

REPORT:

# ISLAMOPHOBIA

IN SLOVAKIA

2023

by THE ISLAMIC FOUNDATION IN SLOVAKIA



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## About the Islamic Foundation in Slovakia

The Islamic Foundation in Slovakia (INS) stands as the leading organization advocating for the Muslim community's interests in Slovakia today, undertaking a variety of responsibilities. It delivers religious services to Slovakian Muslims, supports their spiritual and communal life, and serves as an information hub for Muslim visitors to Slovakia.

While engaging with the Muslim community, INS also promotes relationships between the Muslim minority and the non-Muslim majority. It provides lectures at schools, universities, and other public venues, and runs a cultural center for Muslims. INS is a strong proponent of interfaith dialogue within a diverse society, actively participating in inter-religious activities with Christian, Jewish, and other religious groups.

To build amicable relationships with the Slovak majority, the Islamic Foundation in Slovakia works to dispel various misconceptions and conspiracy theories about Islam, Muslims, and, more recently, Muslim migrants and refugees. It monitors media outlets, public statements, and social networks to gather information on anti-Muslim sentiment, hate speech, and attacks against Muslims. It is the sole organization in Slovakia focused exclusively on addressing anti-Muslim bias. Given its integral role within the Muslim community, INS is also able to gather data directly from Muslims, who may be reluctant to share their experiences with public authorities or the media.

The Islamic Foundation in Slovakia publishes its findings annually in a form of Report on Islamophobia in Slovakia. The first report was published in 2013. The report is being used also as a data source for the annual report on hate crimes in Europe by the OSCE's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights. In 2021 The Islamic Foundation conducted the largest research on islamophobia in Slovakia in the modern history of the Slovak republic. In 2022, the findings were reported in two national TV channels, press conference and textual analysis was published.

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## Foreword

The annual report on islamophobia in Slovakia regularly points out various areas of struggle of slovak Muslims. There is anti-Muslim hate speech coming from the highest political representatives, there were both verbal and physical attacks on Muslims and common is also hate speech on social networks. Slovakia is to this day the last state of the European Union without an official mosque or islamic center, nor it has any official islamic graveyard. But if there is any structural, legislative issue that determines the overall position of Muslims towards the society in comparison to other religious groups, is it certainly the issue of the lack of recognition by the state. According to Slovak legislation, a religious community has to provide signatures of 50 thousand adult members in order to be registered as a religion. Only 4 of 18 currently recognized communities fulfill this requirement. If it is not recognized, it can still profess its faith, but it can't operate as a legal body, nor can it own a building or open a bank account. Muslim community – for example – uses the legal form of foundation for these purposes.

This issue has a long history which is summarized in the chapter “Legal system”. In 2022 for the first time in years there was an actual, legal attempt to solve it, albeit unsuccessful one. Member of Parliament Tomáš Valášek proposed a law that would liberalize the rules for recognition of religious communities and enable Muslims and other faiths to finally achieve equal legal rights with Catholics and other “large” religious communities. In 2023 we saw once again an attempt to solve the recognition issue. Government envoy for religious freedom Ms. Anna Záborská.

This report summarizes the context in Slovakia relevant to Islamophobic incidents, highlighting the most significant events in 2023 related to the topic. The report is organized into three main sections. The first section introduces the Muslim community in Slovakia. The second section discusses Islamophobic incidents and hate crimes, with a particular focus on hate speech from public figures and general public opinion. The final section offers recommendations.

## Muslims in Slovakia

For the first time in Slovak history, the national census of 2021 allowed residents to explicitly select Islam as their religion. This mandatory census for all residents, including those with temporary status, provided an unprecedented opportunity to ascertain the number of Muslims living in Slovakia. The results promise more accurate data on the actual size of the Muslim community, despite the likelihood that not all members disclosed their religion.

As of this report, the data show 3,862 Muslims residing in Slovakia.<sup>1</sup> However, it is acknowledged that some Muslims may have chosen not to declare their religion, were unaware of the option or were scared due to the former anti-Muslim statements of high profile politicians. Consequently, the actual size of the Muslim community is estimated to be between 5,000 to 7,000 members. This figure slightly exceeds initial expectations, which estimated up to 5,000 believers. It's notable that previous censuses did not offer Islam as a listed option, though it could be written in under "others." In 2001, 1,212 Muslims were recorded this way, and 1,934 in 2011. The significant increase in 2021 is likely due to the clearer and more specific inclusion of Islam as a choice. There was no substantial migration or notable increase in the Muslim population between 2011 and 2021.

