

REPORT:

ISLAMOPHOBIA

IN SLOVAKIA

2020

by THE 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 plays the role of an information center for Muslims visiting in Slovakia. While working with the Muslim community, the Islamic Foundation in Slovakia also fosters the relationships between the Muslim minority and the Slovak majority. It offers lectures at 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 an interfaith dialogue in the context of a diverse society. It participates in various inter-religious activities with Christian, Jewish and other religious communities.

In order to establish friendly relationships with the Slovak majority, the Islamic Foundation in Slovakia has to fight various misconceptions and conspiracy theories about Islam, Muslims and currently especially migrants and refugees of Muslim background. In order to do so, it monitors media outlets, 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 the Muslim community, it is also able to collect data directly from local Muslims, who aren't always willing to talk about their experiences to the public authorities or the media.

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Foreword

Since the outbreak of so called “migration crisis” in 2015 and 2016, a large portion of islamophobic incidents is in some way related to migration. Many public figures often use the word “migrant” almost as a synonym to “Muslim”. According to them, migrants bring new culture, new religion and security risks. Therefore, this report focuses heavily on the discourse about migration, even when it is not directly clear whether the statement should be flagged as islamophobic or xenophobic in general.

While islamophobic tendencies in Slovakia in 2020 were less frequent compared to the time when the migration crisis in Europe was at its peak, they were still more common than in the years prior to the crisis. The most common was, once again, the anti-Muslim speech from politicians, usually related to migration to Western Europe.

Slovak politics and society, just like in previous years, were in 2020 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 tendencies will prevail.

Executive summary

The number of cases of anti-Muslim hate speech has decreased in 2020 compared to previous years and the cases were almost exclusively related to the February parliamentary election. Just like in previous years, it was mainly related to migration where a number of political parties tried their best to tap into the anti-refugee sentiment that was on the rise during the refugee crisis a couple of years ago.

Apart from parliamentary elections, there were only a couple of statements throughout the year and even those were attributed mostly to state officials rather than political figures.

This time, there were no reported physical or verbal attacks on Muslims or their properties that we are aware of. One of the reasons might be the COVID-19 outbreak, which resulted in a significant decrease of social interaction in public space. Unreported cases might still have happened even during this time.

Muslims in Slovakia

It is difficult to estimate the exact number of Muslims in Slovakia because of the absence of serious statistics. According to our judgment, the estimated number of Muslims to this day is approximately 5,000. We believe that by the end of 2021 we will have more precise figures thanks to the national census. For the first time in Slovak history, the national census of 2021 allows people to explicitly choose Islam as their religion in its census form. Moreover, the census is mandatory for all people residing in Slovakia including those with various forms of temporary residence. The results will bring more representative data about the actual size of the Muslim community in Slovakia.

Muslims in Slovakia vary on the ethnic basis with the relative majority of Arabs. Other main ethnic groups are Albanians, Bosnians and Afghans. In fewer numbers there are Turks, Pakistanis, as well as Muslims from the former USSR and up to several hundreds of Slovak converts. There are slightly more males than females with the exception of converts, who are slightly dominated by women.

While it is important to avoid generalisation, economic and social status of some of the ethnic groups can be characterized as following: As for the Arabs, for the most part they are either students, university graduates or entrepreneurs, while Albanians are working mostly in gastronomy and confectionery. Quite a large portion of Afghans are doctors or engineers who graduated from universities in Slovakia. This is due to a former bilateral treaty between Slovakia and Afghanistan that resulted in a significant number of Afghan high school students coming to Slovakia in the 80s of the 20th century. Many of them continued with their college studies and remained in Slovakia ever since. In recent years there is also a growing group of Afghan refugees. Bosnians work often as traders and entrepreneurs.

Muslims live in all parts of Slovakia but their main concentration is in the capital city of Bratislava, the second largest community is in the city of Kosice and smaller but noteworthy communities are in Nitra, Levice, Trnava, Martin or Piestany. Due to Slovakia's government's position since the beginning of the refugee crisis in 2015, the influx of refugees to Europe did not have any significant 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 the following years such cases were still present, but their frequency has decreased.

