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Introduction

Following paper summarizes status of islamophobia in Slovakia. Taking into consideration the relatively small Muslim community in Slovakia – Muslims make up to 0.1% of the total population – islamophobia did not use to be a hot topic in Slovak discourse. This however changed dramatically during the so called “refugee crisis” in Europe since the second half of 2015. But since Slovakia offered shelter to almost no refugees, the discourse was mostly virtual. Therefore by far most obvious is islamophobia on internet and islamophobic statements by majority of Slovak politicians, while real-life attacks are much more scarce than in European countries where muslim communities are much bigger.

There were couple of studies on the topic of dealing with islamophobia in the context of Slovakia by local NGOs such as People Against Racism or Center for the Research of Ethnicity and Culture, however mostly in the form of rather shorter chapters and comments as a part of bigger projects on wider topics. It is pure fact that issues with other, main ethnic minorities, especially Hungarians and Roma, are of much larger significance in the context of Slovak republic. Specific studies and projects focused solely on the case of islamophobia in Slovakia are lacking.

This is not to say that Muslims in Slovakia would be without any problems. On the contrary, they are dealing with severe issues, of which the main one are registration of Islam as a state religion, without which Muslims are feeling as 2nd class religious group in compare to members of other religions such as recognized Christian denominations or Jews. Another issue is missing official mosque or Islamic center and refusal of the local governing organs to grant permission to build one.

We could discuss and guess what motivated authorities not to allow islamic center to be build in Slovakia so far, however without any kind of official statements it would be nothing more than giving away our ideas and impressions. We think that there is not enough evidence to prove that islamophobia is the cause for the denial of permission to build an islamic culture center, so we chose not to include these issues into the report. We however do have reason to think that the lacking registration of Islam as a religion in Slovakia can be linked to anti-muslim sentiments. We lay out our reasons in the following paragraph.

Muslims in Slovakia

It is difficult to get the exact number of Muslims in Slovakia because of the absence of serious statistics on this topic. According to our judgment the estimated number of Muslims to this day is approximately 5000 people. Muslims in Slovakia differ on the ethnical basis with the relative majority of Arabs. Except for Arabs, to the main ethnic groups of Muslims belong Albanians, Bosnians, Afghans, but also Slovak converts. In lower numbers there are Turks, Pakistanis, as well as Muslims from the former USSR. Most of the Muslims are of a young age and there are more males than females.

As for the Arabs, they are whether students, university graduates or businessmen. Albanians are working mostly in gastronomy and confectionery. The vast majority of Afghans are doctors or engineers who graduated in universities in Slovakia. Bosnians work mostly as traders and businessmen. Slovak converts are either students or employees (however most of them live abroad due to economical situation). They are usually of a young age too and there are more women than men. There are approximately 500 of them until this day.

Muslims live in all parts of Slovakia but their main concentration is in the capital city of Bratislava, Kosice, Nitra, Levice, Trnava, Martin, Zilina, Piestany.

Discrimination by the law

According to Slovak legislation every religious community that wants to have same rights as already recognized religious communities in Slovakia (such as catholic or orthodox church, jewish religious community etc.) has to fulfill set of requirements before it is allowed to apply for the recognition by the state. Until this day Islam is not officially recognized by Slovak state as a religion with rights equal to religions that obtained official registration. Among these rights is the right to perform religious marriages equal to civil state marriages, the right to teach Islam as a port of religious education in state schools, the right to offer religious support of Imams to prisoners and soldiers or the right to perform funeral rituals in the accordance with the islamic religious tradition.

The lack of registration is caused especially by – in comparison with other EU member states – unusually strict law stating the requirements religious community has to meet before applying for recognition by the state. There used to be theoretical
chance to achieve the registration until 2007, when the government passed novelization of the law that deals with the requirements for state registration of the religious communities. Before this novelization it was sufficient to provide signatures of 20 thousand sympathizers, who agreed that the religious community shall be recognized by the state. However the novelization changed these conditions and decided that the state would require 20 thousand signatures of the members of the religion, who are citizens of Slovakia, have permanent residence in Slovakia and are more than 18 years old. These requirements are far from the reality of Muslim community in Slovakia, which has up to 5 thousand members including children and students, refugees and seasonal workers, who don’t have the citizenship not permanent residence.

