *transnational* – in terms of the movement of refugees; *international* – in view of some humanitarian and political responses (e.g. UNICEF and the EU); but also *national* – as we shall see in the specificities of political discourses within each national context. These different dimensions need to be considered in an assessment of the historical background and development of the crisis.

As a transnational event, the Syrian refugee crisis needs to be set against the backdrop of multiple geopolitical 'crises' involving the forced displacement of people due to war and organized violence: the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) calculated that in 2014 there were 60 million individuals displaced from their homes worldwide (Ferris and Kirişci 2016: 2). The immediate origin of the displacement of refugees was the violence aimed at anti-government protesters in Syria from March 2011 onwards. In the same year the first temporary camps were established in Turkey, with refugees initially called 'guests' on the assumption their presence would only be temporary. The civil war in Syria rapidly developed dimensions of proxy and sectarian warfare, with the threat of death and sexual violence. The intensification of violence led to the increasing displacement of refugees, mostly Sunni Muslims, but increasingly also Shia Alwites, Kurds, Turkomans, Yazidis, Iraqi Christians and others. These people fled to Turkey, where there were over 2.5 million Syrian refugees by December 2015, and Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt and Iraq, as well as some other North African countries. According to the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), the number of Syrian refugees increased from around 8,000 in 2011 to about 4.6 million in 2015 (Ferris and Kirişci 2016: 29). Turkey became the main gateway of refugees into Europe. Many of these took the 'Balkan corridor' towards Western Europe through Macedonia, Hungary, Serbia, Slovenia and Croatia. The attempts of refugees to enter Europe also resulted in over three thousand deaths in the Aegean and the Mediterranean, with many relying on the operations of illegal people smugglers and traffickers.

The arrival of large numbers of refugees triggered various international responses. The United Nations established a Syrian Regional Response Plan (UNHCR 2014) and was able to raise funds. This allowed the UNHCR to manage and finance humanitarian camps in Lebanon and Jordan. In 2015 the European Commission referred to the situation as 'the largest global humanitarian crisis' of our time (cited in Holmes and Castañeda 2016: 12). Many European leaders spoke of a 'crisis', though critics have argued that this crisis was actually 'not so much a crisis of refugees, but more a crisis of the EU itself' (Freedman 2019: 705). The arrival of large numbers of refugees raised many questions about European identity, the role of the EU, national sovereignty, the permeability of national borders and the need to distribute the care and responsibility for refugees between different member states of the EU. The sociologist and international relations scholar Jane Freedman, like various other experts, argues that the use of the term 'crisis' by European politicians in this context served a 'powerful political and symbolic purpose' as it implied that political leaders faced a situation beyond their control for which political solutions were not available (Freedman 2019: 705). The EU's main intervention was in negotiations with Turkey (in the context of ongoing discussions over the country joining the EU) to reduce transit of refugees into the EU, following a year of mass migration in 2015. In March 2016, a deal was made which involved Turkey agreeing that every Syrian refugee arriving 'irregularly' in Greece would be returned to Turkey, with the EU also agreeing to accept one Syrian refugee for every individual returned. Turkey would receive 6 billion Euros for assisting refugees. It has been argued that this deal 'appeased European anxieties about a possible refugee influx but it consequentially crippled on political, ideological,

and moral grounds the EU's capacity and legitimacy to exert pressure over Turkey's compliance with the EU's standards regarding human rights and democracy' (Bélanger and Saracoglu 2019: 288).

The historical specificities and contexts of the responses of the four individual nation states in this chapter require close attention. During the refugee crisis, Hungary became a particularly sought-after transit country for refugees in the 'Balkan corridor' because it was part of the Schengen Zone. When, in the summer of 2015, large amounts of predominantly Muslim refugees arrived in Hungary, discourses employed by the Fidesz government – led by Victor Orbán – presented the situation not as a humanitarian crisis but as a Muslim invasion threatening Hungary's national security and Christian identity. These discourses, practices and policies became part of a hostile campaign on 'immigration and terrorism' (Bocskor 2018; Kallius 2017; Melegh 2020).

The Fidesz government made anti-immigration a central topic of its propaganda and politics in 2015, even before the 'Balkan route' became a focus of attention. Prime Minister Orbán used the tragic events connected to the terrorist attack on the journalists of *Charlie Hebdo* to launch his warfare on immigration. In the direct aftermath of the rally of unity in Paris, he gave an interview to the Hungarian state news agency, in which he connected terrorism with migration, called for a European policy to prevent further immigration and stressed that his government would not accept newcomers (*index* 2015). Throughout the following months, as the number of asylum seekers steadily grew, several waves of carefully planned propaganda took place.

While hundreds of thousands of asylum seekers transited from Hungary to the West, in September 2015 the Hungarian government adopted strict measures to minimize the number of asylum seekers in Hungary and built a fence on the southern border. In the beginning of 2016, the Fidesz government announced that a referendum on a possible quota system within the EU would be held in Hungary,[1] followed by a 10 million Euro communication campaign that included billboards and a national consultation. Even though this referendum, which was held in October 2016, had to be declared invalid due to insufficient electoral turnout (Kingsley 2016), it served its purpose of keeping the question of migration on the agenda, despite a radical reduction of the numbers of refugees seeking asylum in Hungary. As part of the new legislation on migration, the Fidesz government announced a state of emergency in 2016, which gave it various extraordinary powers. The state of emergency has been renewed year by year, despite the fact that the arrival of Syrian refugees in Hungary virtually stopped by the end of 2015.

In September 2015, Germany, along with Austria, opened their borders to refugees who had arrived in Hungary and were trying to reach Northern Europe via the Balkan route. Chancellor Angela Merkel appealed to the German population claiming that it was Germany's 'national duty' to support refugees. Merkel argued that Germany was in a position to cope with the arrival of large numbers of refugees and made the now famous assertion '*Wir schaffen das!*' (We can do this!) (Merkel 2015). However, when more than 1 million refugees registered in Germany in 2016, Merkel's approach became subject to a lot of criticism. Between 2015 and 2019, 1.7 million people applied for asylum in Germany (Ottermann 2020; UNHCR 2020). Merkel was accused of being naively optimistic and of encouraging too many refugees to come to Germany,

allowing them to take advantage of Germany's infrastructure and welfare system (Deutsche Welle 2019; Winkel 2019).