In 2020 the topic of migration was not very important for Slovak political discourse. It received some attention in campaigns of political parties prior to the general election in early 2020. The most frequent expressions were from the far-right party LSNS and its partners, followed by then governing party Smer.

Politics

“[Immigrants would] threaten the safety of Slovak citizens and perhaps create Muslim communities that would completely change the character of the state.”

Former prime minister Róbert Fico’s speech prior to general election in 2020

In the election to The National Assembly in March 2016, the far-right party LSNS won 14 seats in the Assembly. While in opposition, their MPs are often extremely outspoken in any topic related to Muslims, Islam and migration. Some examples of their speech presented in the National Assembly since 2016 include:

- “Islam has no place in Slovakia” (Natália Grausová, LSNS),
- “Islam is more than just a religion, it is cruel, disgusting and inhuman political system” (Milan Mazúrek, LSNS),
- “Every European, Christian or atheist, has to fear this satanic-pedophile creation of devil, which is the religion of Islam“ (Stanislav Mizík, LSNS)
- “Everything else, all of these idols, they are for Christians only daemons“ (Marián Kotleba, the head of LSNS)¹.

Unsurprisingly, LSNS used hatred towards Muslims as a mobilising factor in their pre-election campaign in late 2019 and early 2020. In December 2019 the head of LSNS Marián Kotleba spoke at a meeting with his supporters in the town of Vráble. Among other things, he claimed that various West European cities banned Christmas tree to avoid “offending non-christian

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

citizens” and claimed that his party won’t allow “Slovakia to turn into multicultural piggery”². Members of LSNS also went to United Kingdom and recorded prejudicial video about local Muslim communities. On January 31, 2020 the vice-president of LSNS at the time and the MP of the European parliament Milan Uhrík spoke at the gathering in the city of Trnava. Among other things he said: „We shall not let Slovakia to become a Muslim country. It is a Christian country!“ On February 26, 2020 LSNS published the video from London. Video featured prejudicial „interviews“ with Slovaks living in London who described, how Muslim population supposedly significantly increased in the last couple of decades. It portrayed Muslim shops, restaurants and black people or women in hijab on the streets accompanied by Arabic music in the background.³ The election ended up basically the same for LSNS as in 2016 with 7,97% of votes (in 2016 it was 8,04%) but thanks to fewer parties in the National Assembly, they were assigned 17 instead of 14 seats.

While in the past he was not very interested in the topic, former prime minister Robert Fico started to spread stereotypes and hate speech against Muslims around the so-called migration crisis in early 2015. Some of his statements over the last three years include:

- “We could hardly tolerate that 300-400 thousand Muslims would come here and start to build their mosques”⁴,
- “We are monitoring every single Muslim, who is currently present in the territory of Slovakia”⁵,
- “We have to prevent the formation of a united Muslim community in Slovakia”⁶
- “Islam has no place in Slovakia”⁷.

Robert Fico resigned the post of prime minister in 2018. Just like in the case of LSNS, he and his party Smer-SD returned to the topic of Islam and Muslims prior the general election of 2020. Several statements from his party appeared in late 2019. As part of his campaign, Fico published promotional videos listing achievements of his government during previous years. In one of them a narrator said: “While we were protecting Slovakia from immigrants, the opposition wasted no time and argued with each other”⁸. The other video consists of various statements by

² YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O8gO_n-tUis&feature=emb_title (accessed on 23/12/2019)

³ London: The city defeated by immigrants: <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=198339591276851> (accessed on 19/05/2021)

⁴ 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 on 1/3/2015)

⁵ TA3: Security of Slovakia: <http://www.ta3.com/clanok/1072856/bezpecnost-slovenska.html> (accessed on 27/01/2016)

⁶ 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)

⁷ 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)

