

EU needs fresh ways to engage Europe's Muslims

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Opinion

S&D group Chair Gianni Pittella's newly appointed Special Representative to Muslim communities, Afzal Khan, wants to find understanding on both sides of the integration debate.



Last month, I was appointed S&D group Chair Gianni Pittella's Special Representative to Muslim Communities. This position is a first of its kind in Europe. It is a timely appointment, given Europe's raging debate on extremism, migration and integration.

As Progressives, that is why we have made engagement with Muslims a priority. As a proud Brit, a European Muslim, and a Socialist member of the European Parliament, this appointment humbles me.

I was born in Pakistan, was adopted and was brought to Britain as a child. Like the story of many immigrants, I came from humble beginnings and had to work my own way up. Britain gave me the platform to live my dreams. I worked hard, and excelled, and was grateful.

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I moved from common labourer, to law student and solicitor, then Manchester's first Muslim Lord Mayor, before I was elected to the European Parliament for the Labour Party.

It's a Muslim integration story that - according to Czech President Miloš Zeman - is "practically impossible". Sadly, he is not alone in these views. In Hungary, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán insists that, "Europe and European identity is rooted in Christianity".

The uncomfortable truth is, too many Europeans increasingly feel that coexistence between Muslims and others is impossible. Europe's inability to deal with the migration crisis is feeding this sentiment. Further complicating matters are tensions in Europe's neighbourhood, austerity, slow growth, all testing the European project.

It is regrettable that Muslims are branded as the 'Other', increasingly becoming the scapegoat for Europe's troubles. Our continent's history unfortunately proves, when times are difficult, differences are magnified. I believe we must fight intolerance, racism and xenophobia. They go against the cosmopolitan and humanist culture we are building in Europe,

The truth is that Islam and Muslims belong to Europe. This has been so since the Middle Ages, when Muslim Andalusia produced an impressive civilization that thrived on the model collaboration between Muslims, Christians and Jews.

Hence, today Europe's Muslims cannot be treated as belonging to some other civilization. Europe's Muslims have been born in Europe. German, English and French are their first languages. They go to our schools, and support our local football teams. Their share of Europe's population is at 6.5 per cent. This is a young population, concerned with identity, equality and justice.

Populist politicians are telling us that Europe's Muslims cannot integrate. Muslims are portrayed as oppressing their women, hanging on to antiquated practices and beliefs.

These generalisations are wrong. Muslims of Europe are not a homogenous group. They are as diverse as the World itself. They are converts to Islam, black and white, conservative and liberal.

As a British Muslim, my views and ideas are rooted in Britain's heritage. A Latvian Muslim will be inspired by his own country's history. To believe we can prescribe a formula that fits all is ridiculous, if not farcical.

I see my new role primarily as an ambassador and facilitator. My wish is to bring understanding on both sides of the debate. To enter this discussion, we need to find fresh ways to engage Europe's Muslims based on our common values.

My work will allow me to meet Muslims across Member States, where I plan to engage with religious

and community leaders, as well as politicians. This process will result in tailored solutions to specific problems, avoiding the pitfall of policy generalisations.

Much good work is already being done within communities, and I would like to support such initiatives. We all should. The time is now to make things right.

We must ensure Europe's Muslims are not seen as outsiders, but as our fellow citizens. As such, they must enjoy full rights and protections available under our laws. Where there are legitimate issues on either side of the debate, we need to tackle them head on.

There must be no uncomfortable silence and no exceptionalism in our society. When we insist on women's rights, we must show we care about all women: Muslim and non-Muslim.

Similarly, when we criticise high unemployment rates, we should use all our tools to fix it, not because the unemployed are Muslims, but because they are European citizens.

On radicalisation, our response should be challenging extremist rhetoric that claims you cannot be a Muslim and a European - regardless who articulates it. We can and we must confront extremism in every way and on all fronts.

About the author

Afzal Khan (UK) was recently appointed as the S&D group's special representative to Muslim communities

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