

# Unwelcome Foreigners: Muslims in Slovakia



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On every occasion, we tend to present ourselves as those who welcome visitors with bread and salt. We are continuously creating an image of a nation that is open and hospitable. The current crisis and the anecdotal evidence of the Muslim community in Slovakia, however, have unveiled a surprisingly different picture; a picture of the minorities' life in Slovakia has not always been 'a bed of roses'. Neither has it been like that for those who voluntarily or even against their own will, have found themselves in Slovakia. We do not welcome migrants with open arms. We have built walls of mistrust and we fear them. It is the Muslim minority that receives the most controversial treatment here. Ethnic and racial overtones of a hostile picture of the Muslims emerged especially after 9/11

(Letavajová, 2007) and were emphasised during the refugee waves in 2011 – 2016 (Liďák, 2015; Világi, 2015; Kadlečiková, 2016).

### **Muslims as Unwelcome Foreigners**

A feeling of the unwanted is experienced by the members of a number of minorities in Slovakia. “Under communism, I thought, I didn't feel at home in Slovakia because that was under communism, today I know that it's because they don't want us here” (Szigeti in Gál, 2009:203). After the euphoria of November 1989, a number of Slovak Hungarians have experienced that kind of feeling. The status of unwelcome visitors is applicable to Slovak Muslims, even though they are virtually invisible, which is significantly different from the majority of EU countries. Even so, in Central Europe dangerous aspects of Islamophobia are increasingly manifested. Popularity of right-wing and extremist parties is growing, hate speeches by individuals and political elites are publicly presented and tolerated (Charvát, 2007). In order to take advantage of anti-Muslim propaganda, Islamophobia<sup>3</sup> is

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<sup>3</sup> Islamophobia is most commonly associated with the utterances through which people a priori negatively define themselves against Islam and the Muslims. The most common cause of anti-Muslim behaviour of the majority population is fear triggered by the information spread about Islam and the Muslims as well as historical prejudices associated with Islam and the Muslims. Islamophobia is a concept that does not have a clear-cut definition; the authorities tend to adopt more than one possible approach to this concept. Islamophobia has a polysemous nature and is associated with political populism which rejects internal differentiation of Islam and presents it as a monolithic threat to the West and its values. Islamophobia is expressed in the form of:

becoming a part of the intra-national political struggle during the electoral campaigns of the majority of political parties (Štefančík, 2011a).

The Slovak society paternalistically hinders the acceptance of new ideas and gets shut off from the new minorities. This has been highlighted in building Slovakia and its ethnic and religious identity. Upon signing the Basic Agreement between the Holy See and Slovakia in 2000, the country undertook to support the Catholic Church in its activities in Slovakia.<sup>4</sup> The events of the first decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and a significantly negative image of Islam in the society have created favourable conditions for increasing manifestations of adverse emotions directed against Islam and Muslims – Islamophobia.

The Muslim community in Slovakia is extremely diverse. Its history dates back to the 1960s. At that time the first Muslims

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discrimination, prejudice, violence and social exclusion (Richardson 2004:7-15; Štefančík 2011b: 12-15).

<sup>4</sup> The Basic Agreement between the Holy See and Slovakia was adopted during Mikuláš Dzurinda's first term in 2000. The contract included a number of specific advantages for the Catholic Church. These were supported by the fact that the document takes the form of an international treaty whose status is superior to the national legislation. Through the Treaty, Slovakia undertakes that in religious and personal issues the Catholic Church has absolute sovereignty and the State shall respect the non-working days, Sundays and religious holidays (listed in the contract), shall cooperate with the Church in the protection and support of marriage. The Treaty delimits the rights of the Church in pastoral and educational work, etc. Amendments were supposed to include the issues of funding and education. (The Basic Agreement between the Holy See and the Slovak Republic)

from the allied socialist countries came to Slovakia, they studied at Czechoslovak Universities in Bratislava, Martin and Košice, got married and then stayed in Slovakia. They and their descendants made up the majority of the Slovak Muslim community. An organised community – similarly as in the Czech Republic, however, officially did not exist. There are no relevant records, and it can only be assumed that the Muslim faith in Slovakia was practiced only in private, or within extended families. The life of Muslims was an undercover issue, like any other religious activities of individuals or small communities.

