

REPORT:

# ISLAMOPHOBIA

IN SLOVAKIA

**2018**

by ISLAMIC FOUNDATION IN SLOVAKIA



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## About Islamic Foundation in Slovakia

The Islamic Foundation in Slovakia is the most active organization representing the interests of the Muslim community in Slovakia nowadays, thus carrying out many different duties. It provides religious services for the Muslim community in Slovakia, supports their spiritual and community life and serves the role of an information center for Muslims visiting Slovakia. While working with the Muslim community the Islamic Foundation in Slovakia also fosters the relationships between the Muslim minority and the majority in Slovakia. It offers lectures in schools, universities and other public institutions and opens its prayer room to the public. The Islamic Foundation in Slovakia firmly believes in the importance of interfaith dialogue in the context of a diverse society. It participates in various inter-religious activities with Christian, Jewish and other religious leaders.

In order to foster friendly relationships with the majority in Slovakia, the Islamic Foundation in Slovakia has to fight various misconceptions and conspiracy theories about Islam, Muslims and nowadays especially migrants and refugees of muslim background. In order to do so, it monitors media, public statements, social networks and collects information about anti-Muslim bias, hate speech and attacks on Muslims. It is the only organization in Slovakia whose focus is solely on the sentiments against the adherents of Islam, rather than working on issues concerning other minorities. Thanks to its role within Muslim community, it is also able to collect data directly from local Muslims, who aren't always willing to talk about their experiences to public authorities or the media.

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## Foreword

Ever since the important increase of migration crisis in 2015 and 2016 the vast majority of islamophobic incidents is related to migration. Many public figures use the word “migrant” almost as a synonym to “Muslim”. Migrants – according to them – bring new culture, new religion and security risk. Therefore, this report focuses heavily on the discourse about migration, even when it is not directly apparent whether the statement should be flagged as islamophobic or xenophobic in general.

While islamophobic tendencies in Slovakia in 2018 were less frequent compared to the time when the migration crisis in Europe was at its peak, they are still more common than in the years prior to the crisis. Most common occurrence of islamophobia in 2018 was – just like in previous years – in hate-speech of important political figures. It was expressed mostly from the same public figures as in the last couple of years.

Civil society stood up for Muslims several times in the past and continued doing so in 2018. Recently, more and more of its representatives are joining new political projects, but those are still young and their political future is uncertain. Slovak politics and society was in 2018 repeatedly balancing between populism and xenophobia on one side and, on the other, a pro-european orientation with the values of openness that come with it.. The acceptance of Muslims in the country and the frequency of islamophobic acts in the upcoming years will likely depend on which of these two sides will prevail.

## Executive summary

Just like in the previous years, the vast majority of islamophobic incidents in 2018 were related to migration. The main source of islamophobia are hateful comments of some members of the governing coalition and members of the National Assembly. Out of seven parties that are currently represented in the National Assembly of Slovakia, four of them include members who have expressed islamophobic speech and a fifth party that has a leader notoriously known for his islamophobic speech, who just happen not to have pronounced publicly any of them in 2018.

Most of the time it was with relation to migration, although for example MPs of far-right party Kotleba – LS NS managed to insert anti-Muslim sentiment for example in the debate about the new law against anti-semitism as well as to the debate about the proposal for tightening rules for abortion.

There were also couple of physical and verbal attacks on Muslims reported to us in 2018. Their frequency was more or less the same as in previous years and just like before, in all of them the target was a woman.

On a positive note, supportive actions from various sections of civil society, spiritual leaders and other public figures continued in 2018 with perhaps the strongest occurrence so far, when over 500 people including famous activists, journalists and scientists signed an open letter to the Prime Minister condemning his hateful statements towards Muslims.

## Muslims in Slovakia

It is difficult to estimate 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 5.000 people. Muslims in Slovakia differ on the ethnic basis with the relative majority of Arabs. Except for Arabs, the main ethnic groups of Muslims belong to 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 between 20 and 45 years old 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, although there is also number of refugees. 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.

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. Due to Slovakia's government's position since the beginning of so called refugee crisis in 2015 the influx of refugees to Europe did not have any reasonable impact on the size and composition of Muslim community in the country.

## Islamophobic Incidents and Discursive Events

The interest of Slovak political figures, media and society in Islam and Muslims had its peak during the so called “refugee crisis” in 2015 and 2016. That was also the time when the cases of hate-speech against Muslims were most frequent. In 2017 and especially in 2018 such cases were still present, but their frequency was decreasing. In 2018 the topic of migration was for a while overshadowed by other hot topics, especially the murder of a journalist and major changes in the government.

On the other hand we recorded four cases of physical and verbal attacks in 2018, which is more or less same as during the last couple of years.

### Politics

*Tourism in Slovakia is growing, because “there are no explosions, there they won’t be bothered by Muslims in streets.”*

Róbert Fico, 20. January 2018

In the election to National Assembly in March 2016 the far-right party Kotleba – ĽS NS won 14 seats in the Assembly. While in opposition, their MPs are often extremely outspoken in any topic related to Muslims, Islam and migration. Since 2016 their MPs claimed right in the assembly for example, that “Islam has no place in Slovakia” (Natália Grausová, ĽS NS), “Islam is more than just a religion, it is cruel, disgusting and inhuman political system” (Milan Mazúrek, ĽS NS), every European, Christian or atheist, has to fear this satanic-pedophile creation of devil, which is the religion of Islam“ (Stanislav Mizík, ĽS NS) or that everything else, all of these idols, they are for Christians only demons“ (Marián Kotleba, the head of ĽS NS).<sup>1</sup> In January 2018 the party opened the topic of migration. It published a promotional video displaying a groups of criminals kidnaping a woman accompanied by commentary of several members of ĽS NS talking in populist manner about the dangers of migration.<sup>2</sup> Among other things they highlighted the danger of “invasion of illegal immigrants... who come here to take free pleasures, steal and murder.” The video was followed by press conference of the party announcing the intention to submit a bill that would classify illegal presence within the territory of Slovakia as a crime rather than a mere offense.

