

## DENYING DIVERSITY. CHALLENGES TO MULTICULTURALISM IN CENTRAL-EASTERN EUROPE

Osman KOMURCU, PhD

National University of Political Studies and Public Administration  
Bucharest/Romania

### **Abstract**

This article addresses the issue regarding the recent intensification of tendencies that oppose multiculturalism around the world and especially on the territory of the European Union. Starting from these premises, the article aims at identifying the degree to which the Central-Eastern Europe region can be considered as being a tolerant geographical space when analyzing recent manifestations of racism, extremism, antisemitism, xenophobia and Islamophobia and when analyzing the same manifestations in other countries or regions in the world. The comparison between the situation in Central-Eastern Europe and the situation in other countries or regions will be made through the analysis of several indexes developed by organizations, scholars or recognized international institutions, indexes that will show that the manifestations of diversity denial are far less intense in Central-Eastern Europe than in other countries or regions in the world and will confirm that the CEE states are close not only geographically, but also from political, economic or social perspectives.

**Keywords:** antisemitism; diversity; Islamophobia; Multiculturalism; racism; xenophobia.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Events in the past two decades, as the intensification of terrorist attacks, the intensification of the migratory flows or the financial distress caused by the global economic crisis of 2008, have led to the increase of fear and hatred between different social groups and between groups that are different from an ethnic perspective. These tendencies represent a threat to the values of multiculturalism promoted at the European Union's level and in other countries in the world that support diversity (the United States, Canada, Australia etc.), especially since they tend to manifest themselves through different instances (e.g. racism, extremism, antisemitism, xenophobia and Islamophobia), which makes it difficult for states to identify unitary public policies that could be universally effective.

In order to determine to which degree the region of Central-Eastern Europe (CEE) is affected by anti-diversity tendencies, this article will approach the subject of study from two main perspectives: a theoretical perspective, aimed at defining the key terms, and a practical perspective, aimed at comparing the situation in Central-Eastern Europe regarding different instances of multiculturalism denial with the situation in other countries in the world.

## 2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Multiculturalist policies are threatened by several challenges to diversity, challenges that I have analyzed my PhD thesis 'Multiculturalism in the EU and the Islamophobia case'. According to the research made during the preparation of the thesis, there are five important challenges that can threaten the efficiency of the multiculturalist policies: racism, extremism, antisemitism, xenophobia and Islamophobia (Komurcu 2019). In this chapter I will shortly present a theoretical overview of each of these concepts, but also a short theoretical analysis of diversity and its relation to multiculturalism.

## 2.1. Diversity as a theoretical concept and as a characteristic of the Central and Eastern European space

Diversity is a term that is closely linked to multiculturalism. The relation between the two concepts was established by Kymlicka, who has stated that liberal democracies try to reach their specific goals (social justice, individual freedom, deliberative democracy etc.) through the particular mechanisms of the political philosophy called 'multiculturalism' (Kymlicka 2001). However, diversity policies are not always multicultural since, according to the vision of Bleich (1998), diversity can be achieved both through active and passive multicultural mechanisms, but also through preparationist and assimilationist non-multicultural mechanisms.

One of the first scholars who have envisioned a multicultural society driven by values associated with the respect towards diversity is Karl Popper. He has brought many arguments for multiculturalism in the period between the two world wars, arguments that are still valid today: that societies have to avoid cruel oppression which will lead to aggression, that the institutions of the state have to constantly aim at implementing reforms that are progressive in nature and that societies cannot be considered as unified entities, people who have such a vision usually being either irrational or radical (Malik 2014).

If the conditions identified by Popper as being necessary for constructing a multiculturalist society are met, then the respective society can be called a society that 'accepts diversity', but can, at the same time, be a cultural homogenous society through the specific mechanisms of cultural assimilation or cultural fusion. Each mechanism has its own advantages and disadvantages but ultimately lead to the significant decrease of the risk of marginalization in relation to ethnic minorities and to a significant increase of the rate of success in the attempt to allow the smooth blending of the minority into the culture of the majority (Kymlicka 2001).