The current registration law is repeatedly mentioned in the International Religious Freedom Report conducted annually by U. S. Department of State. The report criticizes the law as discriminatory towards small religions citing examples such as inability to perform religious marriages with official recognition or religious funerals.

While the government officially did not mention any Muslim-related reason for the change, several political actors uttered remarks suggesting that the issue of possible registration of Islam was indeed present when the novelization was created and approved by the national assembly.

The idea to change the law came short after a group of Muslims announced that they want to begin to collect signatures for the registration.

The head of one of the governing parties at that time Slovak National Party (SNS) Ján Slota said shortly before the change was approved: „With the registration of islamic faith in the Slovak republic as the official church in such a boom-boom [quick] way, and after that Muslims in turbans will run around in there, so this is something that SNS disagrees with."

SNS’s deputy Rafael Rafaj, when arguing in the national assembly for support of the novelization, said: „It was announced that there is proposal for the registration of Islam, I have informations that even the Scientology church is active in Slovakia. Politicians have to reflect on those events in advance."

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9 years later, in January 2016 in a TV debate Minister of Culture Marek Maďarič confessed that in his opinion the law is positive because it prevents „islamism“. He said: „I am proud of the fact that the Ministry of Culture under my leadership in the first term initiated legislative amendment that requires 20,000 members to register a church. It is a very good law especially thanks to this, that it prevents penetration of the forces of, not Islam, but islamism.“ Maďarič was Minister of Culture not only in 2016, but also in 2007, when the amendment was proposed and approved.

The very author of the amendment MP Ján Podmanický confessed to his anti-Muslim sentiment in the interview for website Webnoviny.sk on 21st of August 2016. Here he claimed that the fact that London elected its first Muslim mayor is a sign of incoming death of native Europeans. He argued that once Muslims start to be elected in leading positions in European countries, they gain access to their weapons, such as nuclear warheads, which is a great security risk. His statements illustrate that anti-Muslim sentiment could indeed have been responsible for the proposal of the amendment.

As if the law wasn’t strong already, in November 2016 an amendment passed in the National Assembly lifting the quota from 20,000 to 50,000 signature. Head of SNS Andrej Danko announced in 2015 that should his party be part of the government, he will propose this change. His argument was that the number of Muslims is growing and even mentioned that there could be as much as 20,000 of them (we are not aware of any estimate even coming close to this number and Danko didn't quote any source of this information). The law according to him should help to prevent „islamization“ of Slovakia. His party did well in election in 2016 and formed government with two other parties. Danko did actually propose the amendment together with few other MPs and the law was passed by vote.

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The president of Slovak republic Andrej Kiska rejected to sign the amendment, what forced National Assembly to vote on it once again. The definitive vote happened in early 2017 and the amendment was approved once again.

It is also worth noting that on 22th of November 2016 member of Kotleba – People’s Party Our Slovakia and member of parliament Stanislav Mizík proposed an additional amendment to increase the threshold for state recognition of religious communities from 20.000 to 250.000 signatures. The proposal argued that this would be „an effective tool to prevent the infiltration of non-Christian religious organizations and other sects into Slovak society in near future.“ The amendment did not pass the parliament.

Physical and verbal attacks

Islamic Foundation in Slovakia (INS) is not aware of any physical attack on islamic buildings that was reported and confirmed to be a hate crime against Muslims by Slovak authorities, we are however aware of several physical attacks targeting Muslim individuals.

In May 2017 Muslim woman, employee of the Embassy of Indonesia, was being shouted at at the entrance of her apartment. Unknown person shouted: „Go back to where you came from. Go home!“

In June 2017 someone shouted at two Muslim women in hijabs while they were walking down the street in the center of Bratislava. The voice shouted: „Terrorists? Again?“ In another case in the same city in same month someone shouted at Muslim couple near their apartment. Couple was carrying a travel bag, when a man sitting nearby asked: „What is in that bag? Isn’t it a bomb?“

In August 2017 two Muslim women were verbally and physically attacked at the evening near the bus stop Zochová in the center of Bratislava. Unknown people were shouting vulgar comments on them and someone tried to take off the hijab of one of the women. The case was not reported to the police, only to INS.