Another factor contributing to the more representative census outcome may have been a promotional campaign by the Islamic Foundation in Slovakia targeting the Slovak Muslim community. Observing the Muslim community's size in the coming years will be interesting. In 2022, Slovakia saw the first significant influx of Muslims in years, with new groups of workers from Central Asia (Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan) addressing the workforce shortage in Slovakia. If this trend continues, there may be a noteworthy increase in both the reported and actual size of the Muslim community in Slovakia.

Regarding ethnic composition, the majority of Muslims in Slovakia are Arabs, followed by Albanians, Bosnians, and Afghans. There are also smaller numbers of Turks, Pakistanis, Muslims from the former USSR, and several hundred Slovak converts. The community has a slight male majority, except among converts, where women are slightly more prevalent.

Economically and socially, different ethnic groups can be characterized as follows: Arabs are mostly students, university graduates, or entrepreneurs; Albanians primarily work in gastronomy and confectionery; many Afghans are doctors or engineers, a legacy of a bilateral treaty between Czechoslovakia and Afghanistan in the 1980s that brought many Afghan students to Slovakia. Recently, there has also been an increase in Afghan refugees. Bosnians often work as traders and entrepreneurs.

Muslims are distributed throughout Slovakia, with the largest concentration in the capital city of Bratislava. The second-largest community is in Kosice, with smaller but significant

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<sup>1</sup> ISLAMONLINE.sk:

<https://www.islamonline.sk/2022/01/zverejnili-udaje-zo-scitania-obyvateľov-k-islam-u-sa-prihlasilo-3862-moslimov/>  
(accessed on 14/07/2022)

communities in Nitra, Levice, Trnava, Martin, and Piestany. The Slovak government's stance since the beginning of the refugee crisis in 2015 has meant that the influx of refugees to Europe has not significantly impacted the size and composition of the Muslim community in Slovakia. However, there has been a recent increase in Muslim workers from Central Asia.

## Islamophobic Incidents, Events and Discourse

Regarding the frequency of anti-Muslim incidents, 2023 was notably more serious compared to previous years. While the peak interest of Slovak political figures, media, and society in Islam and Muslims occurred during the “migration crisis” of 2015 and 2016, when hate speech against Muslims was most frequent, the following years saw a decline in such cases. However, in 2023, there were seven notable incidents, indicating an increase in severity. Although the topic of migration was not prominent in Slovak political discourse in 2023, these incidents underscore the persistent issue of anti-Muslim sentiment.

*“Sharia is the Islamic legal system  
that allows a man to beat a woman.”*

former chairman of the KDĽ, running for SaS in the  
parliamentary elections in 2023 Alojz Hlina

Islam is not officially recognized as a religion in Slovakia, which significantly restricts Muslims’ ability to practice their faith. A 2007 law requires religious communities to meet stringent criteria for official recognition, including a 2016 amendment demanding 50,000 signatures of adult Slovak citizens for registration. This amendment, initiated by the Slovak National Party to prevent “Islamization,” was implemented despite opposition from then-President Andrej Kiska. Recognized religious communities enjoy privileges such as conducting religious marriages, teaching in state schools, and providing support in prisons and hospitals-benefits denied to unrecognized groups like Muslims.

The U.S. Department of State’s International Religious Freedom Report criticizes Slovakia’s registration law as discriminatory, forcing smaller religious communities to register as civic associations, thus limiting their activities. A 2022 proposal by MP Tomáš Valášek to introduce a two-stage registration process was rejected due to insufficient political support. In 2023, Anna Záborská proposed an amendment to ease registration for smaller religious communities, but it was also rejected, with critics arguing it perpetuated existing discrimination by creating a second-class status for these groups.

A 2021 survey by the Islamic Foundation in Slovakia revealed that 60% of Muslim respondents or their family members experienced discrimination or assault, primarily verbal but occasionally physical. Notable incidents include a Muslim woman in Bratislava being verbally assaulted in a store and physically grabbed by a man questioning her hijab. Another woman faced harassment at a train station, and a Muslim student was reprimanded by school authorities for wearing a hijab. These cases illustrate the pervasive Islamophobia and lack of intervention from bystanders or authorities.