⁸ Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/robertficosk/videos/2766299806769466/> (accessed on 26/12/2019)

different people. One of them says: “I want a positive change.” And another couple adds: “That will strengthen our borders and protect us from dangerous immigrants.”⁹

In 2020 several more videos followed. Some videos claimed that voting for opposition parties means voting for „tens of thousands of immigrants“¹⁰ or even „hundreds of thousands of immigrants“.¹¹ In a different video Fico argues that by letting hundreds or thousands of immigrants in Slovakia, this would „threaten the safety of Slovak citizens and perhaps create Muslim communities that would completely change the character of the state.“¹² In a similar video he said that his political opponent, former president Andrej Kiska wants to bring „thousands of immigrants, especially Muslims, feed them here and give them money.“ Noteworthy is the use of the word „feed them“ where he used Slovak word not used for humans but usually for farm animals.¹³ In yet another video he said: „I’m not going to pay 30-year-old men, Muslims, who are coming here to find a job.“¹⁴ There were other promotional videos and pictures of Smer-SD suggesting that immigrants would bring viruses¹⁵ that their presence would mean smaller pensions for seniors¹⁶, no free lunches for Slovak kids in schools¹⁷ or that instead of 10.000 immigrants we could have 3.000 more doctors¹⁸. Another suggestive video was published on February 20, 2020. Several members of Smer-SD traveled to Sweden and recorded black people and shared stories about various attacks of migrants. At one point the person in the video says: „You will never learn from official statistics that most of these attacks were done by Muslim immigrants.“¹⁹ It is obvious that words Muslims and migrants are used interchangeably by political or state officials. As mentioned in the foreword, our monitoring had to include both because of the assumption that it created in public discourse. In fact, some of the promotional videos were so offensive that Google decided to block them, apparently on the basis of inciting hatred.²⁰

Even this kind of sentimental campaign did not save Smer-SD from losing votes from its former electoral base, scoring with one of its worst electoral results in years.

⁹ Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/robertficosk/videos/752466165233899> (accessed on 26/12/2019)

¹⁰ Responsible change versus irresponsible change: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QdtsGmUETeg> (accessed on 19/05/2021).

¹¹ Facebook: This will happen to Slovakia while opposition will be arguing: <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=1101418923578775> (accessed on 19/05/2021)

¹² Facebook: I challenge you Mr. Kiska <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=231216984542397> (accessed on 19/05/2021)

¹³ Facebook: What are you afraid of Mr. Kiska? <https://www.facebook.com/robertficosk/videos/1239532356232598> (accessed on 19/05/2021)

¹⁴ Facebook: Dangerous policy of West European countries <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=298318284458863> (accessed on 19/05/2021)

¹⁵ Facebook <https://www.facebook.com/robertficosk/videos/208487383528645/> (accessed on 19/05/2021)

¹⁶ Facebook <https://www.facebook.com/robertficosk/photos/a.732950430222315/1314123308771688/> (accessed on 19/05/2021)

¹⁷ Facebook <https://www.facebook.com/robertficosk/posts/1312007785649907> (accessed on 19/05/2021)

¹⁸ Facebook <https://www.facebook.com/smersd/posts/3725686887471273> (accessed on 19/05/2021)

¹⁹ Facebook: We do not want NO-GO zones in Slovakia <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=1030425490670958> (accessed on 20/05/2021)

²⁰ HN Online: Google has blocked some of Smer-SD’s ads, apparently due to inciting hatred <https://hnonline.sk/parlamentne-volby-2020/2098907-google-zablokoval-niektore-reklamy-smeru-zrejme-kvoli-podne-covaniu-nenavisti> (accessed on 20/05/2021).