While in the past he was not very interested in the topic, former prime minister Robert Fico began to spread stereotypes and hate speech against Muslims around the so called migration crisis in early 2015. Over the course of the last three years, he for example said, that “we could

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<sup>1</sup>Facebook: IslamOnline.sk <https://www.facebook.com/IslamOnline.sk/videos/10154680749267629/> (accessed on 22/10/2017)

<sup>2</sup> Kotleba – ĽS NS

<http://www.naseslovensko.net/l5-nase-slovensko-v-nr-sr/l5-nase-slovensko-predstavila-prvy-protiimigracny-zakon-med-ia-to-zamlcali/> (accessed on 19/11/2018)



hardly tolerate that 300-400 thousand Muslims would come here and start to build their mosques”<sup>3</sup>, “we are monitoring every single Muslim, who is currently present in the territory of Slovakia”<sup>4</sup>, “we have to prevent formation of a united Muslim community in Slovakia”<sup>5</sup> or that “Islam has no place in Slovakia”<sup>6</sup>. In 20th of January 2018 in a national radio session Mr. Fico said tourists like to come to Slovakia, because „there are no explosions, there they won’t be bothered by Muslims in streets.”<sup>7</sup> The statement resulted in a wave of criticism from some of the politicians and civil society. Support to the prime minister expressed his Minister of Interior Róbert Kaliňák, who said: “Perhaps we have done a mistake in 2015 when we didn’t open our border with Hungary for migrants to open a camp on Hviezdoslavovo námestie (historical square in the capital’s city center), so that we would understand what migration crisis is.”<sup>8</sup> On the other hand the statement was criticised by the Ministry of Justice Lucia Žitňanská, who said that she finds very bad comments against minorities, such as Muslims.<sup>9</sup> Exceptionally strong was the response of the civil society, which we discuss in detail in chapter “Civil Society and Political Initiatives to Counter Islamophobia”.

One of the strongly discussed topics in 2018 in Slovakia was the so called Istanbul Convention – The Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence. Various public figures feeded the debate about this convention with misconceptions and bias, but only in one major case was the topic in some way connected to Muslims. On 22nd of February 2018 Prime Minister Robert Fico in his press statement said that his government is categorically against the adoption of the Convention noting that the Convention would have made sense if it sent a signal to the Muslim immigrants not to treat women as “second-class beings”. While into it he also repeated that he is “in principle against creation of united Muslim communities in Slovakia.”<sup>10</sup>

The most significant event in 2018 was the murder of the reporter Ján Kuciak with his fiancée. The crime was followed by a series of massive protests that resulted in resignation of Prime Minister Róbert Fico, Minister of Interior Róbert Kaliňák and later the removal of Slovak Police

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<sup>3</sup> Fico: We could hardly tolerate thousands of Muslims with mosques  
<http://www.webnoviny.sk/slovensko/clanok/915511-fico-tisicky-moslimov-s-mesitami-by-sme-tolerovali-tazko/>  
(accessed 1/3/2015)

<sup>4</sup> TA3: Security of Slovakia: <http://www.ta3.com/clanok/1072856/bezpecnost-slovenska.html> (accessed on 27/01/2016)

<sup>5</sup> Denník N: Fico pay for his words about Muslims to be seen  
<https://dennikn.sk/340650/fico-plati-aby-slova-moslimoch-vidno/> (accessed on 27/01/2016)

<sup>6</sup> Politico.eu: Robert Fico: ‘Islam has no place in Slovakia’  
<http://www.politico.eu/article/robert-fico-islam-no-place-news-slovakia-muslim-refugee/> (accessed on 22/9/2016)

<sup>7</sup> RTVS <https://www.rtvs.sk/radio/archiv/1134/877348> (accessed on 25/11/2018)

<sup>8</sup> Hospodárske noviny  
<https://slovensko.hnonline.sk/1680953-kalinak-urobil-som-chybu-mali-si-migranti-spraviti-na-namesti-stanovy-tabor-aby-ste-pochopili-co-je-migracna-kriza> (accessed on 20/11/2018)

<sup>9</sup> Denník N  
<https://dennikn.sk/1014630/remisova-o-moznej-prezidentskej-kandidature-nehadzme-do-plena-mena-pockajme-na-ki-sku/> (accessed on 20/11/2018)

<sup>10</sup> TA3 <https://www.ta3.com/clanok/1122511/vyhlasenie-predsedu-vlady-k-istanbulskemu-dohovoru.html> (accessed on 20/11/2018)

President Tibor Gašpar. While the event and its aftermath did not have a direct impact on the Slovak Muslim community, the personal change of Prime Minister meant that Mr. Fico known for his numerous anti-Muslim statements at least formally lost his legal power. His replacement with Mr. Peter Pellegrini that has no record of anti-Muslim hate speech so far or any comments on topics such as migration, were so far short of any bias, stereotypes or conspiracies.