### **Emergence of the Muslim Community in Slovakia and its Issues**

The late 1980s and early 1990s brought a change. Afghan students, who came to Slovakia, successfully completed their studies at secondary schools and universities. They settled in Slovakia, started their families and created one of the most numerous communities. Contact with the Arab countries, Palestine, Iraq, Syria, and Libya became livelier and that resulted in the emergence of the first Muslim community in Slovakia in the early 1990s. In order to make it possible, a change of the political regime and legislation was necessary so that people could freely form associations.

The emergence of the Muslim community in Slovakia was not surprising in the first years of freedom. International students tried to maintain their Muslim religious traditions even in humble conditions; at least they tried to organise their Friday prayers. However, they lacked a religious authority that would coordinate their activities. What is more, under non-democratic conditions, the faith issues and its public

manifestations were a burden. From the evidence given by Muslims we know that at that time there were a few Slovak converts, however, little do we know about their identity now. There is no information of any similarly significant authority that would be active within the community and would gain the same respect as Prof. Šilhavý in the Czech Republic. The official establishment of the Slovak *umma* [community of believers, ed. note] is still only pending.

Part of the community were refugees from the Balkans, their numbers ranging in hundreds; the community gradually swelled with the Muslims from the Russian Federation, the countries of the former Yugoslavia, and the Albanians from Kosovo and Macedonia, i.e. from Bosnia. With the emergence of independent Slovakia and the opening of embassies in Muslim countries, the community became bigger with the local staff from those embassies. Out of them, over a long period of time, the most active Muslims were from Indonesia and they got engaged in education. In the early 2000s, groups of migrants from African Muslim States entered Slovakia. Those were asylum seekers from the conflict regions of East Africa (Sudan, Eritrea, and Somalia) and partly from Nigeria and Algeria. Altogether these Muslims have created a multi-coloured mosaic of Slovak Islam.

In the early 1990s, favourable conditions were created for free gathering of various communities. Slovak Muslims took advantage of the situation: in Bratislava, the first place for the unofficial prayer room was found near Námestie 1. mája Square and it was available until 1999. Here, the General Union of Muslim Students was established (founded in 1993) (Nielsen et al., 2011). Probably also in other university cities in Slovakia (Martin and Košice), similar prayer rooms were

founded and served as occasional meeting places for Muslims. Daúd Imeri, the first ever known Imam of the Slovak Muslim community, worked in Bratislava. Despite the unfavourable conditions, a strong community was built here and it was instrumental in the integration of the first migrants in Slovakia. Daúd Imeri could not officially perform his profession as the cleric and teacher of Islamic theology due to the lack of registration, and thus he decided to leave Slovakia in 1996.

The General Union of Muslim students in Slovakia endeavoured to win the recognition of Islam. It published several journals, distributed Muslim literature, organised various lectures, raised awareness, organised joint prayers and also provided social assistance to Muslims. After Daúd Imeri left, he was substituted by Muhammad Safwan Hasna in Námestie 1. mája Square prayer room in Bratislava. A few years later, the General Union of Muslims was transformed to the Islamic Foundation. Its establishment was associated with Muhammad Akram al-Hasna, Artan Qineti, and al-Hajwan. Establishing the Foundation brought back to attention the efforts to build a mosque. The Foundation possesses a building lot, however, the city magistrate and the public oppose the construction and do not allow the Muslims to build an Islamic cultural centre that would worthily represent Islam and Muslims in Slovakia. Since 2009, the Foundation has been running the Córdoba Cultural Centre. The Islamic Foundation works successfully, chiefly thanks to Muhammad S. Hasna, Artan Qineti, Zuzana Hasna, Maroš Zofčín, and to many other Slovak converts and Muslims from various parts of the colourful Muslim world.