One of the regions of the world that can be referred to in order to best describe the concept of 'diversity' is the Central and Eastern European space. This region is also known as the 'Socialist Bloc' or the 'Eastern Bloc' in relation to its recent history related to communism and post-communism (Kyvelidis 2000). In order

to define the Central and Eastern European region, we will refer to the division accepted by OECD, an organization that recognizes the following states as being part of the CEE: Romania, Slovenia, Lithuania, Croatia, the Slovak Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, the Czech Republic, Poland, Croatia, Bulgaria and Albania (OECD 2001). Because of the geographical proximity and the similar historical conditions that have characterized their communist and post-communist history, several other countries can also be included in the Central and Eastern Europe region and will also be referred to in this study:

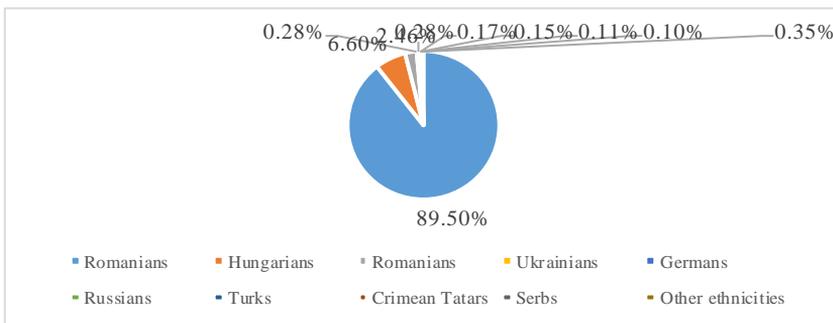
- the former Yugoslavian countries (Bosnia & Herzegovina, Serbia, Montenegro, Kosovo);
- Ukraine;
- Moldova;
- Belarus;
- Macedonia.



*Source: Dobek-Ostrowska and Glowacki, Democracy and media in Central and Eastern Europe*

These countries do not have in common only their history regarding the communist regime or the fact that all have passed through a post-communist era, but also the fact that all are characterized by a relatively diverse population from a cultural, ethnic, religious or linguistic perspective. From the linguistic perspective, for example, the region of Central and Eastern Europe is composed of countries where the Slavic languages are dominant (e.g. in Croatia, Serbia, Poland, Bulgaria), countries where the Baltic languages are dominant (e.g. in Lithuania, Latvia), countries where Finnish languages are mainly spoken (e.g. in Estonia and Hungary) or countries with a language derived from Latin (e.g. in Romania). Similarly, the Central and Eastern Europe region is a very diverse geographical space because of the variety of religions that are present in this geographical space: most Bulgarians are Christian Orthodox, Hungary is relatively equally divided between Protestants and Roman Catholics, Poland is mostly comprised of adherents to the Roman Catholic religion and Islam and Judaism are present in all the CEE countries (Constitutional Rights Foundation 2002).

The states that comprise the Central and Eastern European space are diverse not only from a linguistic perspective or from the perspective of religions practiced in these countries, but also from an ethnic perspective. In Romania, for example, approximately 10.5% of the population is represented by ethnic minorities.



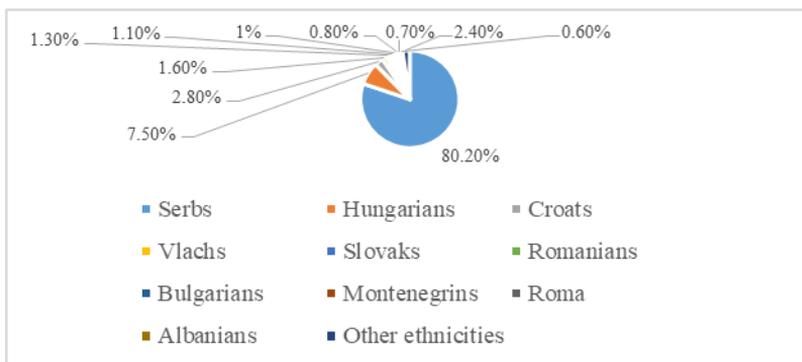
**Figure 2.** The ethnic structure of Romania

Source: National Institute of Statistics, "The 2011 Population and Housing Census"