Another political figure with a long history of anti-Muslim hate speech is the head of National Assembly Andrej Danko. For example in 2011, Danko as a vice president of SNS (Slovak National Party) at that time proposed to ban minarets in Slovakia<sup>11</sup> despite the fact that there are no mosques, nor minarets in the country. Later after becoming SNS's new leader in 2014, in a television debate Danko warned Europe against the threat of islamization and "muslimization" and repeated his statement that "mosques have no place in Bratislava (Slovak capital)".<sup>12</sup> In the following years, Danko among other things announced his intention to rise the minimal number of signatures of believers required for the recognition of their faith by state from 20 thousand to 50 thousand signatories in order to prevent Muslims from obtaining the registration.<sup>13</sup> The goal that he fulfilled a couple of months after the general election in 2016 when his party became part of the government and he himself took the post of the head of National Assembly.

At the end of May 2018 far-right party Kotleba – ĽS NS introduced a new draft of a law tightening current legislation on abortion. While defending the proposal in National Assembly, their MP Stanislav Mizík said that those who oppose the proposal are "protectors of islamic invaders in Europe" and he added that other new laws are needed in order to protect Europe from turning into caliphate.<sup>14</sup>

On 7th of June 2018 Andrej Danko spoke in the National Assembly of Serbia. Among other things, he highlighted the medieval period of Ottoman presence in Europe and painted it as a fight between Christianity and Islam. He noted that he considers both Serbs and Slovak to be proud nations who were able to resist to the "long muslim occupation, when Turks invaded Europe" and reminded that Serbs were "the first ones who protected "our religion, values and culture."<sup>15</sup>

On 5th of July 2018 MP of the largest government party Smer-SD Luboš Blaha commented on his Facebook a two years old case of imitation of a minaret that was built on the largest music festival in Slovakia called Pohoda. At that time the minaret was built on the festival as

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<sup>11</sup> SNS found new threat: minarets <http://www.sme.sk/c/6038438/sns-nasla-dalsiu-hrozbu-minarety.html> (accessed on 19/08/2013)

<sup>12</sup> News and Comments – Elections to European Parliament 2014, see 00:15:30 to 00:17:15 <http://www.rtvs.sk/televizia/program/detail/24/spravy-a-komentare-volby-do-europskeho-parlamentu-2014/archiv?date=13.05.2014> (accessed on 17/05/2014)

<sup>13</sup> Danko: We need to adopt legislative measures against islamization of Slovakia <http://www.teraz.sk/slovensko/danko-treba-prijat-legislativne-opatr/114172-clanok.html> (accessed on 29/11/2018)

<sup>14</sup> ISLAMONLINE.sk <http://www.islamonline.sk/2018/06/poslanci-ls-ns-v-parlamente-zakaz-interrupcii-ako-ochrana-pred-islamizaciou/> (accessed on 26/11/2018)

<sup>15</sup> Facebook: Andrej Danko <https://www.facebook.com/andrej.danko.7169/videos/378430489336005/> (accessed on 22/11/2018)

a symbol of understanding during the refugee crisis. Mr. Blaha in his comment criticized organizers of the festival for “great celebration of Islam” and abusing festival for “propagation of Islam”.<sup>16</sup>

Reporter from newspaper Aktuality.sk reviewed the daily routine during summer camp of People’s youth, youth organisation of far-right party ĽS NS – Kotleba. After the kids wake up and hang the flag, they have lectures on various topics, for example about “Muslim hordes,” who for many years “occupied and terrorized large part of Slovakia.”<sup>17</sup>

In November municipal elections took place all around Slovakia. As the migration was a hot topic in recent years, it was assumed that this or similar issues might be interesting for some of the candidates during electoral campaign. Surprisingly however migration came almost unnoticed during the whole campaign as were other topics related to islamophobia or anti-Muslim hate speech. It seems that migration is not very interesting topic on a local level. It can be perhaps explained by the absence of any significant Muslim communities around the country. Fear of Muslims was always a “virtual” topic, something that is being spoken about on hypothetical, rather than practical level. Municipal elections were, however, much more about things that people actually experience locally.

On 9th of November ĽS NS – Kotleba organized gathering in Humenné, city located in northeastern Slovakia close to Ukraine Border. several MPs including the leader Marián Kotleba joined the gathering and spoke to the people. They criticized the contract between slovak government and UNHCR, according to which Slovakia will house 250 refugees for six months via Humanitarian Transfer of Refugees. They should most likely be placed in refugee camp in Humenné. Representatives of ĽS NS on the gathering complained that the government is supporting refugees instead of its own citizens and mentioned various examples of violent behaviour of Muslims in western Europe. “Are these [male immigrants] going to integrate here?... Don’t you want to live in a safe country in the future?... We Slovaks will not let our land be stolen and overwhelmed by foreigners,” said on the meeting party’s MP Milan Mazúrek.

Global Compact for Migration by UN was another topic that triggered emotional debates in slovak political space during November 2018. It began with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Slovakia Miroslav Lajčák criticizing countries such as Austria who announced that they will not support the compact.<sup>18</sup> Lajčák, who was also President of the United Nations General Assembly for the 72nd session from 2017 until 2018 when the compact was being drafted, expressed clear support for the compact. This woke up coalition party SNS, who responded on the same day with press release criticizing Lajčák’s support for the compact and calling for wider discussion within government and National Assembly on the topic. Most of the coalition and opposition parties joined the following debate using sometimes reasonable arguments and sometimes creating hysteria and fueling fear of migration. “How can this Lajčák compare our people to migrants from Africa?