According to the data provided by Husain Kettani, approximately 4.870 Muslims live in Slovakia, the number

being based on the census taken in 2001, in which 6.214 Slovak inhabitants claimed other than state recognized faith (Kettani, 2010). An unofficial count by the Islamic Foundation presents numbers very close to those given by Kettani. The analysis of various Muslim communities living in Slovakia – the citizens of the Slovak Republic, seasonal workers, entrepreneurs and students – shows that the community consists of approximately 1.500 Arabs (students and naturalised Arabs), 1.000 Muslims from Macedonia (so called Osmanli and Albanians from the towns of Vrapčičšte, Gostivar, Tetovo, and so on), 240 Afghans, 300 to 400 Muslims originating from the former Soviet Union, 200 Muslims from Bosnia and about the same number from Kosovo, 150 – 200 Turks, some 200 Africans (mainly Somalis), about 400 Muslims from other parts of the world (South-East Asia – Indonesia, Pakistan) and about 350 – 500 Slovak converts, among whom the majority are women who married Muslims. Considering the estimate, we can arrive at quite a real number, approximately 4.700 Muslims.

The Muslim community consists of university-educated people with a good knowledge of the Slovak language and successful entrepreneurs who create jobs and contribute to the economic growth of the country. Muslims are not socially isolated or separated from the mainstream society, which partly minimises the negative image of Islam conveyed by the media and politicians. The Islamic Foundation has good relations with non-governmental organisations engaged in the protection of rights and freedoms, though Slovakia unfortunately, still lacks a political party that would publicly stand up for the rights of religious minorities, with the intention to change some aspects of discriminatory laws in force in the Slovak Republic.

## *Using legislation against Muslims*

Discrimination of followers of Islam in Slovakia is also anchored in the law. Amendment to the law on freedom of religion and the status of churches and religious communities made in 2007, put the Slovak Republic among the countries with the strictest standards in Europe (Štefančík, 2011b:21).

The law defines new conditions for the registration of religious groups not recognized by the Slovak Republic. Section 11 states that the application for registration may be “filed if it is established that the church or religious community has at least 20.000 adult members,” but they must have a permanent “residence in the Slovak Republic and be citizens of the Slovak Republic” (Act no. 201/2007 Coll.). The problem is that religious communities are not able to register their affiliates. Especially Muslims, since conversion to Islam is not associated with "baptism," it is not necessarily supported by a relevant document. Authorities (the state), can arbitrarily decide which signatures meet or do not meet the requirements for recognition. This may delay the registration of "inconvenient" religious society in any way that suits the state. Several Slovak politicians expressed such an intention – Interior Minister Kaliňák (September 2006), Minister of Culture Maďarič (January 2016) and Speaker of the Parliament Danko (in 2015 and 2016).<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. <http://www.islamonline.sk/2016/09/sns-vravi-ze-sprisenie-registracie-ma-zabranit-spekulantom-nie-je-to-cela-pravda/>,  
<http://www.islamonline.sk/2016/05/vyroky-premiera-nas-opat-preslavili-vsimpli-si-ich-turisti-ambasady-komentatori-i-zahranicie/>,  
<http://www.islamonline.sk/2016/01/minister-kultury-madaric->

The law defies EU standards<sup>6</sup> and is stricter than some legal standards in undemocratic regimes (Belarus)<sup>7</sup> or in countries that are undergoing the process of transition (Ukraine)<sup>8</sup>. Domestic and foreign institutions expressed criticism. The annual report of the US Department of State on the level of religious freedom in the world reiterates that "the religious registration law in many cases discriminates against smaller

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zakon-na-registraciju-cirkvi-sme-sprisinili-aby-sa-zabranilo-islamizmu/ (10th November, 2016).

<sup>6</sup> The legislation of individual states of the European Union regulating the acceptance of minority religions sets out the minimum number of signatures required for the registration of new church or religious community. There are cases where the state does not make any claim for the registration of religious communities existing on its territory. Religious communities act as social or private organisations and if their doctrine is not contrary to morality or constitutional law and does not violate the rights and freedoms they enjoy the same legal protection as the majority religious community. But usually without any financial compensation. In cases where signatures are required for recognition their number ranges from dozens (Baltic States) to hundreds of members (V4). Alternatively, the percentage of the population is indicated i.e. from 0.002% to 0.5%. (Moravčíková; Lojda 2005).

<sup>7</sup> Despite the fact that Belarus is one of the last non-democratic regimes of Europe, it is more open in the matters of acceptance of new churches and religious communities than the Slovak Republic. In Belarus the registration of religious communities is mandatory and has tightened since 2002, however, the current legal standard requires the signature of at least 20 citizens who are 18 years old and reside permanently in one or more municipalities (Moravčíková & Lojda, 2005).