Islamophobia in Slovak political discourse exacerbates societal prejudices. Politician Alojz Hlina made misleading remarks about Sharia law, suggesting it promotes violence against women, thereby reinforcing harmful stereotypes. The Slovak National Center for Human Rights’ 2023



report “*Nenávistný jazyk na politických facebookových profíloch*,” documents frequent Islamophobic comments on political Facebook profiles, often portraying Islam as a security threat and using Muslim identity derogatively. These narratives were particularly prevalent during political events like the European Union’s vote on the migration pact in June 2023.

The report highlights that Islamophobic rhetoric is not confined to specific political parties but is widespread, with figures like Andrej Danko and members of the Hnutie Republika (Republic Movement) frequently associated with such comments. This pervasive hate speech calls for increased awareness and proactive measures to combat harmful rhetoric in public and political discourse.

In conclusion, Islamophobia in Slovakia manifests in both legal and societal dimensions. The restrictive legal framework denies Muslims essential religious rights, while societal prejudices and political rhetoric further marginalize the community. Addressing these issues requires legal reforms to recognize and protect smaller religious communities and a concerted effort to counteract discriminatory narratives in public and political spheres.

## Legal System

Islam is not officially recognized as a religion by the Slovak state, which denies Muslims certain rights to practice their faith. A 2007 law requires religious communities to meet specific criteria for official recognition. Only recognized communities can perform religious marriages equivalent to civil ones, teach Islam in state schools, offer Imams’ support to prisoners and soldiers, and conduct Islamic funeral rituals. This lack of recognition was particularly problematic during the COVID-19 pandemic, as Imams were not allowed to visit patients, unlike leaders of recognized religions.

Unrecognized religious communities cannot register as private institutions, hold bank accounts, or own buildings. They must rely on private individuals or register as civic unions or NGOs, which are not meant for spiritual activities.

The stringent registration law, amended in 2016, mandates 50,000 adult signatures for a religious community to apply for recognition. This amendment, pushed by the SNS party to prevent the “Islamization” of Slovakia, was passed despite opposition from the president at the time, Andrej Kiska.

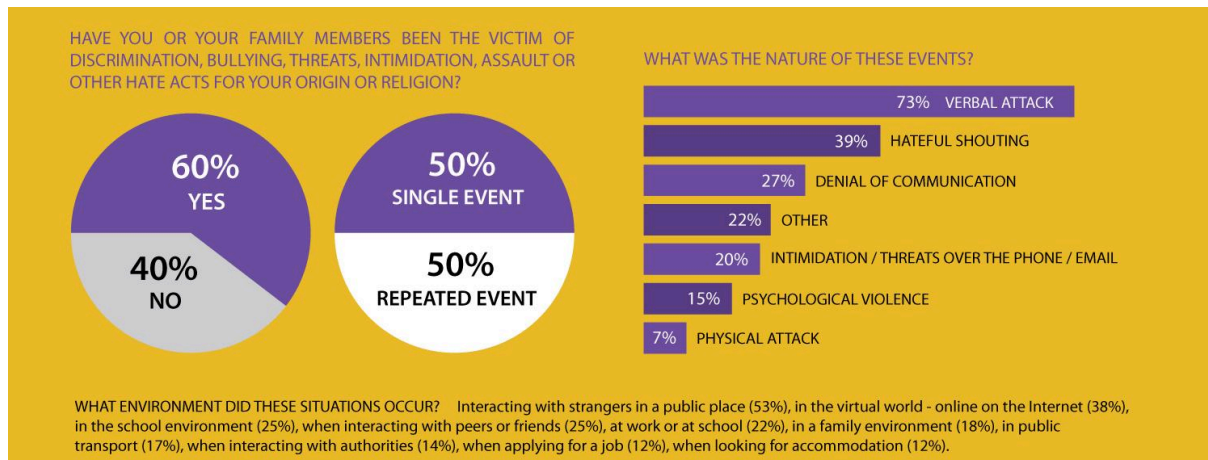
The International Religious Freedom Report by the U.S. Department of State frequently criticizes this law as discriminatory, noting it forces small religions to register as civic associations, which limits their activities and prevents them from being officially recognized as religious groups.

In March 2022, MP Tomáš Valášek proposed a two-stage registration law, requiring only 150 signatures for initial recognition with limited rights, progressing to full recognition after 10 years. However, this proposal lacked political support and was rejected in the first hearing, with only 26 out of 150 MPs voting in favor.