Another politician with long history of anti-Muslim hatespeech is the head of liberal Freedom and Solidarity (SaS) party Richard Sulík. On May 28, 2015 acting as MP of European Parliament at the time, Richard Sulík wrote blogpost where he was pointing out the cultural differences between European and Muslim culture. He suggested his disapproval of refugees settling in Slovakia on the grounds of their Muslim faith. In his words: „Muslims do not share the same values as Christians, which I say while myself being atheist... Now the question is why those refugees who are Muslims do not run to Saudi Arabia instead.“²¹ In the interview with Slovak newspaper SME on August 2016 Sulík said that Islam is not compatible with European culture and defended his position further.²² In the past, he used to speak out against Islam also on his Facebook page.²³ On October 27, 2016 Sulík wrote controversial article²⁴ about the life of the Prophet of Islam. As a reference he used a book of an infamous American anti-Muslim activist Bill Warner. Three Slovak academics and experts on Islam issued counter-article where they refuted his positions.²⁵ On the same website as the original article, a university teacher and political scientist Jozef Lenč²⁶ published yet another article refuting these claims. This was „contra-refuted“ by a Slovak branch of Bill Warner’s institute Center for Study of Political Islam²⁷ (CSPI). The response from Richard Sulík on his Facebook profile is especially noteworthy²⁸. Sulík shared the article of CSPI together with a status, in which he described what he called an „almost stoning“ of his person by Jozef Lenč. As a headline for his status he chose the phrase: „Poturčenec horší od Turka“ („Turkognized“ worse than Turk). This old Slovak saying refers to the era of Ottoman presence in the south parts of Slovakia, when some of the local males were being taken to the Ottoman army in a young age, converted to Islam, trained and then fought as a special forces (Janissaries) on the side of Ottomans. It is publicly known fact that Jozef Lenč is a Slovak Muslim convert and the saying is meant to be offensive, portraying him as someone who betrayed his nation by changing his religion.

Prior to the general election in 2020 Sulík returned to his anti-Muslim agenda once again. In a blog for Denník N he wrote: „We perceive Islam as incompatible with our culture. While we live by the principle of "all are equal," in Islam a man is more than a woman and believer is far more

²¹ Richard Sulík: Seven NO to redistribution of refugees

<https://dennikn.sk/blog/sedem-krat-nie-k-uteceneckym-kvotam/> (accessed 4/6/2015)

²² SME: Sulík: Islam is not compatible with our culture just like nazism

<http://domov.sme.sk/c/20246047/sulik-islam-nie-je-kompatibilny-s-nasou-kulturou-rovnako-ako-nacizmus.html> (accessed 22/9/2016)

²³ Facebook page of Richard Sulík: <https://www.facebook.com/RichardSulik/> (accessed 22/9/2016)

²⁴ The Life of Muhamamd: <https://dennikn.sk/594122/mohamedov-zivot/> (2/11/2016)

²⁵ Is Islam mistaken ideology and are Muslims its victims?

<https://dennikn.sk/596946/je-islam-zhubna-ideologia-a-su-muslimovia-jej-obete/> (2/11/2016)

²⁶ Denník N: Život Mohameda podľa „imáma“ Sulíka

<https://dennikn.sk/595969/zivot-muhammada-podla-imama-sulika/?ref=top> (15/12/2016)

²⁷ Denník N: Stretnú sa Sulík, Lenč a Mohamed...

<https://dennikn.sk/blog/stretnu-sa-sulik-lenc-a-mohamed/#comments> (15/12/2016)

²⁸ Facebook: Richard Sulík <https://www.facebook.com/RichardSulik/posts/1180494605363599> (15/12/2016)

than unbeliever. Pedophilia, polygamy, and many other rules are in complete violation of our rules.”²⁹

The general election finally took place on February 29, 2020 and resulted in a new government formed entirely of former opposition parties – Ordinary People (OLaNO), We Are Family (Sme rodina), Freedom and Solidarity (SaS), and For the People (Za ľudí) with the leader of OLaNO Igor Matovič as prime minister. Once the election took place, Muslims once again became an uninteresting topic for politicians with only a couple of exceptions.