The treatment of refugees became a hotly contested topic in political debates in Germany, reflecting 'Germany's historical struggle between xenophobic tendencies and liberal aspirations' (Holmes and Castañeda 2016: 15). Responses ranged from the endorsement of a *Willkommenskultur* (welcome culture), mobilizing large numbers of volunteers supporting the establishment of refugee shelters (Herrmann 2020), to strong condemnation and concerns about the social, cultural and economic impact, including a perceived 'threat' of an increasing Islamization of Germany and Europe. In some cases, this led to physical attacks on accommodation intended for asylum seekers by far-right groups (BBC News 2015a). When in the city centre of Cologne on New Year's Eve 2015, sexual assaults on women by groups of young men, allegedly including asylum seekers primarily from Arab or North African backgrounds, were reported (Büscher et al. 2016), critics of the *Willkommenskultur* highlighted this event as a sign of the cultural incompatibility of Muslim refugees and of their disrespect for German and European values. This incident was used to justify Islamophobic protest led by far-right populist movements, such as PEGIDA,[2] which claimed that the incidents at New Year's Eve in Cologne showed that Muslim refugees could not be integrated into German society and posed a threat (Dearden 2016; News Wires 2016).

In Spain, it could be argued that the 'refugee crisis' has had much more to do with the situation in Spain – its values, identity and history – than with the situation of the refugees and asylum seekers. Compared to other European countries, such as Germany, Spain barely received any Syrian refugees, in spite of a vast amount of applications from asylum seekers in 2015. In fact, for the period between 2015 and 2017, Spain had agreed to host 19,449 Syrian refugees, arriving in Europe via Greece and Italy. However, at the end of the specified time period, the country had hosted just 2,500 people, around 12.8 per cent of the total number agreed. This was because the right-wing *Partido Popular* (People's Party), the leading party in government at the time, had informally boycotted the EU decision on the quota distribution of refugees. In fact, the country was accused, by its own judiciary system, of breaching the contract. Despite the unwillingness of the Spanish cabinet to host Syrian refugees in the context of the biggest refugee crisis in Europe since the Second World War, Spain still received migrants mainly from North Africa and Latin America as it had historically done. In 2015 Spain received the largest number of asylum applications in its recent history. According to Eurostat, 14,780 people applied for international protection in Spain, 8,934 more than in 2014, which was an increase of more than 150 per cent (CEAR 2016).

Given that the Syrian refugee crisis coincided with the national institutional and financial crisis under Rajoy's government (2011–17), political discourses employed by the Spanish government were at the time preoccupied by domestic issues rather than the international refugee crisis. There is still relatively little literature on how political or media discourses in Spain have constructed migratory phenomena, in comparison with other national or international contexts, possibly because immigration was not picked up as a significant social problem in political or media discourses until the mid-1990s (Montagut and Moragas-Fernández 2020).

In Britain, the initial political discussion concerned the offering of humanitarian support to regional responses to the refugee crisis, notably the camps in Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey. In January 2014, the focus of discussions shifted to the resettlement of vulnerable refugees, with the Conservative (centre-right) UK government at first declining to be involved in UNHCR's attempts to mobilize nation states, but then, by the end of the month, announcing a Syrian Vulnerable Persons Relocation Programme. This was intended to allow only a few hundred Syrians into the country. Indeed, as of September 2014, while 941 refugees had been resettled in Germany, the number for the UK was a mere 38 individuals. As the numbers of refugees crossing the Mediterranean increased, in September 2015 the government announced plans to allow twenty thousand refugees to be resettled from camps in the Middle East – but not from Europe. These numbers were roundly criticized, in particular by the political opposition in the UK Parliament, including the Labour and Liberal (centre-left) parties and the (centre-left) Scottish National Party. An important aspect of criticism was the fate of children, especially in the refugee camps in Calais, France. In May 2016, the 'Dubs amendment' to the Immigration Bill was passed in order to bring unaccompanied children from France, as well as Greece and Italy. By early 2017, around two hundred children had been resettled in the UK, in the care of the local authorities (for the overall UK response see Ostrand 2015; McGuiness 2017).

Three main aspects of the UK response to the refugee crisis are worth a particular mention. First were the discourses around humanitarianism during the crisis. With the image of Alan Kurdi, the young boy whose body was washed onto a beach in Turkey, having a significant public impact, it has been argued that both government policy – which was to offer resettlement only to those seen as most in need – and media reporting around the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement programme focused on an ethic of 'vulnerability'. This, however, also exceptionalized the vulnerable, as 'deserving' subjects, and simultaneously tended to exclude others as 'undeserving' (Armbruster 2019). Second was the association between many of the refugees in Calais – the majority of whom were men – and the threat of Islamic terrorism (Armbruster 2019). This was in a context of years of political 'backlash' against multiculturalism, in which both 'muscular liberal' and right-wing concerns over security and the undermining of 'British values' had been paramount (Vertovec and Wessendorf 2009). Third was the distinctive political backdrop to the crisis: an economics of austerity and public debate over the 'in/out' referendum on the status of the UK in the EU, which culminated in the BREXIT vote of 2016. Anti-immigration – a constant, shrill voice in the UK response to the Syrian refugee crisis – was bound up with both these political issues.

Politics of memory: Political discourses employed in the context of the refugee crisis

Our analysis identified three main themes in the discursive construction of national and transnational memories in the context of political debates about the Syrian refugee crisis:

1. The negotiation of disputed and difficult memories in the discursive construction of national and religious identities,
2. Mobilizations of memories of migration and displacement, and
3. The mobilization of discourses of European identity and anti-European sentiment.

Disputed and difficult memories and the discursive construction of national and religious identities

Discourses employed in the context of political debates about the Syrian refugee crisis often drew on notions of collective memories of historical events to justify national responses to this crisis and negotiate rising tensions between expectations of the international community, humanitarian obligations and domestic pressures (Brownlie 2020). This included discursive constructions of national and transnational memory and identity, which were heavily disputed and employed with very contrasting agendas, that is, either to present refugees as 'foreign' and 'other', or to create a sense of compassion or ethical responsibility towards refugees.

In Spain, different disputed memories, mainly those of al-Andalus and that of its colonial past, constantly play out in the configuration of contemporary understandings of national history and identity, above all when dealing with its religious identity and its relationship with Islam. These memories place Spain in a unique and exceptional position in Europe. Its geographical location, historical background as well as its linguistic and social composition are among the narratives that advocate for its 'exceptionalism' in its relationship with Islam and Arab-Islamic culture (Arigita 2011; Fernández Parrilla and Cañete 2018).

These historical correspondences (the fall of Granada in 1492, the expulsion of the Jews and later the Moriscos in 1609) and the contemporary flows of immigration from North Africa are connected, as if 'they had been experienced by the same people' (Fernández Parrilla and Cañete 2018: 112). The recent phenomenon of migration and, crucially, the refugee crisis, have been understood by many as the return of the 'moors' and have been discursively situated within a narrative of a new 'invasion' appealing to the history of al-Andalus.

