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Rape on Europe

Refugees – a word that until recently aroused only my students' compassion and understanding, for over a year has acquired a completely different "ominous" meaning. From the people who had to leave their country for dramatic reasons, they have been transformed into terrorists whose main purpose is to destroy our European civilization. Like in a Pandora's box, all our social fears, frustrations and stereotypes got hidden in this notion, revealing the full extent of social problems of which we have not been altogether aware until now. For the Polish society, the migration crisis became an examination which unfortunately it has failed. It turned out that European values such as tolerance, solidarity and respect for another human being have not been sufficiently internalized by ourselves as a community. I find this experience very difficult to bear, because for almost ten years of my work as a teacher these have been the primary values upon which I have based my entire philosophy of teaching and educating young people.

I am a teacher at a junior high school in Wasilków, a small town located a few kilometres from the much larger Białystok. For many years, the capital of Podlasie, a region famous for its multiculturalism, has been the scene of numerous racist and xenophobic incidents, and despite numerous initiatives promoting cultural diversity, the city gained the reputation of being intolerant and unfavourable to foreigners. This, however, did not affect the social climate of my working environment until the migration crisis intensified and became the major topic of the mass media. The first months of last school year were very difficult, because "refugees" or "Islamists" appeared during just about every lesson and, obviously, always in the negative context. Several months of collective hysteria diminished in proportion to the amount of emerging media information. It turned out that young people learn about Islam from the media, especially from the Internet. Hence, this knowledge is very superficial, based on stereotypes, and the attempt to verbalize it unconsciously refers to the language of discrimination. Students in their majority began to call Muslims "Islamists", believing that this was a neutral term. Unfortunately, hate speech that became part of the Polish public discourse also contaminated the language of students as well as of their parents and some teachers.

Unfortunately, Islamophobia, which at that time, like a virus, had infected our school community, has left a lasting impression on the attitudes of some students. Despite various

educational activities, some of them remained beyond our reach and we have not managed to persuade them to attempt a more empathic approach to the problem. A small group of young people with educational and behavioural problems became fascinated by the activities of nationalist organizations, which they manifested by wearing so-called "patriotic clothing". Unfortunately, apart from the symbol of Fighting Poland there also appeared sweatshirts with the words "Death to the enemies of the Fatherland", which directly refer to, among others, Romuald Rajs, alias "Bury", responsible for a series of crimes against the Belarusian population committed after the World War II. The fascination with this kind of ideology and the figures whom the nationalist movements have placed on their banners resulted in certain attitudes that were previously absent in our social milieu. When last year we carried out an international exchange project with a school in Georgia, one of the third-year pupils shouted publicly "why did they come?". The same student began painting Celtic crosses and anti-Islamic inscriptions on school property. This year, another third-grader provoked a fight with a Chechen pupil by commenting on his conversation with another student in their mother tongue that "here's Poland, and if he does not like it, then he should clear out back to his own country." The extreme case was the participation of several of our students and graduates in the march under the banner "Bialystok free from immigrants", about which they unfortunately boasted on their Facebook profiles.

The refugee crisis as in a magnifying lens has showed not only the lack of certain civic competences in our society but also the challenges that Polish education is facing. The eruption of Islamophobia in the first months of the migration crisis posed a serious educational dilemma as to how to teach and how to react to the sudden rise in xenophobic and nationalistic attitudes among young people. There is certainly a need for systematic work and a sustained effort aimed at building open attitudes towards diversity starting from the earliest age. This would enable the development of lasting views, resistant to media cacophony and political propaganda. Teachers should also be constantly reinforced in their day-to-day work through training and provision of educational means to effectively tackle difficult topics. In this case, a great role has been played by non-governmental organizations that came with a didactic rescue to Polish teachers, creating lesson plans, online courses and educational films. As the president of the Open Education Foundation, I was myself a part of this process by organizing the First Podlasie School of Intercultural Education "Foreigners in the Educational Sphere" within the Podlasie School of Openness project (Podlaska Szkoła Otwartości). Together with the partners of this undertaking, we have experienced a positive shock when it turned out that over 70 people registered for the training envisioning thirty participants. This shows that teachers do not underestimate this problem and are aware of the need for further training in this area. It seems to me that the

current resources are not sufficiently used to make this kind of teaching more effective. Personally, I think the catechists are facing a great challenge. It is actually the religion at school that should create space for promoting the idea of ecumenism by pointing out the links between Christianity and Islam. The basic religious studies would allow for a deeper reflection on the religious diversity of Europe and the world, and specific knowledge could diminish the level of anxiety and stereotyping among students.

For good many years, our school has been trying to educate young people in a spirit of tolerance. Openness to another person is emphasized in our motto and is the foundation of our educational programme. However, this has not protected our community from the negative impact of public and media discourse related to the negative consequences of social change in Europe. Fortunately, the integrated preventive measures we have embarked upon in the past year have allowed us to limit the scale of this phenomenon to a minimum. First of all, we decided to provide the students with knowledge. To this end, teachers and educators from the Dialogue Foundation in Białystok conducted lessons on the refugee problem and the war in Syria. We also wanted to change attitudes, so we invited to our schools anti-discrimination workshops under the title "Big dog does not bark". We also encouraged pupils to interact with the Other, so we organized encounters with refugees who shared their stories with the students. Parents of Chechen and Ukrainian students were invited to various school initiatives including intercultural culinary workshops at which they, together with Polish students, prepared traditional dishes. These are just few examples of our educational response to the radicalization of students' attitudes. Faced with this challenge, every effort must be made to prevent discrimination, hate speech and xenophobia among young people. In anticipation of systemic change, all possible tools at the disposal of the school and partner institutions should be used. I believe that in spite of the socio-political situation in Poland and in the world, the Polish school will succeed in protecting the youth from the tide of chauvinism and xenophobia that continues to spread through Poland.