In another case in same month a Muslim woman was surrounded by the crowd in the city of Trnava. Crowd was saying vulgar comments when another unknown woman managed to rescue her and took her to safety.

Discrimination by authorities, institutions and companies

During 2017 a muslim child was excluded from kindergarten due to the prejudices of teacher and director. The child was born outside the Slovakia and its parents are practicing Muslims. Director and teacher marked the child as „real threat for other children and teachers themselves.“ The case is currently in court.

In November 2017 newspapers covered a case of an unusual decision of regional court in Trenčín. Woman from Slovakia and man from Turkey divorced and regional court had to decide which parent will get to spend Christmas holiday with their daughter. Although normally court divides Christmas holidays equally among both parents, in this case court decided that child will spend all of its Christmas holidays with the mother. “A minor is growing up with a mother in Slovakia, where the celebration of the Christmas holidays is common and so she would be deprived of these holidays,” said court in the statement defending its decision not to let child spend any of Christmas holidays with its father, who is a practicing Muslim and does not celebrate Christmas.  

Hate speech by politicians

Parliamentary elections were held in Slovakia on 5 March 2016. 8 parties were elected into the National Assembly. It is very telling that leaders of 5 of them – Robert Fico (Smer-SD), Richard Sulik (SaS), Andrej Danko (SNS), Marián Kotleba (ĽSNS) and Boris Kollár (We Are Family) – were engaged in anti-Muslim hate speech, while none of the other 3 leaders spoke against it in any extensive manner before and after the election.

On 8th of October 2017 Danko’s party SNS issued press release, where it claimed intention in promise the ban on burqas (Muslim clothes covering face) in Slovakia following same ban in Austria few months earlier.  

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10 Court would not give chilren to Muslims during Christmas holidays
11 Nový čas:
https://www.cas.sk/clanok/603980/kontroverzny-navrh-z-dielne-kapitana-danka-zakazeme-na-slove nsku-burky/ 22/10/2017
The acting prime minister of Slovakia Robert Fico uttered a number of islamophobic remarks while in his office, of which we will only include the one that occurred in 2017. During the celebration of the national holiday on 5th of June 2017 he spoke of the conflict between West and East and said that is important to protect christianity and Europe against migration and Islam. Mr. Fico uttered number of other anti-Muslim statements in previous years, most of which were included in our former reports.

On 24th of January 2017 regional library in Zvolen screened the movie Battle of Vienna, low budget propagandistic movie from Poland about the fight against ottoman army at the gates of Vienna in 17th century. The screening was promoted by member of parliament Ján Mora (LS NS). INS finds those statements extremely problematic, because they legitimize the hate speech of general public. When prime minister or the head of National Assembly can dare to say such a things about his fellow Muslim citizens, the regular person has simply no reason to perceive his or her own hate speech as something inappropriate.

Debate during approval process of anti-Muslim law

From October 2016 until end of January 2017 Slovak National Assembly discussed the proposal of Andrej Danko and several other MPs from SNS to increase the minimal quota required to recognize religious community by state from 20 to 50 thousand. The discussions in National Assembly generated number of hateful comments, of which we only include those that occurred after 1st of January 2017. Previous comments were part of our report for the year of 2016.

Boris Kollár took the opportunity and his speech in support for the law ended with words: „We will support this law, I am even ready to increase the quota by amendment up to 100.000 and I will be very happy that when my children grow up there will still be a double cross in our state symbol and not the crescent.“ During the last approval round on 31st of January 2017 Boris Kollár said: „By this law we are helping to preserve the traditions of our roots, our civilization and our way of life. We

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are protecting our homeland, we are protecting our people, we are protecting our families. Whether someone likes it or not, we have christian traditions and christian history in Slovakia.\(^{15}\)