<sup>8</sup> In Ukraine, the policy of acceptance of new churches and religious communities is more liberal than in Belarus. In order to obtain state recognition or legal personality, registration should be requested by 10 founding members (Moravčíková & Lojda 2005).

religious communities" (Religious Freedom Report, 2011). The problem, as they see it, is that

... clergy from unregistered religious groups could not minister to their members in prisons or government hospitals, and religious weddings by these groups needed to be accompanied by a civil ceremony to be legally valid. Occasionally, members of these groups were prevented from burying their relatives in municipal cemeteries [...]. Unregistered groups were not represented in official educational materials for religion classes (Ibid.).

The Prosecutor General's Office of the Slovak Republic also commented on Act. 201/2007 Coll. and raised an objection to the Constitutional Court. The final court decision did not grant the Prosecutor's Office request to suspend the force of law no. 201/2007 Coll. and the Constitutional Court judges agreed that "the fact that a church or religious community is not registered does not mean or imply that the freedom of religion of members of such groups is legally hindered" (Constitutional Court ruling 10/08). Judge Lajos Mészáros did not agree with this interpretation and his objections are part of the ruling 10/08. He argues that the number of signatories on the application for registration hinders the freedom of religion. He states that "the inability to obtain legal personality when the number of members is small [...] interferes with the freedom to manifest one's religion" (Mészáros, 2010).

Freedom does not only mean the possibility to profess one's faith and to live it out privately. Freedom covers all areas including the construction of temples and the possibility to legalise religious marriages and funerals (Letavajová, 2007).

She adds that this law creates inequality in that the state recognizes churches that have fewer members but does not accept the community which traditionally exists in Slovakia and exceeds the number of believers of registered churches. This confirms the state bias against Islam and Muslims. The statements of some politicians and political programmes of certain parties can prove it (Štefančík, 2011c; IslamOnline, 2015, 2016).

### **Disinformation and how can we change it**

Misleading information about Islam and Muslims and its dissemination in the society negatively affects the status of the Muslim community in Slovakia. The political and social elites and media have an equal share in this situation. Fertile ground for anti-Islamic disinformation is: a) a lack of education about Islam (Muslim youth in the West, converts and non-Muslim public); b) the media image of Islam and Muslims (repeatedly show terror, violence and punishments based on *sharia*); c) stereotypes conveyed by churches, politicians, and elements of folk culture. It is also true that Islamophobia in Slovakia (and in Central Europe in general – V4) thrives because the true image of Islam, in fact, does not exist.

The most common myths include: an a priori negative attitude of Islam or Muslims to non-Muslims who are not allowed to befriend them and have to fight them; the importance and place of *jihad* in Islam, which is presented only as a “holy war”; oneness of Islam and unity of the Muslim community, which produces a homogeneous image of essentially “bellicose and hateful Islam” as the only alternative, and portrays Muslims as terrorists; and finally the status of women in Islam, which is interpreted as “serfdom” denying existence of any women's

rights. The most visible consequence of spreading myths and disinformation is the current hate debate in the Slovak parliament (and on the Internet), which takes place in the context of amendments to the law on religious freedom Act no. 308/1991 Coll. (Act 201/2007 Coll.) with a view to enhancing its restrictive nature.<sup>9</sup>

Mutual understanding and acceptance of the differences is the best means of how we can deal with irrational fear. This can be seen in Iceland, where the Muslim community has a similar history and structure as the one in Slovakia. It also began to take shape as early as in the 1960s and is similarly ethnically diverse. However, the attitude of the state towards Muslims is different as in Iceland Islam is recognized by the state that supports building of cultural and religious centres. Moreover, the state closely cooperates with the local community in the integration process and in safe coexistence and elimination of myths and disinformation. Strengthening mutual dialogue, understanding and coexistence are the real ways of fighting with growing extremism on both sides. In this sense, Iceland should be for us a model worth following.

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<sup>9</sup> Cf. <http://www.islamonline.sk/2016/10/moslimaci-zberba-ci-dielo-diablovo-takto-niektori-poslanci-v-parlamente-hovorili-o-muslimoch/> (15 November 2016)

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