The disputed memories of al-Andalus have been reflected in the ongoing search for Spanish identity in narratives of cultural and historical entanglements between Spain and Islam. In fact, 'it is impossible to understand the construction of modern Spanish national identity and its historical narratives without considering the problematic presence (or absence) of the Arab/Muslim component' (Fernández Parrilla and Cañete 2018: 112). Two competing discursive constructions of history, the 'myth of *convivencia*' (coexistence) among the three Abrahmanic religions – Christianity, Islam and Judaism – and the 'myth of invasion' as a return of Islam and the 'Moors' have been instrumentalized within contemporary political discourses. These memories and narratives, understood as a continuation or as a disruption of Spanish history, have been used to either unite and bring together or to divide, separate and isolate.

Elena Arigita (2011: 223) divides contemporary approaches to the disputed memories of al-Andalus into (1) jihadists claims of al-Andalus as Islamist territory,

(2) political discourses that present Spain as a border zone that protects Christendom from Islamic threats and (3) representations of al-Andalus as a fruitful crossroad of civilizations where coexistence among religions/cultures is possible. In neither of these representations, Islam is presented as part of the historical or contemporary identity of Spain or of Europe. In the context of political debates about the Syrian refugee crisis, narratives and memories of Spain as a territory of coexistence and as the fortress of Christian Europe have competed with each other. In neither of them, Islam is considered to be part of the historical or contemporary identity of Spain, nor of Europe. Both memories of the Spanish political discourses share a civilizational logic that perfectly coheres the stereotypes of the historical other for the Spanish imagination (Arigita 2011: 233).

The emotional evocation of religious history, and the mobilization of memories of al-Andalus in particular, work at different levels and still permeate political, cultural and social life in Spain (Arigita 2011; Fernández Parrilla and Cañete 2018). However, rather than emphasizing a strong Christian or Catholic religious identity, political discourses have predominantly focused on the amplification of a fear of Islam, which has led to an increasing institutionalization of Islamophobia and a greater emphasis on a security agenda.

In Germany, political discourses used in debates about the Syrian refugee crisis frequently referred to notions of Germany's historic guilt related to a need to deal with its Nazi past. Notions of historic guilt refer to Germany's responsibility for atrocities committed by the Nazi regime, its responsibility towards the victims of the Holocaust and Germany's subsequent duty to help anyone fleeing from political violence. Particularly since 1980, political discourses in the Federal Republic of Germany have demonstrated a 'great interest in the politics of memory' (Winkel 2019: 18) and reflected efforts to 'come to terms' with historical wrongdoings (*Vergangenheitsbewältigung*). These efforts largely focused on finding ways of dealing with its Nazi past, its anti-Semitic policies in particular, which led to the murder of 6 million Jews during the Holocaust (Neiman 2019). As Holmes and Castañeda put it (2016: 14), 'Germany has responded [to the Syrian refugee crisis] with an ambivalent hospitality that is uniquely nuanced and conditioned by memories (and some present-day realities) of xenophobia and fascism'.

An example of political discourse framing the refugee crisis in terms of Germany's historical responsibility (i.e. defining itself in contrast to atrocities committed by the Nazi regime) is Valerie Wilms's (Alliance 90/The Greens) contribution to a debate in the German national parliament on 15 October 2015:

> After the Second World War, Germany took on a historic duty and sensibly included the right to seek asylum as a basic right in its constitution. That is because German history in particular has shown us very clearly that people who are persecuted need shelter. Many people come to us because life in their home countries has become impossible. They seek protection and we have to help them – not only to follow the constitution, but above all as compassionate people. (Wilms 2015: 12727 C, trans. from the German original)

However, these notions of Germany's historic duty have also been controversially received. Members of far-right populist parties, like Björn Höcke from the German nationalist Eurosceptic *Alternative für Deutschland* (*AfD* – Alternative for Germany), have used people's fears about the impact of large numbers of refugees arriving in Germany to promote the idea that Germany needs to 'free' itself from discourses of shame and 'obsession' with feelings of guilt around Germany's Nazi past and instead emphasize discourses of Germany's historical 'greatness' as a country of poets and thinkers (Höcke 2017). Far-right populist movements like the *AfD*, which have been attracting a growing number of followers, have claimed that the arrival of large numbers of Muslims from the Middle East and Northern Africa in particular is posing a 'threat' to German culture and values. For example, in the run-up to the national election in September 2017, the *AfD* used the slogan 'Islam does not belong to Germany!' as part of their election campaign (*Alternative für Deutschland* 2017a; 2017b; trans from the German original).

However, references to notions of religious identities and traditions in political discourses in Germany about the Syrian refugee crisis have not only included concerns about the potential impact of the arrival of large numbers of predominantly Muslim young men on Christian values and traditions in Germany (and Europe). They also included political discourses appealing to Christian values (such as the value of loving your neighbour) as values that could or should inspire compassion towards refugees (see e.g. Sarrazin 2015). Chancellor Angela Merkel, who is a member of the centre-right Christian Democratic Union (CDU), openly identifies herself as a Christian and has repeatedly highlighted Christian values as a source of inspiration to her and of the policies she stands for, including her support of the pro-refugee *Willkommenskultur* (Mueller 2016; Spencer 2016). Merkel has argued that the best path towards community cohesion and peaceful coexistence was to strengthen 'Christian values' and talk about the 'Judeo-Christian tradition', rather than the dangers of Islam. As Merkel put it, 'it is not the case that we have too much of Islam, but that we have not enough of Christianity' (Merkel 2011, trans. from the German original).

However, members of the CDU have also argued that immigrants should be expected to integrate into German society and conform to the *Leitkultur* (guiding culture). The concept of a *Leitkultur* is based on notions of Europe's 'Judeo-Christian heritage', but is also linked to secular values of the Enlightenment (Goździak and Suter 2020: 286).

In the UK, religion as a category was not a central feature in political debates about the refugee crisis. However, where 'ethnicity' and 'race' were the focus of discourse, religion and religious identity may be elided with these categories. Furthermore, specifically historicized understandings of migration were embedded in different ways in political discourses. The 'politics of memory' undoubtedly informed debates about political policy.

