

and the Madrid railway bombings of March this year have made ordinary Europeans increasingly wary of their Muslim co-citizens.

Muslims in the Netherlands have condemned van Gogh's murder and argue that the entire Muslim community cannot be blamed for the acts of a few extremists. But for many in the Netherlands, this is not a valid argument. A majority of the Dutch view van Gogh's murder as an attack on free speech and say it reflects the Muslims' failure to espouse European values.

But van Gogh's slaying and the Islamophobia it has triggered is not just an assault on freedom of expression. It has major implications on future relations between Muslims and host European communities. It highlights the vulnerability of Muslims in Europe and EU governments' clear failure to integrate their immigrant population from North Africa, Turkey and South Asia — many of whom have been in Europe for more than 40 decades but still live on the margins of society.

The dangers of rising Islamophobia in the Netherlands and elsewhere in Europe are very real. A recent poll conducted by Dutch TV showed that 47 per cent of all people in the Netherlands now feel less tolerant of Muslims since last week's murder. Fires have been set at mosques, and a centre that aids immigrants, many of them Muslim, has been vandalized. The latest incident came earlier this week when a pre-dawn explosion in the southern Dutch town of Eindhoven wrecked the front door of an Islamic elementary school and shattered windows in nearby homes. No one was injured.

Once liberal commentators now want Muslim hardliners to be thrown out of the country, even if they have Dutch passports, and are also demanding greater surveillance of the wider Islamic community. Some 900,000 Muslims — mostly of Moroccan and Turkish origin — out of a total population of 16 million live in the Netherlands.

The increasing divide between Muslims and the host society has been accompanied by a continuing radicalization of Muslims

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The centre-right coalition in power has put immigration near the top of its agenda and, echoing public opinion, insists that community relations will be eased if immigrants integrate better. But many argue that Dutch government policies have made immigration an even more explosive issue.

A Dutch government minister, Rita Verdonk, has outlined plans to improve knowledge of the Dutch language among immigrants and to repatriate up to 26,000 failed asylum-seekers. A speech made by Verdonk after the murder of van Gogh last week was described as "Hitlerian" by one immigrant group. Meanwhile, the Deputy Prime Minister, Gerrit Zalm, said the Dutch cabinet had declared war on Islamic extremists.

Even the handling of the murder inquiry has proved politically controversial with the Amsterdam chief public prosecutor criticizing Justice Minister Piet Hein Donner for releasing the text of the letters left with van Gogh's body. One contains a direct threat to Hirsi Ali, a Somali-born Dutch MP who has renounced Islam and helped make van Gogh's film, and mentions two other politicians: the Liberal parliamentary leader, Jozias van Aartsen, and the Amsterdam mayor, Job Cohen. The publication of the letters was hardly calculated to calm tensions, say critics. Van Aartsen later claimed that the Netherlands was in the grip of a jihad and urged increased surveillance of potential Muslim extremists.

Events in the Netherlands also underline a growing rift between a secular Europe which espouses progressive values on issues like abortion and gay marriages and a religious minority seeking to cling on to a more conservative view of the world. While Muslim unease with Europe's secularism is most often in the news, Rocco Buttiglione, an Italian politician whose bid to become EU commissioner was torpedoed after he described homosexuality as a sin, claims that he is the target of

in fact been slow in combating Islamophobia and increasingly have taken up the agenda of far-right groups opposed to immigrants and Islam. Emotions against Muslim immigrants have been on the rise in the Netherlands for several years. Pim Fortuyn, a populist right-wing, anti-immigration politician, was murdered — by a fellow Dutchman — in 2002 but his message of distrust and antagonism towards Muslims remains rife in the country.

Significantly, Fortuyn's views were condemned by the liberal media but the slaying of van Gogh has now changed the situation. The leading liberal Amsterdam newspaper, *The Telegraaf*, has led the charge against Muslims with demands for a very public crackdown on "extremist Muslim fanatics in order to assuage the fear of citizens and to warn the fanatics that they must not cross over the boundaries."

The paper said that international cash transfers must be more tightly controlled; magazines and papers which include incitement should be suppressed; unsuitable mosques should be shut down, and imams who encourage illegal acts should be thrown out of the country. "This should also apply to extremists who have dual nationality. They have no business here," the paper underlined.

*Volkskrant*, published in The Hague, declared that while Muslims might be infuriated by van Gogh's film, they should have taken the film-maker to court rather than engaging in acts of violence. It said: "Muslims will have to learn that, in a democracy, religion, too, is open to criticism — this applies to Islam no less than to Christianity."

While watching events in the Netherlands closely, other EU governments have so far been reluctant to make any direct comparison with the situation of their own Muslim minorities. In France, Nicholas Sarkozy, the former interior minister who has become a political rival of President Jacques Chirac, has said that it is too late to raise the issue of Islam's compatibility with European values.