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<sup>16</sup> Facebook: Luboš Blaha <https://www.facebook.com/LBlaha/posts/2086647724907129> (accessed on 22/11/2018).

<sup>17</sup> Aktuality.sk

<https://www.aktuality.sk/clanok/620530/ako-hlinkova-mladez-lsns-berie-mladych-do-lesa-a-rozprava-im-o-moslimskych-hordach/> (accessed on 22/11/2018)

<sup>18</sup> YouTube: Ministry of Foreign Affairs [https://www.youtube.com/watch?time\\_continue=1333&v=gBUHINySEc8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=1333&v=gBUHINySEc8) (accessed on 23/11/2018)

Is he crazy?” wrote Boris Kollár, head and MP of opposition party SME Rodina on his Facebook profile.<sup>19</sup> He attacked Lajčák’s argument that the compact is beneficial for Slovakia, because it also has a lot of emigrants who are working in other countries and compact is securing their rights. According to Kollár while Slovak migrants work hard and never abuse social system of the countries they go to, migrants from Africa come to Europe and get everything for free. Couple of days later suddenly head of party Smer-SD Róbert Fico (mr. Lajčák’s was nominated to the post of Minister of Foreign Affairs by Smer-SD) uploaded video on his Facebook profile where he categorically refused the compact saying, that people coming to Europe are “increasing the risk of terrorism and fundamentally jeopardize the European way of life and the civilization, cultural, religious roots of our continent.”<sup>20</sup> The National Assembly finally on 29th of November approved a declaration in which it rejecting the compact as such.

On 27th of November the National Assembly of Slovakia debated the new law proposing specific definition of the term antisemitism. The MP of LS NS – Kotleba ms. Natália Grausová used the opportunity and joined the debate saying that it is interesting that “this definition of antisemitism was created and approved only one year after the beginning of Muslim invasion to the states of European Union.” She added that the real purpose of multicultural policy „is the global dominance of Islam.“<sup>21</sup>

## Legal System

*“Registration confers the legal status necessary to perform economic functions such as opening a bank account or renting property, and civil functions such as presiding at burial ceremonies.”*

U. S. Department of State, International Religious Freedom Report, Slovak Republic, 2017

According to Slovak legislation every religious community that wants to have same rights as now 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 part 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.

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<sup>19</sup> Facebook: Boris Kollár [https://www.facebook.com/boris.kollar/posts/1994214850663688?\\_tn\\_ =H-R](https://www.facebook.com/boris.kollar/posts/1994214850663688?_tn_ =H-R) (accessed on 23/11/2018)

<sup>20</sup> Facebook: Róbert Fico <https://www.facebook.com/robertficosk/videos/368933283847709/> (accessed on 25/11/2018)

<sup>21</sup> ISLAMONLINE.sk:

<http://www.islamonline.sk/2018/12/kotlebova-poslankyna-v-parlamente-cielom-boja-proti-antisemitizmu-je-svetovla-da-islam/> (accessed on 8/4/2019)

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 were 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. 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.<sup>22</sup> 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.”<sup>23</sup> 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.“<sup>24</sup> 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

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<sup>22</sup>Government parties opposed to small churches

<http://spravy.pravda.sk/domace/clanok/152603-vladne-strany-sa-postavili-proti-malym-cirkvam/> (accessed 1/3/2015)

<sup>23</sup>SME: They want to stop small churches <http://www.sme.sk/c/3129969/chcu-zastavit-male-cirkvi.html> (accessed 22/9/2016)

<sup>24</sup>RTVS: O 5 minute 12 <http://www.rtvsk.sk/televizia/archiv/10013/84336> (accessed 22/9/2016)

security risk.<sup>25</sup> His statements illustrate that anti-Muslim sentiment could indeed have been responsible for the proposal of the amendment.

As if the law wasn't strict 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.<sup>26</sup> 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.<sup>27</sup> 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<sup>28</sup> 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.

The current registration law is repeatedly mentioned in the International Religious Freedom Report conducted annually by U. S. Department of State.<sup>29</sup> 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. “A group without the 50,000 adult adherents required to obtain status as an official religious group may seek registration as a civic association, which provides the legal status necessary to carry out activities such as operating a bank

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<sup>25</sup>Webnoviny.sk: Podmanický: Muslim politicians can gain access to weapons

<http://www.webnoviny.sk/slovensko/clanok/1094876-podmanickymuslimski-politici-sa-mozu-dostat-k-zbranim/> (accessed 22/9/2016)

<sup>26</sup>ISLAMONLINE.sk: Keď ešte Danko nebol vo vláde, prezradil pravý dôvod, prečo chce SNS sprísniť registráciu cirkví

<http://www.islamonline.sk/2016/09/sns-vravi-ze-sprisenie-registracie-ma-zabranit-spekulantom-nie-je-to-cela-pravda/> (15/12/2016)

<sup>27</sup>New York Times: A Blow-Slovak Muslims Critical of New Church Law

[http://www.nytimes.com/aponline/2016/12/02/world/europe/ap-eu-rel-slovakia-islam.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/aponline/2016/12/02/world/europe/ap-eu-rel-slovakia-islam.html?_r=0) (accessed on 15/12/2016). Independent: Slovakia bars Islam from becoming state religion by tightening church laws

<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/slovakia-bars-islam-state-religion-tightening-church-laws-robert-fico-a7449646.html> (accessed on 15/12/2016). Reuters: Slovakia toughens church registration rules to bar Islam