Debates in the UK parliament about the Syrian refugee crisis reflected a wider rhetorical emphasis on a 'tradition' of British tolerance, one which is shaped by a particular sense of historical consciousness. For example, during a debate in the House of Commons ('Unaccompanied Child Refugees') in November 2017, Labour MP Stella Creasy asserted:

> Actually we have had a proud tradition of taking and supporting refugees in this country. I am mindful that Creasy, like Farage, is a Huguenot surname, and that all of us come from communities that have benefited from the input of refugees in this country. That is the true British, patriotic tradition that we should be supporting. (*Hansard* 2016: col. 549)

Various scholars have pointed out that a 'myth' of toleration is evident in discourse concerning multiculturalism. The historian David Feldman even suggests that there is a significant vein of 'conservative pluralism' on the right in British politics, informed by historical consciousness. Feldman uses this argument in relation to debates around religious accommodation in the public sphere (e.g. concerning food, clothing, religious schools). He showed how political discourse, for example, concerning legislation on Sikh turbans and motorbike helmets in the 1960s, was informed by a historical narrative of religious and ethnic toleration – for example, towards Nonconformists and French Huguenots (Feldman 2011). Some of the discourse he describes seems to assume a 'whiggish' sense of British history – one which presents a historical narrative of continuous progress towards toleration and freedoms. However, this 'tradition' is understood in different ways, with varying understandings of the implications of this tradition, what the 'limits' of inclusivity should be and how it relates to notions of Christian 'heritage'. This was evident in an exchange in the House of Commons in 2015. The Conservative MP Sir Gerald Howarth, for example, asked the prime minister, David Cameron, the following:

> As we approach the festival marking the birth of Jesus Christ, may I invite the Prime Minister to send a message of support to the millions of fellow Christians around the world who are suffering persecution? May I also invite him once again to remind the British people that we are a country fashioned by our Christian heritage, and which has resulted in our giving refuge to so many of other faiths over so many centuries, but that we will not tolerate those who abuse our freedom to try to inflict their alien and violent fashions upon us, particularly in the name of Islam? (*Hansard* 2015a: col 1552)

Cameron's response was as follows:

> I join my hon. Friend in saying that we should do everything we can to defend and protect the right of Christians to practise their faith the world over. That is an important part of our foreign policy. … Yes, Britain is a Christian country. I believe that the fact that we have an established faith and that we understand the place of faith in our national life makes us a more tolerant nation and better able to accommodate other faith groups in our country. That is why, as I said earlier, we should be proud that this is one of the most successful multi-ethnic, multi-faith, multi-religion democracies anywhere in the world. That is not in conflict with our status as a predominantly Christian country; that status is one of the reasons why we have done it. (*Hansard* 2015a: col 1553)

This was against the context of debates over whether persecuted Christian minorities from Syria and Northern Iraq should be prioritized by the UK Government.

On the eve of the refugee crisis, Hungary differed from most non-post-Soviet parts of the EU in number of ways. In recent history, Hungary's experience of migrants or refugees, particularly from non-European countries, was relatively scarce. In the twentieth century, this included groups of Greek left-wing refugees arriving in the 1950s as well as members of Hungarian-speaking minorities from neighbouring countries and about fifteen thousand largely self-employed migrants from China, who settled in Hungary in the 1980s and 1990s (Melegh 2020). However, the most significant experience of larger-scale migration was the arrival of Jewish migrants in the nineteenth century. Before the arrival of Syrian refugees, political discourses associated with topics such as the non-Christian population in Hungary or issues of religious tolerance other than between Christian communities were therefore associated with the Jewish population and heavily traumatized by historical anti-Semitism. The prior lack of domestic discourse on immigration in Hungary meant that concepts like 'multiculturalism' that are part of Western European discursive traditions on immigration were empty signifiers in the political context of Hungary. They could therefore be used and misused freely in political propaganda in a media space where no such prior discursive tradition existed. Furthermore, the Fidesz government, led by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán – which can be described as a hybrid or semi-authoritarian regime – developed a monopolistic capacity to set the agenda and drive home messages uncontested (Kovács and Trencsényi 2020).

Mobilizations of memories of migration and displacement

The refugee crisis has often brought into sharp relief understandings, sometimes contested, of national memories of migration and displacement. In contrast to Western European countries' perception as 'immigration countries', Hungary has been an 'emigrant nation' in its recent history. This perception has played an important role in political discourses used by Hungary's prime minister, Viktor Orbán, in relation to the Syrian refugee crisis. Mass emigration is a distinctive feature of the modern history of Hungary, dating back to the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Hungarians, thus, appear to be on the side of those who were helped in and by Western Europe. This is especially the case with the memory of emigration following the October 1956 uprising against the communist regime. The 1956 uprising has been largely perceived as a pivotal moment of history on which the legitimacy of the post-1990 political system has been based. One of the longest-lasting rhetorical elements of Fidesz, the right-wing national-conservative party in Hungary led by Orbán, has been anti-communism, and the mythical significance of the 1956 uprising has only strengthened over time.

The arrival of Hungarian refugees in Austria in 1956 marked a turning point in Europe's history of migration. The sheer numbers of Hungarian refugees and the fact they did not flee open warfare posed great challenges to the newly established system of international asylum. Hungary was also a scene for another significant moment in

European history, when it opened its borders to East Germans in 1989, facilitating a route to West Germany through Austria (the 'Pan-European Picnic'). No wonder that references to these refugee-friendly instances of Hungarian history were used even in the international press (Szirtes 2016; BBC News 2015b). The main problem for governmental communication in Hungary was the fact that reality did not fit its binary representations of Hungarians as 'good' and 'strong', of immigrants as 'evil' and of the West/the EU as 'weak'. This became particularly problematic in the context of political discourses employed against the backdrop of the anniversary celebrations of the 1956 uprising on 23 October, when anti-immigration became the central topic of government communications.

At a ceremony in 2015 commemorating the 1956 uprising, Lajos Kósa, then executive vice president of the Fidesz party, vehemently denied that the fence that Hungary had erected to repel migrants at its borders was reminiscent of the Iron Curtain. He claimed that 'as Hungarians did not hesitate to defend their country we cannot hesitate today: we have to defend Hungary, Europe and European values' (Kósa cited in *Propeller* 2015, trans. from the Hungarian original). Speaking at the commemoration organized by the Fidesz party, Minister Varga saw a similar parallel: 'The Hungarians' answer is the same as it was in 1956. Hungary protects itself, its borders and its liberty' (Varga cited in MTI 2015, trans. from the Hungarian original).