In 2023 Government envoy for religious freedom Ms. Anna Záborská (OLANO) initiated another proposal in this regard. The proposed amendment sought to make it easier for smaller religious communities to register as legal entities, thereby granting them the same rights and obligations as larger, established churches. These associations would have gained legal status, enabling them to operate officially without being forced to register as civic associations. The state would still ensure that these groups adhered to legal norms and respected public order, health, and the rights of others. The proposal was criticized by some for not addressing the true issue of treating smaller religious communities as 2nd class citizens. “The approach does not ensure equality but rather enshrines existing discrimination in law... The new category of ‘religious association’ marginalizes modern religious communities, treating them as second-class believers,” wrote MP for Progressive Slovakia Ondrej Prostredník at the time.<sup>2</sup> The law did not pass the reading in the National Assembly and was rejected.

## Physical and Verbal attacks

In 2021 INS has conducted a survey among members of Muslim community and their relatives to record their experiences with anti-Muslim hate crimes.



Online survey with over 50 questions was filled by 127 individuals. 60% of them said they or their family members were victims of discrimination or assault due to their origin or religion. Half of them said that the attacks have been repeated. Most of them were of verbal nature, but 7% reported physical attacks during their time in Slovakia.

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<sup>2</sup> Ondrej Prostredník, Facebook  
<https://www.facebook.com/prostrednik/posts/pfbid02PQVJuLWN3t3kk7aD8qh55YBZJ4xvDUxnFLg3sRvhL7HM2To8kS3HyCrPhQDPBDtLJ> (accessed on 3/6/2024)

The Islamic Foundation in Slovakia collects all cases of anti-Muslim verbal and physical attacks. It encourages Slovak Muslim and the public to report the findings to the INS. There is a special form set up and published for this purpose.<sup>3</sup> Following are the cases that were reported.

On May 6, 2023, in Bratislava, a disturbing incident unfolded at a Kaufland store. Zuzana, a Muslim woman, observed a Slovak couple, approximately 50 years old, reacting negatively to a group of Turkish Austrians, including a woman wearing a hijab. The Slovak woman loudly and angrily exclaimed to her husband, "Everywhere these damn Muslims." Zuzana, also a Muslim, was deeply affected by this blatant display of Islamophobia.

Between April 3 and April 10, 2023, Zuzka P. experienced two separate Islamophobic incidents in Bratislava. The first occurred at the Galéria Petržalka shopping center. As she entered the mall with her children, a middle-aged woman began crossing herself and muttering, "Dear God, what have we let in here?" She then turned to her son, around thirty years old, and asked if he saw it. A few days later, at the Danubiana shopping complex in Bratislava Petržalka, Zuzka encountered another older couple. The woman remarked loudly, "Dear God, how is she dressed?" and they continued to discuss her appearance, highlighting the pervasive prejudice she faced in her daily life.

On June 17, 2023, in Bratislava, a Muslim woman experienced a distressing incident at a local store. A man physically grabbed her by the hand, demanding to know why she was wearing a hijab. The altercation caused a scene, but ultimately ended without police intervention, as the victim believed reporting it would be futile. The lack of police involvement and the absence of any supportive bystanders highlighted the isolation felt by the victim.

On July 20, 2023, at the Kaufland on Trnavska cesta in Bratislava, a Muslim shopper faced harassment at the exit gate. As she struggled with a non-functional scanner, a bystander verbally assaulted her, questioning her presence in the country. Her cries for help drew the attention of many onlookers, but none intervened. Despite the public nature of the incident, she did not contact the police, believing it would be ineffective.

On August 18, 2023, a Slovak woman married to a Turkish man experienced persistent online harassment. Early in their relationship, she encountered numerous xenophobic and Islamophobic comments, reflecting the broader societal prejudice. The repeated nature of these online attacks underscores the pervasive and insidious nature of Islamophobia in Slovakia.

On October 5, 2023, a Muslim woman traveling from Vienna to Košice was targeted at the Bratislava train station. She was subjected to derogatory remarks and threats by a group of individuals. Despite the presence of other travelers, no one intervened, and she did not report the incident to the authorities, feeling disheartened by the apathy around her.

On October 5, 2023, at Gymnázium Katkin Park in Košice, a Muslim student was summoned by her teacher to the principal's office, where she was reprimanded for wearing her hijab. The teacher's actions were not challenged by other staff, and no further steps were taken despite the student's clear distress. The school's inaction reflects a troubling acceptance of discrimination within educational institutions.