<http://www.reuters.com/article/us-slovakia-religion-islam-idUSKBN13P20C> (accessed on 15/12/2016)

<sup>28</sup>NR SR: Amendment 7 0273 [http://www.nrsr.sk/web/Default.aspx?sid=schodze%2Ffnrepedn\\_detail&id=2358](http://www.nrsr.sk/web/Default.aspx?sid=schodze%2Ffnrepedn_detail&id=2358) (accessed on 26/04/2017)

<sup>29</sup>United States Department of State: International Religious Freedom Report for 2013 – Slovak Republic <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/222479.pdf> (accessed on 30/3/2015)



account or entering into a contract,” states in Slovak Republic 2017 International Religious Freedom Report by U. S. Department of State.<sup>30</sup> “In doing so, however, the group may not call itself a church or identify itself officially as a religious group, since the law governing registration of citizen associations specifically excludes religious groups from obtaining this status,” the report continues.

## Church and other faiths

*“The more Muslims there are in the state, the greater threat they represent to security and democracy.”*

Anton Ziolkovský, 7. April 2018

Unique projekt to counter islamophobia and bias against other religions was an ongoing activity throughout the year 2018 where Muslim imam, Jewish rabbi and Christian priest would visit high schools around Slovakia and discuss with students about the tolerance among religions.<sup>31</sup> In schools they often took the opportunity to discuss with teachers about their difficulties in educating children about these topics. Another similar activity aimed at teachers in particular began in October 2018 and will continue in 2019.

Religious leaders of all three abrahamic faiths also discussed with the public in several occasions. The biggest one caught the interest of over a thousand people on Facebook<sup>32</sup> and up to 300 people came to the live-streamed event. The debate featured Muslim imam Mohamad Safwan Hasna, Jewish rabbi Miša Kapustin, Evangelical priest František Ábel, Catholic priest and the chairman of Slovak Bishop's Conference, the main catholic body in Slovakia Anton Ziolkovský.

Mr. Ziolkovský's attitude towards Muslim communities was conflicting in 2018. He attended the aforementioned debate and while voicing his concerns he also expressed the support for dialogue. He also participated to one of the *iftars*, a common dinner where the Islamic Foundation in Slovakia invites various public figures to share breaking of the fast with the Muslim community. In his speech during the *iftar*, he for example blamed Slovak politicians for feeding the fear against Muslims. On the other hand Mr. Ziolkovský published several somewhat biased comments on his public Facebook account. For example on April 7th 2018 he wrote referencing an article about Islam in Belgium that “it is also constantly confirmed that the more Muslims there are in the state, the greater threat they represent to security and democracy.”<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>30</sup>United States Department of State: International Religious Freedom Report for 2017 – Slovak Republic <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/281202.pdf> (accessed on 25/11/2018)

<sup>31</sup>Denník N <https://dennikn.sk/1006584/zisli-sa-na-diskusiach-zid-moslim-a-krestan-slovenska-realita-nie-vtip/> (accessed on 20/11/2018).

<sup>32</sup>Facebook: Stretnú sa krestan, moslim a žid [https://www.facebook.com/events/519600361742078/?active\\_tab=about](https://www.facebook.com/events/519600361742078/?active_tab=about) (accessed on 20/11/2018)

<sup>33</sup>Facebook: Anton Ziolkovský <https://www.facebook.com/anton.ziolkovsky/posts/2054557614758093> (accessed on 20/11/2018)

## Physical and Verbal attacks

The 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.

On 29th of January 2018, a group of students from an Islamic high school in Vienna visited the Islamic center Cordoba in Bratislava, prayer room of Islamic Foundation in Slovakia hoping to get familiar with the status of Muslims in Slovakia. One of the students reported that on the way to the prayer room someone on the street shouted “Allah Akbar” at her. She subsequently asked during the visit, if Muslim women are allowed to move freely in Bratislava.<sup>34</sup>

In August 2018, a Muslim woman from Iraq living in Bratislava was taking her older son to kindergarten and while pushing the stroller with her baby someone suddenly pushed her from behind in a way that almost knocked her out of her feet. She managed to keep her balance by holding on to the stroller. She asked the man what is going on and he replied: “Are you an Arab? Where did you come from? What are you doing here?” . The man left after she said she will call police. The woman was wearing a hijab. Although there was a couple of other people on the street, nobody came for her defence. A woman reported the case to the Islamic Foundation of Slovakia<sup>35</sup> and to a local humanitarian organization ADRA Slovensko who contacted the National Criminal Agency (NAKA).

In September 2018, the newspaper Aktuality.sk reported that in summer 2018 a certain Somali woman in Bratislava was attacked twice within a couple of days. She was wearing a hijab as well. At first, she and her 6-years old child were victims of aggressive and vulgar shouting. A couple of days later someone pushed her 6-years old child on the street. Both of these cases were also reported to NAKA.<sup>36</sup>

## Internet

On 29th of September a woman published several photos on Facebook group “Slovak nation, wake up!” accompanied by a short description. According to her own words, she took these photos on the same day in a shopping mall in Bratislava. On the photos is a woman apparently wearing a Muslim face veil (burqa), perhaps a tourist. The woman described how the

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<sup>34</sup>Facebook/IslamOnline.sk

<https://www.facebook.com/IslamOnline.sk/photos/a.228852752628.175497.211508012628/10156019998937629/?type=3> (accessed on 20/11/2018)