In the following year, Prime Minister Orbán's speech commemorating the sixtieth anniversary of the 1956 uprising centred on the notion of 'courage', presenting it as a black-and-white concept. Orbán argued that courage 'is not a virtue which can be measured and shared out with precision: people are either brave, or they are cowards' (Orbán 2016, trans. from the Hungarian original). He also made connections between the past and present by drawing parallels between the Hungarian government's contemporary response to the refugee crisis and historical events in 1956 and 1989 and referring to notions of national memory, history and fate:

> In 1956, after the Soviets pulled out of Austria, we sought to push the Iron Curtain back beyond our eastern border. We were brave and attacked the Soviet tanks with mere Molotov cocktails. In 1989 it was we who had to open our border, to let Germans find their way to other Germans. We were courageous and did this, despite the fact that Soviet forces were stationed here. And now, in 2015–2016, it is we who have had to close our border to stop the flood of migration from the South. Not once did we request the task – it was the work of history, and was brought on us by fate. All we have done is not run away and not back down – we have simply done our duty. We have continued to do our duty, even while being attacked from behind by those who we have in fact been protecting. (Orbán 2016, trans. from the Hungarian original)

The anti-immigration policy, thus, is not only presented as a binary choice but also as inevitable, predestined by fate.

In 2017 the Hungarian prime minister selected a most radical mix of conspiracy theories to connect 1956 with the Syrian refugee crisis, which was promoted by government-controlled media. He argued:

> We wanted and continue to want the European Union to be a guarantee and a vehicle with which the European nations protect their shared ideas of civilisation. In reality, however, we have made ourselves more vulnerable than we used to be. In every crisis situation they cry 'Europe!', as if it was a magic word that on its own is capable of turning around our fate. Europe has found itself in a dead-end. We Hungarians know why, and we see this most clearly at times like this, on the twenty-third of October. In the twentieth century the trouble was caused by military empires, but now, in the slipstream of globalisation, it is financial empires that have risen up. They have no borders, but they have global media, and they have bought tens of thousands of people. They have no fixed structure, but they have extensive networks. They are fast, strong and brutal. It is this empire of financial speculation that has captured Brussels and several Member States. Until it regains its sovereignty, it will be impossible to turn Europe in the right direction. It is this empire that saddled us with modern-day mass population movement, with millions of migrants, and with a new migrant invasion. They developed a plan with which they now seek to turn Europe into a continent with a mixed population. We alone resist them now. We have reached the point at which Central Europe is the last migrant-free region in Europe. This is why the struggle for the future of Europe is being concentrated here. (Orbán 2017, trans. from the Hungarian original)

The fact, however, remained that at a very memorable point of European history, Hungarian refugees were welcomed by Western Europe, and this shaped Europe's current understanding of asylum and its humanitarian approach to migration in important ways. This fact did not remain unnoticed by foreign critics of the Hungarian governments' stance on migration. The Regional Representative of the UN Refugee Agency based in Budapest noted in an interview that the first Hungarians she met were refugees, referring to the two hundred thousand Hungarians who left the country in 1956 (Toth 2015). Furthermore, Frans Timmermans, vice president of the European Commission, asked the European Parliament, 'What would Europe have looked like if, in 1956, other Europeans had said "I do not mind where those Hungarians go, so long as they do not come to us"?' (Timmermans 2015).

It was the latter that prompted a government response highlighting some of the basic assumptions of the thinking behind anti-immigration policies. László Surján, a former vice president of the European Parliament, wrote an opinion piece in a Hungarian newspaper, which turned into a tirade against Western Europe in general. He presented the Hungarian asylum-seekers as good people ('you were enriched by two hundred thousand people capable of outstanding performance'), while he argued that the West had always been dishonest ('disgraceful', 'hypocritical' and 'self-righteous') – now as in 1956. He established a narrative distinguishing between 'good' and 'evil' refugees, contrasting present-day asylum-seekers with 'good' refugees fleeing Hungary in 1956: 'I do not know either, if you, Mr. Commissioner, really do not know the amount of cultural distance between two European nations, and you really do not see the amplitude of difference in thinking, culture and religion between Europeans and present-day asylum seekers, or you mix these up

consciously.' He argued that there were no 'fake refugees' among the Hungarians in 1956 (László 2017).

In the UK, a key historical reference point during the Syrian refugee crisis was the *Kindertransport*, the rescue operation in 1938 and 1939 in which Jewish children were brought from Central Europe to remove them from the danger of the Nazis. The *Kindertransport* has been described by Sharples (2012: 16) as 'occupying a crucial place within Britain's historical consciousness' and 'one of the most written about refugee movements'. This position of the *Kindertransport* in the British historical imagination has been fixed in part because of the oral and written primary sources of those involved. However, as various scholars have noted, the representation of the *Kindertransport* in the British national narrative has been somewhat partial, 'perpetuating uncomplicated, celebratory and heroic accounts of the programme while ignoring some of its complexities and limitations' (Sharples 2012: 23). During the Syrian refugee crisis, the political rhetoric of both the 'right' and the 'left' tended to present the *Kindertransport* uncritically as evidence of a tradition of British toleration and welcome for refugees. Nevertheless, the *meaning* of the *Kindertransport* within the context of the crisis was contested. In a House of Commons debate on 'Refugees and Counter-Terrorism' in September 2015, the government policy of taking in twenty thousand refugees was criticized by the Labour (centre-left) Member of Parliament Gerald Kaufman as insufficient when *contrasted* with the *Kindertransport* as well as the German response:

> In the summer of 1939, my parents took into our home a young Jewish girl, Johanna, who had arrived in Leeds on the Kindertransport. Her sister and others had arrived on the same Kindertransport, and Neville Chamberlain facilitated the arrival of these young children more than this Government are facilitating such things now. It is sad that this Government are doing less than Neville Chamberlain did. The right hon. Gentleman says that he is going to take in 20,000 refugees over five years. The Germans took in 10,000 on one day. What kind of comparison is that? I recognise the financial problems and the assimilation problems, but if we do not do it now, we will live to regret it for the rest of our lives. (*Hansard* 2015b: col. 33)

In response, though, the Conservative (centre-right) prime minister, David Cameron, asserted:

> I believe that the 20,000 Syrian refugees – many of whom will be children – that we will take directly from the Syrian refugee camps are the modern equivalent of the Kindertransport, and this country should be proud of that. (*Hansard* 2015b: col. 33–4)

For Cameron, then, the response of the government was comparable with the *Kindertransport*, and therefore reflected a wider British history of welcome and toleration for refugees.