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<sup>3</sup> Form to report islamophobia <https://forms.gle/guKeL4S3R2ne7UI98> (accessed on 3/6/2024)

## Politicians

In an article,<sup>4</sup> politician Alojz Hlina made remarks that portray Islam in a negative light, suggesting that Islamic Sharia law promotes violence against women. Hlina criticized Boris Kollár by saying, "Kollár was a policeman, prosecutor, and judge, and he sentenced the mother of his child with a beating," implying a parallel to Sharia law which he describes as allowing men to beat women. Such statements are misleading and contribute to harmful stereotypes about Islam.

It's important to counteract such portrayals because they are not representative of the true nature of Islamic teachings. Islam, like all major religions, is diverse and complex, with the vast majority of Muslims advocating for peace, respect, and justice. Sharia law, when properly understood, emphasizes compassion, community welfare, and ethical conduct. Misrepresentations of Sharia law can fuel prejudice and discrimination against Muslims, undermining social cohesion and mutual respect in multicultural societies like Slovakia.

The report, titled "Nenávistný jazyk na politických facebookových profiloch," was released in 2023 by the Slovenské národné stredisko pre ľudské práva (Slovak National Center for Human Rights).<sup>5</sup> This document provides an in-depth analysis of hate speech on the Facebook profiles of Slovak politicians and political parties, specifically focusing on Islamophobic sentiments starting from page 45.

The report reveals that Islamophobic comments were notably frequent on political Facebook profiles. A significant portion of these comments portrayed Islam as a security threat, used Muslim identity as a derogatory term, or resorted to violence and dehumanization. The analysis shows that these hate speech elements were often not linked to any clear intention of spreading hate, suggesting that negative narratives about Islam might be internalized and expressed unconsciously by some commenters.

During the monitored period, from March to June 2023, a marked increase in Islamophobic comments was observed in early June. This spike coincided with the European Union's vote on the migration pact, indicating that political events can heavily influence the prevalence of hate speech online.

The data indicates that Islamophobic sentiments were often associated with broader security concerns, linking Islam and Muslims to crime and terrorism. This framing was used to stir fears about cultural and national identity threats among the majority population. Comments often generalized violent and criminal tendencies to Muslim identity, reinforcing negative stereotypes and stigmatization.

The research also highlights that Islamophobic narratives were not confined to specific political parties or figures but were spread across the political spectrum. For instance, political

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<sup>4</sup> Alojz Hlina: <https://dennikn.sk/3437270/borisovi-kollarovi-treba-vysvetlit-ze-na-slovensku-neplati-saria/> (accessed on 3/6/2024)

<sup>5</sup> Nenávistný jazyk na politických facebookových profiloch <https://www.snslp.sk/wp-content/uploads/Nenavistny-jazyk-na-politickych-fb-profiloch-2023> (accessed on 3/6/2024)

figures like Andrej Danko and members of the Hnutie Republika (Republic Movement) were associated with comments that framed Islam as a security threat. Richard Sulík's profile featured comments using Muslim identity pejoratively, especially in contexts like the EXPO exhibition in Dubai.

Overall, the report underscores the troubling trend of using political discourse to spread hate speech, including Islamophobic narratives. It calls for heightened awareness and proactive measures to counter such harmful rhetoric in the public and political arenas.

## Civil Society and Political Initiatives to Counter Islamophobia

In order to counter Islamophobia in Slovakia, members of civil society not only respond to incidents but also create a constructive narrative on coexistence with Muslims.

In 2023, several interfaith initiatives took place. A discussion moderated by Jozef Lenč brought together various religious leaders to foster understanding and dialogue.<sup>6</sup>

During Ramadan, a festive iftar dinner had a positive impact on the perception of Islam, with Jewish, Catholic, and Protestant leaders, diplomats, and NGO representatives sharing experiences and promoting tolerance. The Islamic Foundation in Slovakia organized this iftar event to celebrate interfaith dialogue.<sup>7</sup>

Educational videos addressing the threat of prejudice were released, and multiple meetings were held to further these themes. Representatives of the Islamic Foundation met with individuals such as local community leaders, educators, and religious figures, including local government officials, academics, and representatives from different religious communities, to discuss cooperation and mutual understanding.

