

Non-technical summary

“The level of knowledge and perception of Islam in Czechia and Slovakia: does ignorance determine subjective attitudes?”

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The paper examines the links between the objective knowledge and subjective views on Islam, Muslims, and the world of Islam in Czechia and Slovakia. As such, it seeks to contribute to the understanding of some of the friction areas within a confrontational relationship between Islam and the West. The analysis draws on a representative questionnaire survey among Czech and Slovak university students, on 17 in-depth semi-structured interviews with experts from relevant fields, and on the analysis of 32 recent Czech and Slovak high-school textbooks from geography, history, and social science.

In general, the study illustrates that the knowledge about Islam is quite biased and mostly limited to a few popularly-known facts. Moreover, it documents that the information provided to students of secondary schools is quite superficial and fragmented. This is clearly inadequate when considering the importance of these issues in the current geopolitical situation as well as the prominent place of these issues in the area of every day public discourses.

In particular, the level of knowledge of Islam has been confirmed as an important determinant of:

- A wider understanding of Islam in terms of acknowledging its social sensitivity and law-making functions.
- More favourable attitudes towards the integration of Muslim immigrants and less fear of Islamic terrorism.
- The recognition of the superiority of economic interests over security or religious/cultural motives for the occupation of Iraq.

While all of these findings are interesting, the second one is particularly relevant from a practical point of view as it demonstrates straightforward links between education and knowledgeableness on the one hand and intercultural understanding and tolerance on the other.

In addition, the respondents' religious affiliation has been found as a statistically important factor when:

- The Roman Catholic respondents have been found to have more negative views on Islam and Muslims than other respondents.
- A better objective knowledge about Islam has been confirmed for the adherents of "minor" religions (i.e. other than Roman Catholics and atheists).

Overall, the paper indicates that a more complex discussion of contemporary diversities and controversies related to Islamic issues is needed. This also incorporates a more responsible approach to teaching these issues as well as a need for more space in education curricula.

Keywords: attitudes, Muslims, Islam, knowledge, teaching