Population displacement was also a historical reference point in Germany during the Syrian refugee crisis in 2015, when comparisons were made with the

experiences of millions of Germans who had lived in Eastern Europe and were fleeing or expelled from East Russia, Silesia, Czechoslovakia, Poland and Hungary after the Second World War. An example of this comparison is the banner that Leipzig city council put across their city hall in autumn 2015. This displayed two photographs next to each other. One showed a group of German refugees (three women and a child) leaving the Eastern European city of Gdansk at the end of the Second World War in 1945. The other showed a woman and a child walking through the ruins of the bombed city of Kobane in Syria in 2015. According to Leipzig city council, this banner 'documents what being a refugee means: hardship, distress, hopelessness, homelessness – regardless of centuries or continents' (*Leipziger Städtische Bibliotheken* 2015, trans. from the German original). Burkhard Jung (Social Democratic Party, SPD), who was the mayor of the city of Leipzig at the time stated:

> Just 70 years ago, tens of thousands of our parents and grandparents experienced first-hand what it means to lose your home. Practically every German family has some refugee experience – as displaced persons themselves or as people who took refugees in, who worked with them and lived with them after World War II. We then mastered this situation at a much worse time. Today we must succeed in managing and organising immigration. In that process we must not ask too much of either the refugees or the local population. (Jung cited in *Leipziger Städtische* Bibliotheken 2015, trans. from the German original)

This historical analogy was also picked up by President Joachim Gauck, who argued thus in a speech delivered in August 2015:

> And I would also like to remind you that in terrible times, when Germany was desperately poor and destroyed, it had to manage much greater challenges with large streams of refugees. Of course, people living in Germany today have forgotten this. But these were extreme challenges that this country managed to overcome. (Gauck cited in Welt 2015 trans. from the German original)

Another example of this is a parliamentary speech by Carsten Körber in September 2015. Körber is a member of the German national parliament, where he represents the Christian Democratic Union (CDU):

> As a nation we have experienced many big waves of refugees before. How many refugees from East Russia and Silesia did Germany integrate successfully after the Second World War at a time when it was extremely poor? Of course, the situation isn't entirely comparable as the people concerned were displaced persons from the Eastern German territories then, and they belonged to our country and our culture. How many people in the GDR [the former German Democratic Republic in East Germany] were refugees themselves or would have become refugees had the [Berlin] Wall not fallen so suddenly? We shouldn't forget all this. And we should talk about this, especially to those who have been out on the streets, already

> shouting about the downfall of the Christian West. (Körber 2015: 11874D, trans. from the German original)

It is notable that Körber, Gauck and Jung use this historical analogy to promote solidarity and empathy and try to create a positive climate for the reception of contemporary refugees, a *Willkommenskultur* (welcoming culture). Körber not only refers to the experience of flight and expulsion in the immediate period following the Second World War but also to the experiences of people who fled the GDR across the border between East and West Germany during the decades when Germany was divided. However, Körber's reference to 'our country and culture' and to people 'shouting about the downfall of the Christian West' also emphasizes difference, refers to processes of othering (of predominantly Muslim refugees). It also hints at controversies around this comparison. Indeed, questions have been raised around the extent to which generalizations can be made about these different forms of migration experiences, and whether recent representations of the integration of 13 million displaced people after the war might be more 'rosy' than the lived reality at the time. The historian Carmen Winkel, for example, argues that the 'approximation of forced migration from Syria with Flucht und Vertreibung (flight and expulsion) of Germans after WWII' has been 'decontextualized' and instrumentalized in political discourses and, in her view, this is 'not suitable as a standard of comparison' (Winkel 2019: 23).

While the Spanish central government did not pursue a national hosting policy comparable to that of Germany (as the country that has received the most asylum applications in recent years), regional governments have criticized the central government's lack of solidarity towards refugees (Villaverde Ferreño and Cruz Pérez 2019). Associations of Spanish national memory drew parallels between the experiences of Syrian refugees and those of Spanish refugees from the Civil War (1936–9) and the Franco regime (Pérez Baquero 2020: 241).

An Association of Former Members of Parliament and Ex-Senators of the General Courts also demanded the approval of a specific protocol to cater for the needs of Syrian refugees arriving in Spain, reminding the government of the fact that there were people who had to leave Spain because of the Spanish Civil War. In their opinion, 'it is a duty of humanitarian and political solidarity' to act in support of these refugees (Europa Press 2015).

However, the most important social actors that mobilized the memories of the Spanish Civil War were the cultural and civil society associations who expressed their solidarity with the Syrian refugees at a local level by drawing parallels between their experiences and those of the refugees from the Spanish Civil War. This also coincided with events commemorating the eightieth anniversary of the end of the Spanish Civil War and the exile of thousands of Spaniards in France, North Africa and Latin America. While both cities were governed by left-wing independent coalitions, the mayors of Barcelona and Madrid adopted the 'Refugees Welcome' campaign which was explained as follows:

> The aim of Refugees Welcome is to create a Culture of Welcome among the citizens and to promote a real integration of the refugees who live in our house

> and who have many problems to access housing. The non-profit organization puts displaced people / refugees in contact with local citizens who are willing to share housing in conditions of horizontality and mutual respect. Refugees Welcome is an international initiative that was born in Germany 3 years ago and has achieved more than 1,100 coexistence in the 12 countries of the European Union, Canada and Australia where the project has been developed. The entity has been present in Catalonia (Barcelona) since May 2017. (Ajuntament de Barcelona 2015, trans. from the Spanish original)

The campaign adopted by the mayors of Madrid and Barcelona had the intention of providing housing to refugees by connecting locals with refugees. On a local level, exhibitions, documentary films, graphic novels and theatre plays drawing parallels between the experience of Spanish Civil War exiles and the current situation of Syrian refugees were used to show and encourage solidarity with Syrian refugees. Although these local initiatives did not receive as much media attention as political speeches at the national level, the support these initiatives received by the local population is worth mentioning. Despite their transnational scope, according to Javier Alcalde y Martín Portos (2018), citizens' mobilizations are deeply rooted at the local level. Furthermore, the absence of anti-refugee protests in Spain led by racist countermovements is also a sign that the majority of the local population supported the hosting of refugees in Spain.