The Vice President of Indonesia visited Slovakia, furthering diplomatic and cultural ties between the two countries.<sup>8</sup> Additionally, students visited the Islamic Center, engaging in cultural exchange and learning about the Muslim community in Slovakia.<sup>9</sup>

These initiatives collectively contribute to a more inclusive and understanding society.

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<sup>6</sup> Debate <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=552953016642428> (accessed on 3/6/2024)

<sup>7</sup> Iftar <https://www.facebook.com/IslamOnline.sk/posts/251926393867765> (accessed on 3/6/2024)

<sup>8</sup> Visit of vicepresident <https://www.facebook.com/IslamOnline.sk/posts/251926393867765> (accessed on 3/6/2024)

<sup>9</sup> Visit of the students <https://www.facebook.com/IslamOnline.sk/posts/347527994307604> (accessed on 3/6/2024)

## Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

The current legal framework and societal attitudes in Slovakia undermine the rights and freedoms of the Muslim community. Islam's lack of official recognition as a religion denies Muslims access to essential religious practices and institutional benefits afforded to other recognized religious groups. This discrimination is compounded by a 2016 amendment requiring an impractical number of signatures for religious registration, which effectively marginalizes smaller religious communities. The societal dimension of this issue is equally troubling, with instances of verbal and physical attacks against Muslims, fueled by prevalent Islamophobic rhetoric in political discourse. These conditions create an environment where Muslims in Slovakia face disadvantages and hostility, to certain extent hindering their ability to practice their faith freely.

To address these issues and foster a more inclusive and equitable society, several policy recommendations are proposed. First, it is important to amend the religious registration law to make it more accessible for smaller religious communities. A two-stage registration process, as previously proposed, could provide a more reasonable pathway to recognition.

Ensuring that all religious communities, regardless of size, have access to the same rights and benefits is crucial. This includes the ability to conduct religious marriages, offer religious education, provide support in prisons and hospitals, and conduct funeral rituals. Such measures would eliminate the second-class status of smaller religious groups and promote equality.

Public awareness campaigns and educational programs are necessary to combat Islamophobia and promote understanding and respect for religious diversity. Collaboration with civil society organizations, religious groups, and educational institutions can create initiatives that address misconceptions about Islam and highlight the contributions of Muslims to Slovak society. Additionally, stricter regulations and monitoring mechanisms should be implemented to curb hate speech in political discourse, particularly on social media platforms. Political leaders and parties should be held accountable for Islamophobic rhetoric, and measures should be taken to ensure that political discourse promotes inclusion and respect for all religious communities.

Facilitating dialogue between different religious communities and the broader public is crucial for fostering mutual understanding and integration. Government and community leaders should actively engage in efforts to bridge divides and build cohesive communities that respect and celebrate religious diversity. By implementing these policy recommendations, Slovakia can take significant steps towards ensuring religious freedom and equality for all its citizens, fostering a more inclusive and harmonious society.

## Chronology

Chronological list of all cases of hate speech against Islam and Muslims and all verbal and physical attacks in 2023:

- **06/05/2023:** In Bratislava, a Muslim woman named Zuzana observed a Slovak couple reacting negatively to a group of Turkish Austrians, including a woman wearing a hijab, at a Kaufland store. The Slovak woman loudly expressed her disdain for Muslims, which deeply affected Zuzana.
- **April 2023:** Zuzka P. experienced two separate Islamophobic incidents in Bratislava. The first occurred at the Galéria Petržalka shopping center, and the second at the Danubiana shopping complex, where she faced derogatory remarks about her appearance from Slovak individuals.
- **17/06/2023:** In Bratislava, a Muslim woman was physically grabbed by a man in a local store, who demanded to know why she was wearing a hijab. The incident ended without police intervention.
- **20/07/2023:** At the Kaufland on Trnavska cesta in Bratislava, a Muslim shopper faced harassment at the exit gate. Despite the public nature of the incident, the victim did not contact the police.
- **18/08/2023:** A Slovak woman married to a Turkish man experienced persistent online harassment, reflecting broader societal prejudice and Islamophobia in Slovakia.
- **05/10/2023:** A Muslim woman traveling from Vienna to Košice was targeted at the Bratislava train station with derogatory remarks and threats by a group of individuals. No one intervened, and the victim did not report the incident to the authorities.
- **05/10/2023:** At Gymnázium Katkin Park in Košice, a Muslim student was reprimanded by her teacher and principal for wearing her hijab. The school's inaction reflected a troubling acceptance of discrimination within educational institutions.