On May 15, 2020 MP for OLaNO Richard Vašečka gave an interview for SME, where he was asked whether he would support construction of mosque in Slovakia. He argued that he would not like it due to security reasons.³⁰

State Institutions

“He was shouting Allah Akbar, which is a phrase used by terrorists.”
Jana Maškarová, First Vice President
of the Police Force

Several representatives of state institutions had comments that are worthy of mention. They are not elected representatives, we do not include them in the previous “Politics” section.

In July 2020 there was a case when a person (not Muslim) was shouting Allah Akbar on the street while holding a knife. The intervention of police was criticized by some as too heavy considering the actual threat the man was posing. In reaction to this criticism the vice president of Police Jana Maškarová said on July 10, 2020 that „he was shouting Allah Akbar, which is a phrase used by terrorists.”³¹ Muslim community found such prejudicial statement problematic, because Allah Akbar is a phrase that Muslims use in their prayers thus all the Muslims use it. The police vice president was however giving an impression that whenever someone says this phrase he might be considered a terrorist.

Also on July 10, 2020, news emerged that the Minister of Social Affairs and Family Milan Krajniak (Sme rodina) nominated a new head of the Institute for the research for work and family. The new director is Roman Joch, citizen of Czech republic known for his conservative and namely anti-Muslim statements. To this date he did not publish or perform any anti-Muslim statements or actions in his new position.

²⁹ Denník N: <https://dennikn.sk/blog/1743283/niekolko-rad-od-starejsieho-k-zostavovaniu-vlady/?ref=list> (20/05/2021).

³⁰ YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o5cz_mNhLmM&t=1113s (accessed on 29/05/2021)

³¹ SME.sk <https://domov.sme.sk/c/22443337/policajti-sa-pochvalili-zasahom-pokazilo-im-to-video.html> (accessed 20/05/2021)

Legal System

„...We tightened the registration of new churches in order to stop islamisation.“

Štefan Zelník (SNS) in an interview
for TA3, 2020

According to Slovak legislation every religious community that wants to have the same rights as now recognized religious communities in Slovakia (such as Catholic or Orthodox church, Jewish religious community etc.) has to fulfill a 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.

The lack of registration is caused especially by – in comparison with other EU member states – unusually strict law stating the requirements for the religious community before applying for recognition by the state. There used to be theoretical chances to achieve the registration until 2007. In this year, the government passed a novelization of the law that deals with the requirements for state registration of 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 nor 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.

As if the law wasn't strict enough already, in November 2016 an amendment passed in the National Assembly lifted the quota from 20.000 to 50.000 signatures. 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.³² His party did well in the election in 2016 and formed a government with two other parties. Danko did actually propose the amendment together with a few other MPs and the law was passed by vote.³³ The president of Slovak republic Andrej Kiska refused to sign the amendment, which forced the National Assembly to vote on it once again. The definitive vote happened in early 2017 and the amendment was approved once again.

In 2020 it was once again confirmed that the intention of SNS party to pass the law was motivated by the anti-Muslim sentiment. Štefan Zelník (member of SNS) said in TA3: „We put a stop to migration and we tightened the registration of new churches in order to stop islamisation.“

³⁴

The current registration law is repeatedly mentioned in the International Religious Freedom Report conducted annually by the U. S. Department of State.³⁵ 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 account or entering into a contract,” states the International Religious Freedom Report in Slovak Republic 2017 by U. S. Department of State.³⁶ “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.

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 by Slovak authorities to be a hate crime against Muslims in 2020. We are also not aware of any physical or verbal attacks targeting Muslim individuals in the year of 2020. It is worth noting that social interaction as such was greatly limited throughout the

³²ISLAMONLINE.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)

³³ 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 (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-fi-co-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)

³⁴ TA3: <https://www.ta3.com/clanok/1176357/duel-v-teme-dna-zelnik-proti-cernegovi.html> (accessed on 20/05/2021)

³⁵United 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)

³⁶United 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)

majority of 2020 due to ongoing COVID-19 restrictions, rather than to any notable shift in perception of Muslims in the society. Simply put, there were less opportunities for social interaction in person thus less opportunities for physical or verbal attacks in person.