Ethnic minorities are present in all the countries of the Central and Eastern Europe, a few examples that present the situation from an ethnic perspective in some of the largest countries in this region being the following:

- approximately 93% of Poland's population is represented by Polish ethnics, the rest of the population being represented by Armenian, Belarusian, Czech, German, Greek, Kashubian, Lithuanian or Macedonian ethnicities (Bobryk and Cezary 2015);
- Ukrainians represent only 77.5% of the total population of Ukraine. The most important ethnic minorities are Russians (17.2%), Moldovans (0.8%), Belarusians (0.6%), Crimean Tatars (0.5%), Bulgarians (0.4%), Hungarians (0.3%) or Romanians (0.3%) (Lutz 2017);
- Hungary is a country comprised almost entirely of Hungarians, but ethnic minorities, representing approximately 2% of the population, can still be encountered (mostly Romani, Germans, Romanians and Slovaks) (Hungarian Central Statistical Office 2018).

Even in countries that have been tormented in the past decades by wars with an important nationalist component, such as Serbia, ethnic minorities still represent an important part of the general population.



**Figure 3.** The ethnic structure of Serbia

Source: Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, "Census 2011"

Considering all these data, it can be concluded that Central and Eastern Europe is a diverse geographical space from an ethnic perspective, several minority groups being present in all countries of the CEE.

## 2.2. Challenges to diversity

The five challenges to diversity that will be analyzed in this section of the article are the following: racism, extremism, antisemitism, xenophobia and Islamophobia.

### **Racism**

This term comes from the Italian word 'rassa', that had a negative connotation in the Middle Ages (referring to a group of people who usually conjure and plot against other groups) and that has received a second meaning only several centuries later, a meaning related to the genealogy of royal families (Stanculescu 2012). Today, the derived concept of 'racism' is encountered in the modern language under many forms, the most important ones being 'cultural racism' (where cultural traits like customs or rituals are considered to be superior for a group of people in relation to another group of people), 'internalized racism' (that manifests within people targeted by racism), 'institutional racism' (that acts as a system of complex practices and policies), 'interpersonal racism' (that is often spontaneous and appears in the social relations between individuals) and 'active racism' (that seeks to maintain an already racist view) (Bell et al., 2016).

### **Extremism**

The people who have extremist beliefs are the ones whose line of thinking is considered as being 'unacceptable' or 'unreasonable' by the majority (Cambridge Dictionary 2018). Extremists can be single issued, meaning that they pursue a single belief (examples of single-issue extremists are anti-gay groups or radical groups that oppose abortion), left-wing, meaning that they pursue the belief that capitalism must be replaced with social equality, politico-religious, meaning that they assign a political interpretation to a specific religious belief, or

right-wing, meaning that they believe in the values supported by ideologies like fascism or ultranationalism (Centre for the Prevention of Radicalization 2018).

### **Antisemitism**

In a broad sense, antisemitism can be defined as a hostile attitude against 'Jews as Jews' (Kushner, 1989), manifesting itself through stereotypes like 'Jews do not care about anyone but themselves', 'Jews are always trying to take advantage of their status of victims during World War II' or 'The influence of Jews in my region or my country is higher than it should be' (Zick, Kupper and Hovermann 2011).

### **Xenophobia**

Xenophobic manifestations are characterized by denigrations aimed towards people or groups of people, solely based on perceived differences (Hjerm, 1988). The severity of these manifestations is higher in periods of political and economic instability because of the imbalances that characterize these times. An example of instability is the one that arises when massive flows of migrants are registered, flows that indirectly make natives feel threatened by the newcomers (Esses et al. 2001) and xenophobic manifestations to emerge.

### **Islamophobia**

This concept appeared at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, much later than the other forms of diversity denial analyzed in this section of the article. It was first used by political activists and it refers to the manifestations like hostility or fear in relation to Muslims (Alshammari 2013). The complexity of this concept is given by its diverse forms of manifestation: discrimination (in provision of services or employment practices), violence (verbal abuse, physical assaults, properties' vandalization), exclusion (in the work market, in politics or in companies) and prejudice (in social contexts or in mass-media) (Runnymede Trust 1997).

