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Islamic Foundation in Slovakia:

The Portrayal of Islam and Muslims in Slovak media

Public discourse concerning Islam and Muslims is predominantly shaped by media and the speeches of political figures, who oftentimes use the media to express their opinions. Even today, the topic of Muslims and Islam has only been analyzed marginally, partly in studies about foreigners, migrants, or refugees. It is our attempt to fill this gap.

This publication is presented as a part of a project conducted by the Islamic foundation in Slovakia named *Combating Islamophobia and supporting hate crime victims in Slovakia*, under the abbreviation SalamSK. This project is implemented by the Islamic foundation in Slovakia in partnership with the League for Human Rights, during the timeframe from 1 January 2021 to 31 Dec 2022, with financial support from the European Union through the Rights, Equality and Citizens program (2014-2020).

The goal of the study was to create an analytical basis for future proposals for combatting social dichotomy and rising social conflicts. Media reports were evaluated through deep-content analysis, which we believe has the highest value, especially thanks to the way it frames the problem using media themselves.

Our main research question was to understand how Muslims and Islam are portrayed in Slovak media and what is the impact of the topic's presentation on Slovak society. To satisfy this goal, it was necessary to answer auxiliary questions, which are:

1. Who are Muslims in Slovakia? What attitudes do Slovak citizens hold towards Islam and Muslims?
2. What is the social and political discourse concerning Islam and Muslims?
3. How do Slovak media frame the topic of Islam and Muslims?

4. To what extent, and through which means, do media process the theme of Muslims and Islam in Slovakia?
5. Who are the main actors of presented events and what are the relationships between them?
6. Who talks about Islam and which places are the presented events related to?
7. What sentiment is associated with the reports about Islam and Muslims?
8. How do media form and support stereotypes about Islam and Muslims?
9. How do media presentations support, enhance or refute the discourse of Islam and Muslims?

We have monitored the media throughout the year 2021. A temporal period from 1 October to 31 December 2021 was chosen for a detailed quantitative and qualitative analysis. The media reports were identified based on the presence of keywords, which were set at the beginning of the survey and are considered as fundamental: “Islam”, “Muslim”, “Islamic”, “Arab”, “Quran”, “mosque”, “hijab” and their grammatical forms in Slovak.

The analysis focuses on the content of opinion-forming media and tabloids. Since our focus is also political discourse, we included speeches from the political sphere. The study consists of seven parts. In the first part we describe our goals and methodology, the second being a review of relevant literature. Thirdly, we present a historical context of the Islamic presence in Slovakia and the demographic characteristics of this part of the population, concluded by current perception of Islam and Muslims by the majority Slovak population. In the fourth part we focus on the political discourse by analyzing the speeches of political actors during meetings of the National Council of the Slovak Republic. To better understand if the political discourse is supported by the narratives in the media, the fifth part turns its attention to analysis of media reports. This part is the most lengthy in the study and focuses on both printed and online media types. We complete the picture in part six by analyzing social media, namely Facebook. The study is concluded with final chapters summarizing the main findings, formulating conclusions and recommendations for future projects targeting this problem.

Our study shows that the theme of Muslims and Islam in media is framed into several topics. The most outstanding is a topic of conflict, represented by more than half of all reports. A reader is informed about practices of various extremist movements, who are marked as Islamic, about war conflicts, political relationships and detentions, court trials or imprisonment. Other important topics were politics; culture and sports; hate and stereotypes; covid-19; cultural specifics and lifestyle in Muslim countries; women in Islam; catastrophes, misfortunes, crime; and finally, tourism.

In terms of geographical settings, most of the reports are news from abroad. Very little information is given about Muslims living in Slovakia. The attitude of the texts is highly negative, with as much as 70% of all articles having negative emotion. Muslims are portrayed as actors in conflict situations; someone we need to be protected from or as citizens of countries that are at war, going through some power struggle or affected by catastrophe, unrest, or conflict and finally as those who are victims of attacks.

We do not receive information about the life of Muslims. In very few occasions do we see an interview which conveys direct experience with Muslims. Thus, a Slovak recipient gets an image in which violence dominates, where physical sanctions for breaking Islamic law (Sharia) are acceptable, where women are refused their rights, independence, or education. This narrative is supported by public figures who use or even enhance fear concerning migrants and Muslims for their own political agenda.

In relation to the presented study, we can conclude that media and political discourse enhance and affirm each other. We also do not see any progress in their narratives for the given theme.

In 2009 a similar study pointed to high negativity with which Islam and Muslims are presented and this study has confirmed that the same patterns persist.

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