Parallels between the experiences of the Spanish and Syrian Civil Wars were also used by politicians at national and international levels. When visiting an integration project for refugees in Berlin, Pedro Sánchez, general secretary of the Spanish Socialist Party, told a young Syrian that Spain, because of its own history, understands the drama of a civil war very well:

> We suffered a long time ago from a civil war and many Spaniards left, especially to Germany and France, and we feel very closely what you are suffering now. (EFE 2016, trans. from the Spanish original)

Also, in the Spanish parliament, several interventions by different members of the parliament have drawn on historical narratives and memories. Discussions around the proposal of the Parliamentary Socialist Group on the situation of the Syrian refugees on 29 September 2015 is one of these examples. In her contribution to this debate, Esperanza Esteve, member of the Socialist Group at the Congress of Representatives, recalled the images of Spanish people fleeing to France and Latin America and appealed to the memory of the Spanish exiles and their trauma:

> Today it's Syria, it's Eritrea, it's all those countries where every day we see images of horror, but before it was us. Let's remember the images after our Civil War, fleeing to France and Latin America: 800,000 people were displaced. The memory is sometimes short and it is a matter of not losing it and of understanding that there are dynamics in this global world that generate injustice and defenselessness of human beings and that sometimes the very countries that we welcome are the

> cause of them; it is cause, response, responsibility, where it begins and where it ends. (Esteve cited in Propuesta de No Ley 2015: 32, trans. from the Spanish original)

Carlos Martínez Gorriarán, of the group Union, Progress and Democracy, was harsher in his criticism of the 'Spanish amnesia' towards its own 'expelled people'. He goes back to the history of the Jews and the Moriscos and the twentieth-century Civil War. This is a recurrent narrative, that of al-Andalus and later the history of Moriscos, which again appeared when dealing with the Syrian refugees:

> Spain is a country that has a terrible historical tradition of producing refugees. We have been a country that has expelled large masses of people. In 1492 it expelled the Jews, in 1609 the Moors and during the Civil War there were hundreds of thousands of people who moved within the territory itself from one area to another and hundreds of thousands more who left as a result of Franco's victory. Therefore, we should be a country with a special sensibility to realise that whenever a tide of refugees is provoked, what is absent is democracy, and not only democracy, but the consideration of our fellow human beings as equals in the democratic sense of the term. (Martínez Gorriarán cited in Propuesta de No Ley 2015: 36, trans. from the Spanish original)

The utilization and contestation of examples of migration and population displacement in political discourse was therefore evident in Hungary, the UK, Germany and Spain. In the UK, the underlying issue was whether or not contemporary political policies were living up to the imagined tradition and standards of British welcome and whether tolerance was evident in the *Kindertransport*. In comparison, in German and Spain, the relationship between history and the present day was often presented in terms of empathy, arising from the experience of the historic past. In Spain, furthermore, as we saw in the arguments by Carlos Martínez Gorriarán, history was also referenced with a sense of shame – in the case of the expulsion of Muslims and Jews – and also with the caution that the treatment of migrants reflects on the vitality of democracy. By contrast, in Hungary, political discourses employed by the national conservative Fidesz government mobilized memories of migration and displacement in order to justify anti-immigration policies.

The mobilization of discourses of European identity and anti-European sentiment

Europe is an ideological structure of fluid borders and definitions, given that it is predominantly a political and epistemological, rather than geographical, category. From Hegel to the most contemporary postcolonial thinkers, majority of the scholars agree that, as an epistemological category, Europe is often defined and shaped by its 'Others', that is, formed as an antithesis to its opposites or outsiders. This has also been the case with discursive constructions of the concept of Europe and European identity in political discourses employed in Hungary, Germany, the UK and Spain in

the context of the Syrian refugee crisis, which have drawn on narratives about the Christians roots of Europe or a 'Clash of Civilizations' (Huntington 1997) between the East and the West. Some discourses have inflamed fears of the Islamization of Europe, presenting Muslim migrants as posing a threat to Europe's Christian and secular roots, values and identity. These discourses often perpetuate negative stereotypes of refugees; for example, by associating refugees with abuse of the social welfare system or with crime. They can also present NGOs, individuals and civil society organizations who try to defend the rights of refugees in extremely negative terms. For example, during the electoral campaign for the Andalusian Parliament, Santiago Abascal, the leader of VOX, a recently emerged right-wing party in Spain, argued that by 2050 '50% of French population would be Muslim'. Furthermore, just after entering the Andalusian Parliament for the first time, Iván Espinosa de los Monteros, the vice-secretary of the party, stated that 'Spain does not have the duty to attend to 400 millions of migrants' (Monzón et al. 2019).

On numerous occasions, these discourses are modelled on those who have been employed by extreme right-wing leaders and populist movements in countries like the United States, Hungary, France, Germany, Italy and Brazil. In Spain, Santiago Abascal insists on expanding the idea of a supposed 'invasion of Europe', warning of a risk of 'an Islamized Europe', like the right-wing populist *AfD* in Germany. Far-right Eurosceptic populist parties – like UKIP (the United Kingdom Independence Party) or the Brexit Party in the UK or the *AfD* in Germany – have also capitalized on people's fears and anxieties about the potential impact of the arrival of large numbers of refugees from different countries.

In the UK, Nigel Farage, leader of the right-wing populist UKIP which argued for a BREXIT referendum, suggested support for giving 'some Christians refugee status' in April 2015 in the run-up to the UK election. Part of the context was that UKIP had been making a case for the UK as a 'fundamentally Christian nation' and published a Christian manifesto titled *Valuing Our Christian Heritage* (UKIP 2015), which argued for full consideration of 'our Judaeo-Christian heritage', whilst claiming that 'other parties have deliberately marginalised our nation's faith' (for overview see Roose 2021: 121). As Strømmen and Schmiedel (2020) argue, the implications of these claims are evident:

> If Christianity or Judaeo-Christianity is central to the Constitution, the culture and the character of the country, what is it that's unconstitutional, uncultured and uncharacteristic? The answer is, of course: the Muslim migrant. There's no need for the manifesto to name Islam. The claim to Christianity as Judaeo-Christianity does the trick. The resonances to wider trends in Europe are loud and clear.

In the case of Spain, these newly emerged right-wing actors have once again reappropriated the concept of 'Reconquista' in a new manner not seen since the Francoist dictatorship when it was used to attack leftists, atheists and those who were on the margins of the Franco regime's national-Catholic imagination. This notion of the 'Reconquista' as studied by García Sanjuán bears the idea that there is a recovery of something previously lost (García Sanjuán 2020: 139). This notion relies on the idea

that Muslims took over the Iberian Peninsula illegitimately and aims to delegitimize the Muslim presence on the Medieval Iberian Peninsula and emphasize the right of Christians to take it over (García Sanjuán 2020: 140). In the context of the celebrations of the *Toma de Granada* (Conquest of Granada), a yearly event that has been largely criticized because it commemorates the end of Islamic Spain and later expulsion of the Jews and Moriscos, Santiago Abascal vindicated this event by saying that 'Centuries later, the indelible pride of a seven-century achievement remains. And there remains the determination not to submit to Islam' (Barreira 2019).