## **3. CASE STUDY: CHALLENGES TO MULTICULTURALISM IN CENTRAL-EASTERN EUROPE**

In this section of the article, five different potential challenges to multiculturalism in the countries of CEE will be analyzed: racism, extremism,

antisemitism, xenophobia and Islamophobia. This will allow us to draw relevant conclusions regarding the current tendencies that deny diversity and to compare the situation in Central-Eastern Europe with the situation encountered in other countries in the world.

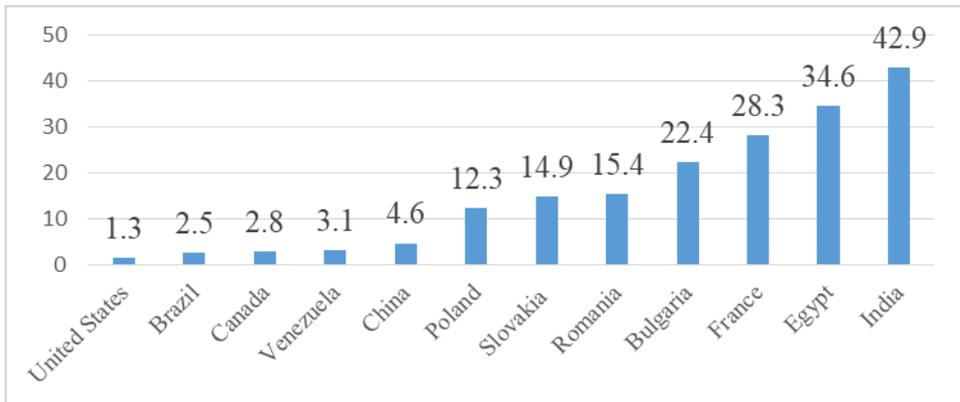
### **Racism**

The phenomenon of racism in Central-Eastern Europe manifests itself mainly with the attitude towards one of the most important ethnic minorities that is present in all the CEE countries, the Gypsy population. Although people of Gypsy ethnicity are present throughout the Central and Eastern European geographical space, most of them live in the following countries (Council of Europe 2007):

- Romania (with an estimated Gypsy population of 1.8 million);
- Bulgaria (0.75 million);
- Hungary (0.7 million);
- Serbia (0.45 million);
- Slovak Republic (0.43 million);
- Macedonia (0.24 million).

People of this ethnicity are often associated by locals with attributes like 'uneducated', 'lazy', 'dirty' or 'thieves'. Also, several stereotypes are assigned to the gypsy population, the most frequent stereotypical manifestations being the ones associated with statements like 'gypsies live in clans that engage in illegal activities', 'gypsies wear thick golden jewelry' or 'gypsies prefer to live in large palaces' (Szelmenczi 2013).

Despite these stereotypical manifestations, according to a study of World Value Survey regarding the racial intolerance level in all the countries in the world, the countries in Central-Eastern Europe are some of the most tolerant countries. For example, the study has shown that only 17.6% of Romanians would not want a person of another race as their neighbor, this percentage placing Romania in the same category with other states that have been shown by the World Value Survey's data as being racially tolerant: The United States, Brazil, Canada, Venezuela or China (Gye 2013).



**Figure 4.** The most tolerant and intolerant countries in the world in terms of attitude in relation to people of another race

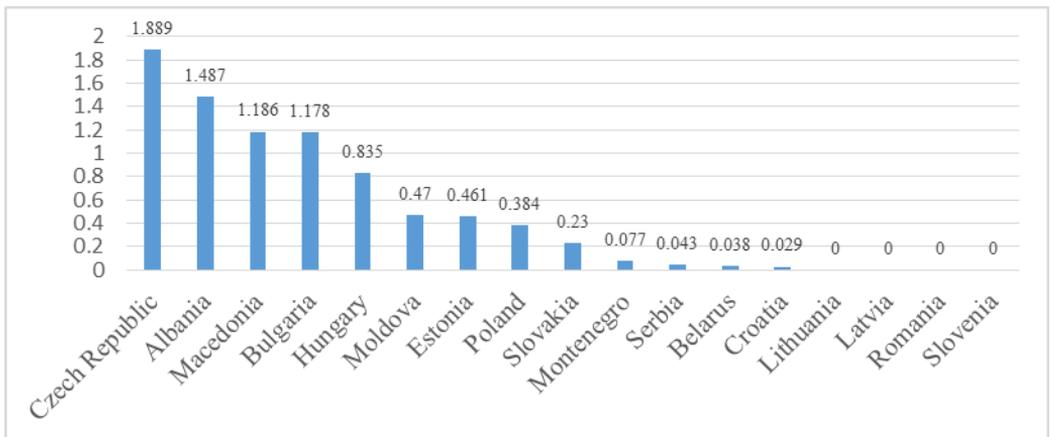
*Source: Gye, "Map shows world's `most racist` countries"*