Public attitude towards Muslims

There was no specific research on Muslims in 2020, but there was a research on attitude towards foreigners which gives some idea about how the society perceives “the others”. In September 2020 Center for research of ethnicity and culture conducted research about the views of people in Slovak republic towards migrants. It turned out that even though migration is not in the center of public discourse anymore, there is still a high level of animosity towards migrants in the society. More than half (55%) of respondents said they intentionally avoid interaction with foreigners. Almost every second person considers Slovak culture to be superior to others. According to more than 80% of respondents, a foreigner has to learn Slovak language and history if s/he wants to be accepted by society. Over two thirds think that the state should only support immigration of foreigners with high qualifications (such as doctors) and are from „culturally close countries“. Approximately half of people think that foreigners are taking jobs from Slovaks. Only approximately one fifth of the respondents think that foreigners can bring economic or social benefits to the country.

The research did however also have some questions that are directly related to our report. One third of people think that other than Christian religions should not be allowed in the country. Over 50% think that they should be allowed but only as long as they would be practised in private. Only less than one fifth thinks that religions should be permitted regardless of how each of them is practised. The research also showed that when people are talking about non-Christian religions, they mostly imagine Islam. According to 43% of respondents, Islam is a dangerous religion and should not be allowed in Slovakia. Another one third thinks that Islam is too different from Christianity and one should beware of Muslims. People feel negative emotions when they hear the word „Muslim family“ (64%) or „refugee from Syria“ (68%).

Civil Society and Political Initiatives to Counter Islamophobia

In order to counter islamophobia in Slovakia, members of civil society not only react to cases that have already happened but also offer their own constructive narrative of how coexistence with Muslims may look like.

Interfaith project that aims among other things to counter islamophobia and bias against other religions was an ongoing activity throughout the year 2020. Due to restrictions related to COVID-19 pandemic the activities were mostly online. Throughout the year Muslim imam,

Jewish rabbi and Christian priest met 3 times and had discussion about coexistence among religions.

Typically, a festive dinner during the fasting month Ramadan has a positive effect on the perception of Islam and Muslims. Muslims shared their dinner with personalities from various fields of public life including Jewish, Catholic and Protestant religious leaders, diplomats, representatives of state and NGOs. Each of them delivered a speech where they spoke about their experience with Muslim community or multireligious environment. This year, due to COVID-19 pandemic, the event took place in an online space.³⁷ Religious leaders from different denominations signed a joint statement in the aftermath of the terrorist attack in Vienna on November 3, 2021.³⁸ The following day they met in a live streamed online discussion where they debated on the same topic.³⁹

³⁷ Facebook: Online iftar <https://www.facebook.com/211a508012628/videos/2740972622696904/> (accessed on 20/05/2021)

³⁸ Facebook: Statement <https://www.facebook.com/IslamOnline.sk/photos/a.10151879871617629/10158741165832629/> (accessed on 20/05/2021)

³⁹ Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/events/294856054856786/> (accessed on 20/05/2021)

Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

During the last two years we saw a decrease in the frequency of anti-Muslim hate speech from politicians. Unlike in 2018, when almost all of the parties in National Assembly had someone speaking out against Islam or Muslims, in 2019 and 2020 the statements came mostly from LS NS and Smer-SD. It is also worth noting that no new law that could be connected to Islam or Muslims was proposed in the National Assembly in 2019 and 2020, unlike in previous two years.

Most of the cases where we could see connection to Islam or Muslims came from campaigns prior to the parliamentary election in February 2020 with the frequency of those statements increasing after it. The parliamentary election resulted in a complete change of power with no political party being present in both - the former and the current government. Representatives of two of the new parties have had previous cases of islamophobia in the past – statements of the head of SaS Richald Sulík and statements of several members of Sme rodina. However no specific anti-Muslim policy was proposed in 2020, though this can also be attributed to the fact that government was busy coping with the impact of COVID-19 crisis.