Existing literature on political discourse and the refugee crisis positions Spain as an exceptional case due to the absence of an extreme right-wing party in the decades following the end of the Franco regime (Zapata-Barrero, González and Montiijano 2008). However, since the far-right party VOX gained visibility and won parliamentary seats in 2019, VOX has been setting the social and political agenda on the issue of immigration, drawing on national and transnational memories. Discourses used by VOX in the Spanish context of debates about refugees share many similarities with discourses used by other far-right populist parties in Europe, such as the German *AfD* or UKIP in the UK (Monzón et al. 2019). Paradoxically, it has been right-wing populist Eurosceptic parties that often emphasize the existence of a common European heritage to justify their anti-immigration policies. As De Cesari, Bosilkov and Piacentini (2020: 27–8) argue:

> In this discourse, Islam and the figure of the Muslim are placed in the position of the other. Such deep preoccupation with an alleged Islamic civilization threat ('Islamization' is the code word for stoking fears of Europe's disappearance) drives a paradoxical stance: the combination of 'identitarian Christianism' with a fervent defence of secularism and liberal values such as gender equality, gay rights and freedom of speech – which coexist with the traditional social conservatism and illiberal authoritarianism of the far right.

By contrast, Orbán's Fidesz government has discursively framed anti-European sentiment in terms of a critique of Western European countries, blaming their history of colonialization for the refugee crisis, whilst expressing contempt for 'a perceived Western liberal cultural imperialism from the European Union' (Mark, Kalinosvky and Marung. 2020: 24). From this point of view, Eastern Europe is presented as the 'real' centre of Christianity. Initially, discourses employed by the Hungarian government centred on the theme of 'welfare migration', based on claims similar to those made by far-right populist movements in Western Europe. These were new to the Hungarian public, 'given that prior to 2015, immigration rarely played a significant role on Hungarian political discourse' (Bocskor 2018: 554). From 2015 onwards, anti-immigration became a central topic of discourses employed by the Fidesz government, including the use of anti-Muslim stereotypes and an increasing focus on Christianity in government propaganda. This included the conflation of 'immigrants' and 'refugees' (diminishing their need for protection) and the association of 'immigration' with 'terrorism'. These discourses referred to acts of terrorism in Western Europe to present refugees as dangerous. The idea of a fundamental cultural difference between

immigrant and native communities had already become apparent in Orbán's first interview in the aftermath of the *Charlie Hebdo* attacks in 2015. However, over time there was an increasing amount of references to religion in political discourses employed by the Fidesz government in the context of the refugee crisis. 'Otherness' of refugees and migrants became increasingly associated with Islam, while the idea of 'European culture', supposedly 'under siege', received also different interpretations tied partly to notions of Christianity.

As early as in January 2015, the Fidesz government called for an extraordinary 'debate day' in parliament. During a debate on the topic 'Hungary Does Not Need Welfare Immigration', government MPs used very harsh language about refugees, arguing, for example, that 'their clothes should be collected on the border to prevent Hungarians from touching them as those can bring diseases in the country' (*Országgyűlési Napló* 2015: 7418) and erasing the line between categories of 'economic migration', 'refugees' and 'asylum seekers'. A 'national consultation', a form of national survey introduced by the Orbán government in which the government asks the public leading questions, was announced on the topic of 'welfare immigration'. In April, a letter signed by Viktor Orbán and bearing his picture was posted to every Hungarian citizen explaining that the instances of terror in the news show that 'Brussels and the European Union is not capable of handling the question of immigration' and that 'welfare migrants posed as asylum seekers, but factually [were] coming for social benefits and jobs'. The questions included in this survey were very leading, asking, for example, 'Some say that welfare migrants put the jobs and welfare of Hungarians in jeopardy. Do you agree?' (*Nemzeti konzultáció* 2015: 1, trans. from the Hungarian original). In June, the government announced its billboard campaign against migration, costing more than a million Euros to the Hungarian taxpayers.

From the end of 2015, Viktor Orbán equated 'the European man' with 'the Western, Christian man' explaining what he meant by 'civilisation, the race [species] to which we belong'. Using these terms interchangeably, he opposed immigration in the context of an alleged 'invasion of Europe' (Orbán 2015, trans. from the Hungarian original). Orbán presented multiculturalism in terms of a coexistence of Christian Hungarians or Europeans with non-Christians, and claimed that this coexistence was not possible. These claims do not just bear serious consequences for Muslims. For instance, in the context of nineteenth-century Jewish immigration, these claims can be regarded as strongly anti-Semitic.

Conclusion

Our analysis of political discourses employed in Hungary, Germany, the UK and Spain in the context of the Syrian refugee crisis shows that they often mobilize national and transnational memories when presenting issues related to religious diversity and migration in contemporary society. References to collective memory have played an important role in discourses employed in these debates, for example, by creating links between national or European identities, to address or avert tensions between humanitarian principles, domestic pressures and expectations of the international

community. Notions of race, ethnicity, culture and religion are often implicated, conflated and intertwined in these discourses, as are references to Judeo-Christian heritage and secular Enlightenment values.

Transnational memories employed within political discourses in these debates have often been embedded in national contexts and narratives, such as Spanish and British myths of tolerance, Germany's efforts to come to terms with its Nazi past or the notion of Hungary as the 'real' Christian centre of Europe. Notions of religious history and heritage, particularly Europe's Judeo-Christian heritage, have to different degrees been instrumentalized in these discourses in very different ways and for different, contrasting purposes: both to foster toleration and compassion, and to stoke fears of cultural, ethnic and religious difference, including the perceived threat of the 'Islamization of Europe'. Particularly in right-wing political discourses, there is little acknowledgement of the internal diversity of refugees (who are predominantly presented as young Muslim men) or of Islam as well as a tendency to conflate 'refugees' and 'migrants', but to distinguish between 'deserving' and 'undeserving' migrants (who allegedly have a hidden agenda, such as the Islamization of Europe).

The discursive framing of the arrival of large numbers of refugees as a 'crisis', and associations with security concerns in particular, highlight 'anxieties in Europe about diversity and change' (Holmes and Castañeda 2016: 13) and reflect insecurities and tensions around notions of European identity. While political discourses employed by the Fidesz government in Hungary stand out as particularly unwelcoming and hostile to Muslim refugees, there are clear parallels with discourses employed by right-wing populist movements in the UK, Germany and Spain that have been growing in popularity. Paradoxically, far-right populist parties have both utilized Eurosceptic sentiments in support of their anti-immigration stance, whilst also appealing to a sense of a common and shared European history, presenting Europe as both the centre of Christianity and of secularity.

The extent to which representations of history, and religious history in particular, have been weaponized and contested in political discourses in Europe about the refugee crisis highlights the important public role of academic research in offering nuanced, critical perspectives on the past. Given the specific interest of this volume in youth, this also highlights the need to promote and support the development of historical and religious literacy in education to equip young people to critically assess oversimplified representations of the past, and of religious history in particular, and raise awareness of the internal diversity and complexity of religious traditions.