At the other end of the spectrum are placed societies that have been shown by World Value Survey to be highly intolerant in relation to people from another race, France, Egypt and India being three of these countries. According to this data, the phenomenon of racism in Central and Eastern Europe is less intense than in most of the states in the world, but more intense when compared to very tolerant countries like Canada or Brazil (Gye 2013). This means that tolerance is present in most countries that were part of the Communist bloc, but policy measures could be taken in order to improve the situation and bring the CEE countries closer to the most tolerant countries in the world in terms of racial manifestations.

### **Extremism**

The phenomenon of extremism in the Central-Eastern Europe has been rising in the past decade, Romania being a particular case within this phenomenon since it does not have a far-right party or leader holding the political power (either the executive or the legislative power). No extremist party is in Romania's Parliament, the most known far-right party in the recent history of Romania, PRM, being now almost disbanded after the death of their main political leader, Corneliu Vadim Tudor (Sandu 2017).

If we consider terrorism one of the most important forms of manifestations of extremism, then we can say the CEE region is not comprised of extremist countries. On the contrary, the states of this region were identified by the Institute for Economics & Peace (2017) as some of the few countries of the world with a 'Global Terrorism Index' of less than 2, on a scale from 0 to 10.



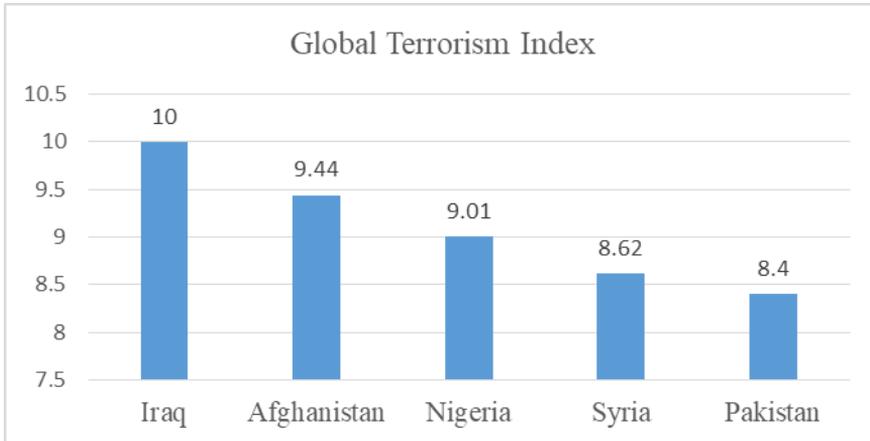
**Figure 5.** The Global Terrorism Index of several Eastern and Central European states

*Source: Institute for Economics and Peace, "Global Terrorism Index"*

The Global Terrorism Index was determined by the Institute for Economics & Peace by taking into consideration three relevant factors:

- the total number of terrorist attacks that took place in a given year;
- The financial measure of the property damages caused by terrorist attacks in a given year;
- the total number of injuries and fatalities caused by terrorist attacks in a given year.

The score of CEE countries on the terrorism scale is much lower compared with the countries in the world with the highest Global Terrorism Index.