COVID-19 situation might have been the reason behind no physical attacks on Muslims or their properties this year and behind less hate crimes in general. It can be seen in Chronology below that the last recorded event is from July 2020.

For the time being the most successful ways of combating islamophobia are local activities, such as the Islamic Foundation's cultural center Cordoba that serves as an information hub for Muslims and non-Muslims, offers lectures and excursions for students and others interested in learning more about Muslims living in the country with them. Very effective are also ongoing interfaith activities, especially the project called "Imam, Rabbi and Priest Meet Together", where the spiritual leaders of these religions meet in schools or public spaces and discuss with students or with the public about tolerance and mutual understanding, although during most of 2020 this was only possible in a limited scope and online.

Building on what works well we believe that supporting civic society in combating anti-Muslim sentiment together with thorough monitoring of the situation (opinion polls, cases of hate crimes) is the way forward. We see no imminent hope for a change in the most visible cases of discrimination of Muslims, which is the anti-Muslim law of registration of religious communities.

Recognition of Muslim community on a national and local level is often limited by high representatives of the state, municipalities or cities and towns. This can be seen on a number of occasions, for example during religious holidays, when we see them regularly congratulating other religious communities but not Muslims. This is true also for the communities of similar size as Muslim community.

Chronology

Chronological list of all cases of hate speech against Islam and Muslims and all verbal and physical attacks in 2020:

- **31/01/2020:** MP of European parliament Milan Uhrík spoke at the gathering in the city of Trnava. Among other things he said: „We shall not let Slovakia to become muslim country. It is christian country!“
- **26/02/2020:** LSNS published suggestive video from London. Video features suggestive „interviews“ with Slovaks living in London who describe, how Muslim population supposedly significantly increased in last couple of decades portrays Muslim shops, restaurants and black people or women in hijab on the streets.
- **January 2020:** Smer-SD publishes claims that voting for opposition parties means voting for „tens of thousands of immigrants“ or even „hundreds of thousands of immigrants“.
- **January 2020:** Róbert Fico argues that should Slovakia let in hundreds or thousands of immigrants, they would „threaten the safety of Slovak citizens and perhaps create Muslim communities that would completely transform the character of the state.“
- **January 2020:** Róbert Fico says that his political opponent, former president Andrej Kiska wants to bring „thousands of immigrants, especially Muslims, feed them here and give them money.“ Noteworthy is also the use of the word „feed them“.
- **January 2020:** Róbert Fico says: „I’m not going to pay 30-year-old men, Muslims, who are coming here to find a job.“
- **20/02/2020:** Several members of Smer-SD traveled to Sweden and recorded suggestive pictures of black people and shared stories about various attacks of migrants. At one point the person in video says: „You will never learn from official statistics that most of these attacks were done by Muslim immigrants.“
- **04/02/2020:** Richard Sulík (SaS) in a blog on Denník N he wrote: „We perceive Islam as incompatible with our culture. While we live by the principle of "all are equal," in Islam a man is more than a woman and believer is far more than unbeliever. Pedophilia, polygamy, and many other rules are in complete violation of our rules.“
- **16/02/2020:** It was once again confirmed that the intention of SNS party to pass the law was motivated by the anti-Muslim sentiment. Member of SNS said in TA3: „We put a stop to migration and we tightened the registration of new churches in order to stop islamisation.“
- **15/05/2020:** MP for OLaNO Richard Vašečka gave an interview for SME, where he was asked whether he would support construction of mosque in Slovakia. He argued that he would not like it due to security reasons.
- **10/07/2020:** President of Police Jana Maškarová said on 10th of July 2020 regarding an incident with a violent man (not Muslim): „He was shouting Allah Akbar, which is a phrase used by terrorists.“

- **10/07/2020:** The Minister of Social Affairs and Family Milan Krajniak (Sme rodina) nominated a new head of the Institute for the research for work and family. The new director is Roman Joch, citizen of Czech republic known for his conservative and namely anti-Muslim statements.