Member of Boris Kollár’s party SME Rodina Milan Krajniak added during the last round of approval speeches that although the law itself is beneficial, there needs to be an effort in other areas, namely to prevent future construction of mosques in the country. „Mosques are turning into centers of other culture, other way of life and different views on human rights,“ said. „Mosques are centers of recruitment of people who are leaving Europe to train for caliphate or al-Qaida,“ added Krajniak.\(^{16}\)

Another MP of SME Rodina Peter Pčolinský said during the last round in January 2017 Pčolinský said in favor of the law: „We do not want to have no go zones in Slovakia, such as those that are popping up in Vienna, so we should do everything in order to prevent – and I will say it out loud – Muslims from coming into our country.“

On 31st of January 2017 National Assembly held approval process of the aforementioned law for the last time where the law finally passed.

Debate during approval process of the proposal to ban construction of mosques

Milan Krajniak (SME Rodina) suggested during his aforementioned speech in January 2017 that the focus should be on preventing the construction of mosques in Slovakia. On 28th of February 2017 he held press conference where he announced his intention to propose such a law to National Assembly. „Isn’t it better for the security of Slovak people to ban mosques, rather than to close them later on?“ Argued during the press conference and added that he only hopes that „in Slovakia there will be no mosques, because it is important for our safety.“\(^{17}\)

He indeed proposed the law and it was discussed in National Assembly on 4th of April 2017. „Islam divides people into Muslims and disbelievers,“ started Krajniak his speech and one by one named all traditional misconceptions about Islam, such as

\(^{15}\) ISLAMONLINE.sk

\(^{16}\) ISLAMONLINE.sk

\(^{17}\) MediaPortal NR SR: http://tv.nrsr.sk/archiv/tlacovakonferencia/7/2368 (22/10/2017)
freedom of religion in Islam, treatment of women, or various scary claims about „the shariah law“. Krajniak further claimed existence of some statistics proving that „practicing Muslim who regularly visits mosques approves those [terrorist] attacks... more often than non-practicing Muslims.”18

Unlike previous law this was proposed by a party that is not part of the government. As a result no government party voted for the law and thus it did not pass.

Anti-Muslim organizations, activists and public figures

Organization that calls itself The Institute of Leo XIII. published hateful book titled The ancestor of anti-Christ where it collects various anti-Muslim statements of catholic religious leaders throughout history. In summer 2017 the organization shipped this book to Catholic parishes around Slovakia. According to reports at least some of the churches did share promoting materials for this book. Promoting materials were also distributed to people’s post boxes in various locations around the country.19

Famous actor Andy Hryc took a stand against migration and Islam in the interview on 8th of August 2017. In the interview he asked: „For centuries Europe was defending itself against the intrusion of Islam. Our ancestors fought, bled and died but they did defend our continent. Are we supposed to just give it to them?“ The journalist responded with a question asking him, whether he is referring to defending Europe with arms. „Of course. I own several firearms at my home and when it will be necessary, I will even buy Kalashnikov.“20

It is very hard to sue public figures for these types of comments. They are hardly to be looked at as criminal acts. While we are not lawyers, we are aware of much more severe cases of hate speech that went unpunished. On the other hand there is a great danger in comments such as those of Mr. Hryc. He is considered to be an cultural elite and his opinion matters to many people. Article with his remarks was one of the

most shared slovak articles on Facebook in that month. Just as with hate speech by politicians, this only increases the confidence of general public, which has now a reason to think that hate speech against Muslims and refugees is appropriate or “normal”.

Hate speech on internet

Islamophobic comments on internet are specific kind of hate speech in Slovak internet context. It would take for separate project to collect and categorize most of them. For the purpose of this summary we can state that comments of this kind were present in most of popular news websites below articles touching the topic of islam or muslims in one way or another.

Apart from websites hate speech was present on social networks, especially Facebook. Possibly biggest islam-oriented Facebook page in Slovakia and Czech republic to this day is Facebook.com/IslamOnline.sk, which was no exception for this kind of hate speech.

Except for hate speech in comments, we witnessed rise of dedicated anti-islam and anti-muslim Facebook groups and pages. Various individuals created weblogs dedicated to spreading hatred about Islam and Muslims. Anti-muslim hate speech is increasingly popular topic of several „alternative“ news sites that spread hoaxes and conspiracy theories on Slovak internet.