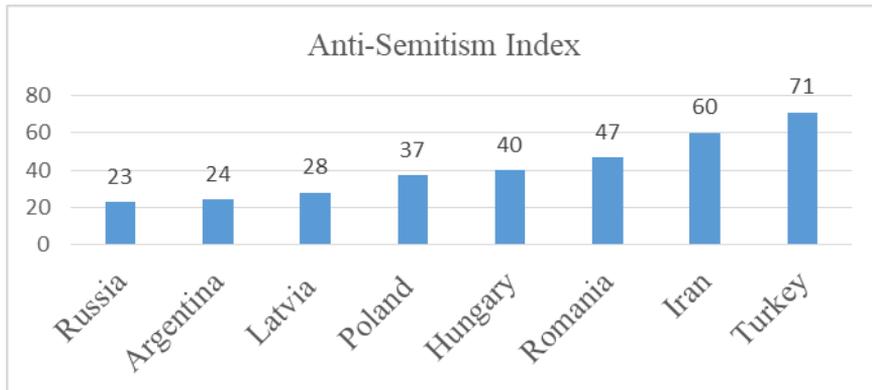
**Figure 6.** The highest Global Terrorism Indexes in the world  
*Source: Institute for Economics and Peace, "Global Terrorism Index"*

According to the data in Figure 6, the most affected countries by terrorist incidents provoked by extremists are Iraq, Afghanistan, Nigeria, Syria and Pakistan. Extremism is less present in countries from the Eastern and Central Europe region (e.g. the Czech Republic, Bulgaria or Hungary), but the terrorist incidents provoked by extremists are more frequent in these states than in Romania, Lithuania, Latvia and Slovenia, countries where no terrorist incident was recorded throughout the year. This shows that the CEE region as a whole is characterized by few extremist tendencies, but intensity of the extremism in the countries in this region is not equal, some states (e.g. Czech Republic or Albania) being more extremist than others (e.g. Romania or Lithuania).

### **Antisemitism**

If racist and extremist events are rare in the Central-Eastern European region, not the same thing can be said about anti-Semitic manifestations. According to a survey developed by ADL Global (2016), CEE states can be considered as being average regarding the intensity of antisemitism in relation to other states that can be considered less anti-Semitic (e.g. Argentina) and in relation to states that can be considered as being more anti-Semitic (e.g. Iran or Turkey). The study of ADL Global was based on telephone and face-to-face interviews that put

respondents in the situation of assigning 'true' or 'false' statements to anti-Semitic stereotypes like 'Jews have a lot of power within the financial markets that operate on the international level', 'Most of the wars on the globe are the Jews' responsibility' or 'Jews believe they are better than others'.



**Figure 7.** The index score of several CEE states on the anti-Semitic scale compared with the index score of other countries  
*Source: ADL Global, "An Index of Anti-Semitism"*

Figure 7 shows that most CEE countries (e.g. Latvia, Poland or Hungary) are placed in the middle on the anti-Semitism scale. This figure also shows that Romania has a relatively high score in relation to other CEE countries, a score that is supported by events that have happened recently. One of the most known recent events involving anti-Semitic behaviors was the one that took place in 2019 in the city of Huși. Here, vandals damaged over seventy Jewish gravestones, an event that shocked the community of about 10,000 Jews currently living in Romania (McGrath 2019).

According to the study of ADL Global (2016), the stereotype that is most often encountered in the Romanian society is that Jews talk too much about the events surrounding the Holocaust. The results showing that almost two thirds of Romania's population agree with this statement indicate that this country can be considered as being anti-Semitic, at least when compared with other countries of

the Eastern and Central Europe that have lower values of the anti-Semitism index (Hungary, Poland, or Latvia).

### Xenophobia

The fact that the challenges to diversity are, in general, less intense in the Central-Eastern Europe than in the majority of the EU's Member States is confirmed by the fact that the European barometer of 2015 shows that the major cities of CEE that have participated in the study have received a tolerance score higher than than the average level of tolerance registered at the EU level.