<sup>35</sup>ISLAMONLINE.sk

<http://www.islamonline.sk/2018/08/v-bratislave-bola-napadnuta-muslimka-s-kocikom-ktosi-ju-sotil-a-nadaval-jej/> (accessed on 26/11/2018)

<sup>36</sup>Aktuality.sk <https://www.aktuality.sk/clanok/625147/kriminalisti-vysetruju-tri-utoky-na-cudzinky-v-bratislave/> (accessed on 23/11/2018)



muslim woman ran away after she started to take pictures of her. It is apparent from the photos that the woman in veil didn't like being photographed. The discussion under the post was full of hateful comments, such as: "That stinky scum, they gotta be taken where they came from," or "they are multiplying here like rats".<sup>37</sup>

## Anti-Muslim organizations and organized groups

Slovakia did not witness any major demonstration against Islam in 2018 short of the rather small gatherings of Kotleba – ĽS NS party mentioned in the "Politics" section. Islamophobia is a popular interest of most far-right groups, however Slovakia does not have many non-political public figures or movements that are exceptionally outspoken against Islam in particular, such as the initiative "We don't want Islam in CR" that is active in neighboring Czech Republic.

Of the more noteworthy ones is Slovak branch of outspoken American anti-Muslim activist, speaker and writer Bill French known also as Bill Warner. His international institute called Center for the Study of Political Islam (CSPI) has supporters, websites and presence on social media in Slovakia and Czech republic. Slovak branch used to organize events in the past, but all we noticed in 2018 were four articles in their blog<sup>38</sup> on website of Denník N. One of them was trying to create connection between the murder of journalist Ján Kuciak and Islam. Second article came after the murder of filipino christian Henry in Bratislava in 2018. His murder caused made to call for more tolerance and acceptance of foreigners and the article reminded the readers that while being open is good in general, it's not a good idea when it comes to Islam and Muslims. Third article dealt with the model of minaret build on music festival Pohoda two years earlier and last one was condemning UN's Compact on Migration.

## Public attitude towards Muslims

Public polls conducted in Slovakia over the years show a majority of long term negative perception of Muslims. The local organization Network media service (NMS) published in December 2009 a poll according to which 55% of Slovak citizens are against the construction of any islamic prayer house in Slovakia.<sup>39</sup> In February 2012, Open Society Foundation made research on Public Opinion on the Right-Wing Extremism. Part of the research focused on attitude of Slovaks towards so called "new minorities" and namely Muslims. It turned out that as of February 2012 almost 70% of respondents partly or completely disagreed with the statement that state

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<sup>37</sup>Facebook: Iveta Michalikova

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/ludova.strana.nase.slovensko/permalink/2279484065614973/> (accessed on 23/11/2018)

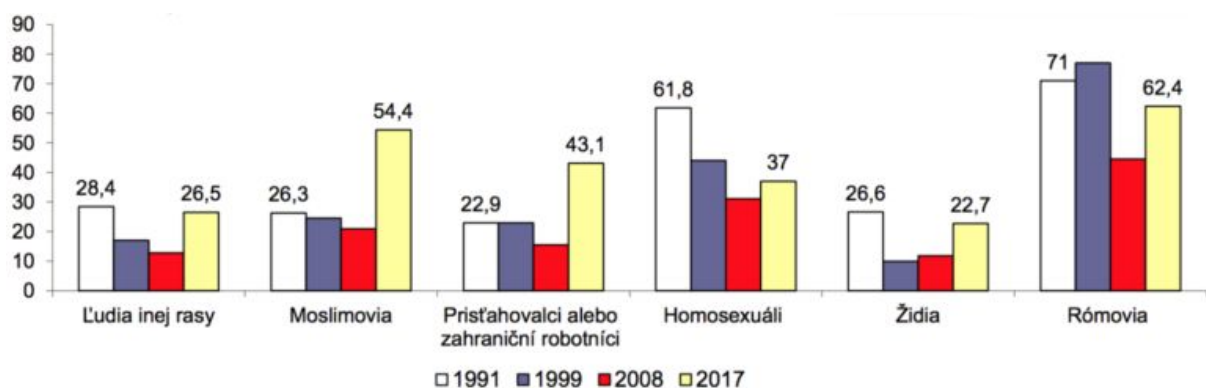
<sup>38</sup>Blog of CSPI, Denník N <https://dennikn.sk/autor/cspi-sr/> (accessed on 27/11/2018)

<sup>39</sup>Research: Czechs and Slovaks do not want neither minarets nor mosques

<http://www.sme.sk/c/5158055/prieskum-cesi-a-slovaci-nechcu-ani-minarety-ani-mesity.html> (accessed on 19/08/2013)

should allow Muslims to practice their religion and 50,5% of them thought that state should ban construction of any islamic religious and cultural centers in Slovakia.<sup>40</sup>

In December 2017 Slovak Academy of Science (SAV) published a 4th set of data of poll called “Our European Values 2017”<sup>41</sup>. Among other things the respondents were asked whom of the 6 groups they would not want as a neighbour: People of other race, Muslims, immigrants or foreign workers, homosexuals, Jews or Roma. The same poll was done in years 1991, 1999 and 2008. While between years 1991 and 2008 the number of those who chose Muslims was decreasing from 26% in 1991 to approximately 20% in 2008, the year of 2017 showed radical increase with 54,4% of respondents reporting that they would not want a Muslim as a neighbour. The sudden increase can be most likely related to the so called refugee crisis and a way it was abused for domestic political agenda.