In June 2017 Islamic Foundation in Slovakia organized a celebration of the breaking of fast during the month of Ramadan (iftar) with number of guests from NGOs, religious leaders, diplomats and academicians. Before the dinner several public figures gave their speeches. The final speech was delivered by the head of Islamic Foundation in Slovakia Mr. Mohamad Hasna. All of the speeches were recorded and published on Facebook later on. Of them, the speech of Hasna was picked up and shared by group of fans of far-right party LS NS. Video was shared on their Facebook group, where it generated number of hateful comments including death threats. Police did not take any action in this case, nor in other cases of online hate speech reported in this file.

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21 For examples of some of those pages and groups see attachment no. 1.
22 See attachment no. 2, where we include some those that were active to the recent time.
23 For examples see attachment no. 3
24 ISLAMONLINE.sk
In summer 2017 someone photographed Muslim woman in burkini (Muslim swimming suit) in a public swimming pool in Czech republic. Number of Facebook pages and groups called for doing the same in Slovakia. During August 2017 people shared several photographs of Muslim tourists in Slovakia accompanied with various hateful comments.25

Worth mentioning are also hoaxes that spread over social networks from time to time, because some of them are related to islamophobia. One such hoax was spreading rapidly in November 2017 on Facebook. It appeared as a story of a man who helped a Muslim on Christmas market. He found his lost wallet and this Muslim in return advised the man not to go to Christmas market this year because of a planned terrorist attack. As a response President of the police corps Tibor Gašpar himself recorded video of himself refuting the hoax and posted it on Facebook.26

Last dimension of islamophobia on internet that we should highlight in this paper are emails sent to the official email address of Islamic Foundation in Slovakia. Typical emails promoted exclusion of Muslims from Slovakia or even vulgar statements. Some of them were taken public on Facebook page IslamOnline.sk27 for readers to see and give them an opportunity to comment on them.

Recommendations and Conclusion

Dealing with islamophobia in Slovakia should reflect its specific character. There is not much that we can do about the statements and comments of political representatives (except maybe for official announcements of Islamic Foundation in


Slovakia condemning those, which was the case in the past\textsuperscript{28}). Therefore think most of our energy shall be aimed at combating internet islamophobic comments and articles.

This could be done in various ways. Our internet projects\textsuperscript{29} are offering proper informations about Islam and Muslims and except for other content are trying to combat misconceptions and stereotypes.

As for hateful comments, strong „Islam and Muslim positive“ internet community can already argue with those individuals in comments sections by itself without the need for much of the intervention from our site. All comments below our content are of course monitored by us and those violating Slovak laws and moral principles are being deleted.

We think it is important to deal with islamophobic expressions on internet by fighting the misconceptions themselves, providing alternative sources of informations and cultivating our own internet communities that can react and „fight back“ to aggressive comments and posts.

\textsuperscript{28} Slovak Muslims: SNS shall deal with real problems instead of creating made-up causes

\textsuperscript{29} Website ISLAMONLINE.sk, Facebook page Faebook.com/IslamOnline.sk, Twitter channel @IslamOnline.sk and YouTube channel YouTube.com/IslamOnlineSk
Attachments

Attachment no. 1

- http://www.facebook.com/SlovakDefenceLeague
- http://www.facebook.com/groups/1326580234790304/?fref=ts
- http://www.facebook.com/pages/Som-proti-vyjadreniu-biskupov-%C5%A0e-katol%3C%DAci-podporuj%u00e1-islamiz%u00e1ciu-Eur%F3py/213073992062860

Attachment no. 2

- http://mokova.blog.sme.sk
- http://jurajpolacek.blog.sme.sk
- http://jurajpolacek.blogspot.sk
- http://www.blogovisko.sk/author/main
- http://ivanaheckova.blog.sme.sk

Attachment no. 3

- http://medzicas.sk
- http://www.konzervativnyvyber.sk
- http://www.hlavnespravy.sk
- http://www.parlamentnelisty.sk