**Figure 8.** Levels of xenophobia in several Eastern and Central European cities

Source: *European Data Journalism Network, "Xenophobia in European cities"*

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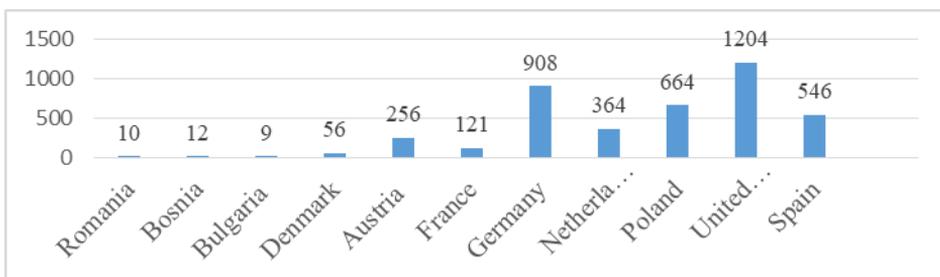


According to the data presented in Figure 8, Romania is more tolerant not only than the European Union's average, but also more tolerant than other countries in the Eastern and Central Europe region. The three cities of Romania that have participated in the study, Bucharest, Cluj-Napoca and Piatra Neamț, are at least

5% more tolerant than the EU average, while cities from Bulgaria, Hungary, Slovenia or Slovakia are as tolerant as the average registered at the EU level or even less tolerant (as is the case of the Bulgarian capital Sofia, for example).

### Islamophobia

The societies of the Central-Eastern European countries are more tolerant than most of the world's societies not only from the perspectives of manifestations like racism, extremism, antisemitism or xenophobia, but also from the perspective of Islamophobia. According to Bayrakly and Hafez (2018), the number of Islamophobic incidents is very high in countries like Germany and United Kingdom and much lower in CEE countries like Romania, Bosnia or Bulgaria. In these Central-Eastern European countries there were under 15 hate crimes against Muslims in 2017, while in western countries like Austria, the Netherlands, France or Spain there were over 100 hate crimes against Muslims in the same period. In Germany and the United Kingdom, the situation is even worse from the perspective of Islamophobia, since, in 2018, there were approximately 1000 reported hate crimes against Muslims in 2017.



**Figure 9.** The number of Islamophobic hate crimes in 2017 in several EU countries

*Source: Bayrakly and Hafez, "The State of Islamophobia", Ghenea, "Islamophobia in Romania"*

According to the data in Figure 9, the number of reported Islamophobic hate crimes is far lower in Romania than in several Western European countries that were affected in the past years by numerous terrorist attacks that can be linked with Muslim fundamentalists. However, the number of reported hate crimes is

much lower in Romania not only in comparison with countries like the United Kingdom or Germany, but also in comparison with countries that have not suffered many terrorist attacks (Austria, for example) or other countries in the Eastern and Central Europe block (Poland, for example). This data confirms once again that Romania and most of the other CEE countries have far fewer challenges to multiculturalism than Western societies. A view that confirms the low intensity of Islamophobia tendencies in Romania is the one given by one of the most eminent Muslim preachers in Romania. According to this erudite, Islamophobia is not present in Romania, Muslims and Romanians live alongside in peace in many cities and adherents to Islam did not encounter barriers in practicing their religion in the Communist era, before 1990, and do not encounter barriers today (Islamic World 2014).

#### **4. CONCLUSIONS**

The comparative analysis has shown that Central-Eastern European states are more tolerant countries than most of the states of the world and that many of the challenges to multiculturalism are far less present in the CEE states than in countries where racism, xenophobia, Islamophobia or extremism represent a social problem that needs to be addressed through coordinated public policies. The only form of diversity denial that is truly present in the CEE societies is antisemitism in Romania and Islamophobia in Poland. According to the results, Romanians are more antisemitic not only in comparison with the average antisemitic tendencies at the global level, but also in comparison with the antisemitic tendencies registered in other countries in the Eastern and Central European region. Also, the case of Poland showed that the number of hate crimes against Muslims is much higher than all the CEE countries and even in comparison with states that are comprised of a large Muslim community (e.g. Spain or France).

Despite these exceptions, the Central-Eastern Europe space remains one of the regions in the world that embraces most the diversity values. This conclusion shows that policies based on multiculturalist premises have the potential of

being implemented successfully in all the CEE societies. However, public institutions and private organizations have to constantly monitor any potential future manifestations that may deny diversity and to take any corrective actions necessary if a rise of Islamophobia, xenophobia, racism or extremism is identified in the Central-Eastern European states.

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