In September 2018, the brand Absolut ran a campaign on social media and on posters featuring black woman wearing traditional slovak dress and revealing to be a slovak national. The brand also ordered public polls on certain issues and made the results available to public. Of 1000 respondents 80% would not want a black person or person from Asia in their family while 89% would not want an Arab in their family. Less than half of respondents, would want to be a friend with an Arab and only one third of them would invite an Arab to a party.<sup>42</sup>

## Civil Society and Political Initiatives to Counter Islamophobia

Various human rights organizations and a large part of civil society in general are very supportive when Muslims are victims of hate speech. For example, in his speech for press on 7th of

<sup>40</sup>Open Society Foundation – Public Opinion on the Right-Wing Extremism, 2012

[http://www.cvek.sk/uploaded/files/vyskumna\\_sprava.pdf](http://www.cvek.sk/uploaded/files/vyskumna_sprava.pdf), p. 37-39 (accessed on 17/05/2014)

<sup>41</sup>Slovak Academy of Science <http://www.sociologia.sav.sk/podujatia.php?id=2786&r=1> (accessed on 20/11/2018)

<sup>42</sup>SME.sk

<https://fici.sme.sk/c/20915833/cudzincov-nehceme-v-rodine-ani-na-party-slovaci-maju-najvacsi-problem-s-arabmi.html> (accessed on 22/11/2018)

January 2016 in the aftermath of sexual assaults in Cologne allegedly conducted by migrants from Africa and Middle East former Prime Minister Róbert Fico said: “We will never make a voluntary decision that would lead to formation of a united Muslim community in Slovakia.”<sup>43</sup> The statement was repeated several times during the speech and the Prime Minister was later found to pay for online advertisement prior to the general elections that reads: “R. Fico: We have to prevent formation of a united Muslim community in Slovakia.”<sup>44</sup> Soon after this statement various Slovak NGOs<sup>45</sup> stood up to show support for Slovak Muslims. Some of them issued their own statements and other signed the joint letter “Letter of Support for Islamic Foundation in Slovakia and Muslim Community”. It was signed by 12 non-governmental organizations and more than 500 people signed it online during following days.

Similar situation occurred in 2018 when on the 20th of January 2018 in a national radio session Mr. Fico said that tourism in Slovakia is growing, because there are no explosions, there they won't be bothered by Muslims in streets.” Three days later, the newspaper SME published column by slovak evangelical priest Ondrej Prostredník titled “You insulted my friend, mr. Prime Minister”. Mr. Prostredník in his column described his friendship with head of Islamic Foundation in Slovakia Mohamad Safwan Hasna and how the Prime Minister's words were generalizing and painful to many. Around the same time, Mr. Prostredník with several other representatives of civil society, media, and religions issued an open letter titled “Mr. Prime Minister, do not insult people for their religion!”<sup>46</sup> The statement had eight signatories, over 50 people joined the statement right after and 388 people signed it as on online petition.<sup>47</sup> Among signatories were current and former university teachers, religious leaders, politicians, activists and experts.

In order to counter islamophobia in Slovakia members of civil society not only react on cases that already happened but also offer their own constructive narrative of how the coexistence with Muslims may look like. On 9th of June 2018, the 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. Among the speakers were the chairman of Slovak Bishop's Conference Anton Ziolkovský, dean at Evangelical Lutheran Theological Faculty at Comenius University in Bratislava František Ábel, former Minister of Foreign Affairs Pavol Demeš and ambassador of the Republic of Indonesia in Slovakia H. E. Adiyatwidi Adiwoso Asmady. People from various ethnic

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<sup>43</sup>The Independent: Slovakian Prime Minister warns country will stop Muslim refugees from entering <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/slovakia-wants-to-stop-muslim-migrants-from-entering-a6803811.html> (accessed on 27/01/2016)

<sup>44</sup>Denník N: Fico pay for his words about Muslims to be seen <https://dennikn.sk/340650/fico-plati-aby-slova-moslimoch-vidno/> (accessed on 27/01/2016)

<sup>45</sup>ISLAMONLINE.sk: Slovaks stand up for Muslims. They are writing emails, taking pictures with kebabs and sign letter of support <http://www.islamonline.sk/2016/01/slovaci-sa-zastavaju-muslimov-pisu-e-maily-fotia-sa-s-kebabmi-a-podpisuju-podporny-list/> (accessed on 27/01/2016)

<sup>46</sup>Týždeň.sk <https://www.tyzden.sk/politika/45506/pan-premier-neurazajte-ludi-pre-ich-nabozenstvo/> (accessed on 25/11/2018)

<sup>47</sup>Changenet.sk <http://www.changenet.sk/?section=kampane&x=946749> (accessed on 25/11/2018)

and religious backgrounds shared a meal during this important islamic month showing that they can not only live, but also share pleasant experiences and enrich each other with slovak Muslims.<sup>48</sup>

Another similar activity was organized : an interfaith tour tin high schools in various cities around Slovakia in different times of the year. I, Christian and Jewish religious leaders and one moderator came to schools, sat with students in circles and discussed different topics that students would wonder about.<sup>49</sup> In a similar manner the same group arranged workshops about the difficulties that teachers in Slovakia might face when teaching values of intercultural and interfaith.

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<sup>48</sup>ISLAMONLINE.sk

<http://www.islamonline.sk/2018/06/duhovni-lidri-a-osobnosti-vecerali-cez-ramadan-so-slovenskymi-muslimami/>  
(accessed on 25/11/2018)

<sup>49</sup>Denník N <https://dennikn.sk/1006584/zisli-sa-na-diskusiach-zid-moslim-a-krestan-slovenska-realita-nie-vtip/>  
(accessed on 25/11/2018)

## Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

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 and various statements of civil society representatives). Hate speech of high profile figures is however fueling the anti-Muslim emotions present in the society. This is especially the case in Slovakia where the actual size of Muslim population is so small that most people in the country have never even seen one. They have no opportunity to confront what they hear from their leaders with their personal experiences. It is an unfavourable situation where large source of anti-Muslim emotions comes from a source (high profile political figures) that civil society has no direct impact on. Thus, rather than solving the cause it has to deal with solving only the effects.

This is being done in various ways. Some internet projects such as ISLAMONLINE.sk are offering proper information about Islam and Muslims, and trying to combat misconceptions and stereotypes. As for hateful comments on social media, strong “Islam and Muslim positive” internet community sometimes argue with those individuals in comments sections without the need for much intervention from us. All comments below our content are 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 directly, providing alternative sources of informations and cultivating our own internet communities that can react and “fight back” aggressive social media comments and posts.

Apart from the online sphere anti-Muslim hatred can be combated with positive examples and with activities where people around the country actually see and talk to real Muslims. This is also already happening, but such activities are expensive and time consuming, their impact is limited by the available budget and number of people who can participate.

In order to fight anti-Muslim sentiment in society efforts on various levels have to begin or be increased. Human rights organisations and international bodies including EU, UN and OSCE should continue to remind public figures in Slovakia that hate speech goes against the values of these international bodies and that Slovakia agreed to adhere to these values when it joined them. At the same time, there needs to be more support for such activities of civil society in Slovakia that monitor cases related to islamophobia, analyze them and react upon them, but also such activities that counter anti-Muslim sentiments with constructive narrative giving positive examples of coexistence that is mutually beneficial.

## Chronology

Chronological list of all cases of hate speech against Islam and Muslims and all verbal and physical attacks in 2018.

- **17/01/2018:** Far-right party Kotleba – LS NS published a promotional video displaying a groups of criminals kidnaping a woman accompanied by commentary of several members of LS NS talking in populist manner about the dangers of migration.
- **20/01/2018:** Prime Minister Róbert Fico said in a national radio session that tourism in Slovakia is growing, because „there are no explosions, there they won’t be bothered by Muslims in streets.”
- **29/01/2018:** Group of students from Vienna visited the prayer room of Islamic Foundation in Slovakia. One of the students reported that on the way to the prayer room someone on the street shouted “Allah Akbar” at her.
- **22/02/2018:** Prime Minister Robert Fico said that the Istanbul Convention should have sent a signal to the Muslim immigrants not to treat women as “second-class beings”. He also repeated that he is “in principle against creation of united Muslim communities in Slovakia.”
- **07/04/2018:** Chairman of Slovak Bishop’s Conference Slovakia Anton Ziolkovský published Facebook status where he claimed that “it is also constantly confirmed that the more Muslims there are in the state, the greater threat they represent to security and democracy.”
- **28/05/2018:** MP of far-right party Kotleba – LS NS Stanislav Mizík said in National Assembly that who oppose their proposed anti-abortion law are “protectors of islamic invaders in Europe” and he added that also other new laws are needed in order to protect Europe from turning into caliphate.
- **07/06/2018:** Head of Slovak National Assembly Andrej Danko said during speech in the National Assembly of Serbia that both Serbs and Slovak are proud nations who were able to resist “long muslim occupation, when Turks invaded Europe” and reminded that Serbs were “the first ones who protected “our religion, values and culture.”
- **August 2018:** Unknown man pushed Muslim woman from Iraq living in Bratislava from behind in a way that almost knocked her out of her feet. He asked: “Are you an Arab? Where did you came from? What are you doing here?” The man left after she said she will call police.
- **Summer 2018:** Somali woman in Bratislava was attacked twice within couple of days. At first her and her 6-years old child were victims of aggressive and vulgar shouting. Couple of days later someone pushed her 6-years old child on the street.
- **Summer 2018:** During summer camp of People’s youth, youth organisation of far-right party LS NS – Kotleba, kids were having lectures on various topics, for example about “Muslim hordes,” who for many years “occupied and terrorized large part of Slovakia.”

- **29/09/2018:** Woman in shopping mall in Bratislava was taking photos of another woman apparently wearing muslim face veil (burqa). It is apparent from the photos that the woman in veil didn't like being photographed. Photos were posted in public Facebook group and the discussion under the post was full of hateful comments.
- **09/11/2018:** Kotleba – LS NS organized gathering in Humenné criticizing that will house 250 refugees for six months. “Are these [male immigrants] going to integrate here?... Don't you want to live in a safe country in the future?... We Slovaks will not let our land be stolen and overwhelmed by foreigners,” screamed party's MP Milan Mazúrek.
- **18/11/2018:** Head of coalition party Smer-SD Róbert Fico uploaded video on Facebook where he claims that people coming to Europe are “increasing the risk of terrorism and fundamentally jeopardize the European way of life and the civilization, cultural, religious roots of our continent.”
- **27/11/2018:** The MP of LS NS – Kotleba ms. Natália Grausová said during the debate in National Assembly that newly approved “definition of antisemitism was created and approved only one year after the beginning of Muslim invasion to the states of European Union.” She added that the real purpose of multicultural policy “is the global dominance of Islam.”