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THE STATE OF ISLAMOPHOBIA IN EUROPE

ENES BAYRAKLI • FARID HAFEZ

This is the second edition of the annual *European Islamophobia Report (EIR)* which was presented for the first time in 2015. New countries are included in this year’s *EIR*; while 25 countries were covered in 2015, the report for 2016 includes 27 country reports. *EIR 2016* is the result of 31 prominent scholars who specialise in different fields such as racism, gender and Islamophobia Studies. In the years to come we will attempt to include more countries in our report. Our final aim is to cover and monitor the developments of Islamophobia in all European countries.

Islamophobia has become a real danger to the foundations of democratic order and the values of the European Union. It has also become the main challenge to the social peace and coexistence of different cultures, religions and ethnicities in Europe. The country reports of *EIR 2016*, which cover almost all the European continent from Russia to Portugal and from Greece to Latvia, clearly show that the level of Islamophobia in fields such as education, employment, media, politics, the justice system and the Internet is on the rise. Since the publication of the last report there is little improvement. On the contrary, one can see from the country reports that the state of democracy and human rights in Europe is deteriorating. Islamophobia has become more real especially in the everyday lives of Muslims in Europe. It has surpassed the stage of being a rhetorical animosity and has become a physical animosity that Muslims feel in everyday life be it at school, the workplace, the mosque, transportation or simply on the street.

The refugee movement and the turmoil it has created in Europe, the unprecedented rise of far right parties all across the continent and the UK’s Brexit decision, which took many by surprise, have revealed the importance and relevance of this report, which covers incidents and developments in 2016. The short-term political significance of Islamophobia is as much relevant as Islamophobia’s structural dimension. As mentioned before, small successes can be witnessed in some European countries yet great challenges lie ahead for deepening the values of human rights and freedom of religion in Europe.
The Rise of Islamophobia

As a survey conducted by the Chatham House Europe Programme shows, public opposition to any further migration from predominantly Muslim states is by no means confined to Trump’s administration (implementation of the ‘Muslim-Ban’). Respondents in Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Poland, Spain and the UK were presented with the statement ‘All further migration from mainly Muslim countries should be stopped’. As the report reveals, the majorities in all but two of the ten states agreed to this statement, ranging from 71% in Poland, 65% in Austria, 53% in Germany and 51% in Italy to 47% in the United Kingdom and 41% in Spain. In no country did the percentage that disagreed surpass 32%.1

The findings of this report go hand in hand with similar surveys on this topic. The Ipsos Perils of Perception Survey 2016 found that the current and the future Muslim population in Europe are enormously overestimated in most countries. Out of the list of all 20 countries where respondents overestimated the Muslim population by more than 10%, 12 are European, while the USA and Canada are among the remaining 8 countries. When asked “Now thinking about 2020, out of every 100 people, about how many do you think will be Muslim?”, the top 20 countries where proponents overestimated the Muslim population again were in majority European (11). The average guess in France is that 40% of

the population will be Muslim in 2020 when the actual projection is 8.3%. Italy comes third with 26% overestimation, and Belgium and Germany fourth with 24% overestimation.3

Connecting this to a survey conducted by the Pew Research Center, we can suggest that this overestimation is connected to unfavourable views regarding Muslims. The report states,

“Opinions of Muslims vary considerably across Europe. Half or more in Hungary, Italy, Poland, Greece and Spain have a very or somewhat unfavorable view of Muslims. And in Italy (36%), Hungary (35%) and Greece (32%), roughly a third hold very unfavorable opinions. Majorities in the other nations surveyed express positive attitudes about Muslims. Nonetheless, at least a quarter in each country have negative views of Muslims.”4

These numbers are not shocking if we look at the incidents of Islamophobia and its pervasiveness in power structure across Europe. Muslims are seen as the enemy ‘within’. There is wide consent in Western societies to Muslims not being seen as equal citizens. Othering and differential treatment may also overlap with the dehumanization of Muslims. Thus, physical attacks and political restrictions can often be carried out and even defended in an atmosphere of wide distrust and enmity. Islamophobia is by no means confined to the working poor or the middle class, who have been misinformed about Islam and Muslims. It is especially true for the so-called educated elite. Discriminating policies like the ban of the hijab for certain professions, the ban of the niqab in public, bans of minarets and other laws restricting Muslim’s freedom of religion speak volumes. If politicians can take such decisions and the media, along with large parts of society, accept them, why should we wonder about the strong opposition to immigration of Muslim people in Europe?

Hence, these numbers reveal the necessity of the EIR, which looks at the challenge of Islamophobia from a qualitative and not a quantitative research perspective. Its aim is to document and analyse trends in the spread of Islamophobia in various European nation states. There cannot be a claim of full comprehensiveness, since European nation states by majority still lack data collection. Hence, a central recommendation of the EIR is that Islamophobia or anti-Muslim hate crime should be included as a category in European nation states’ statistics – a development that has not occurred as of yet. The EIR’s primary contribution is to reveal the tendencies of Islamophobia and to give representative examples of its overall unfolding in the investigated states.

Recognition of Islamophobia

There are various definitions of Islamophobia. However, the definition of Islamophobia used by the *EIR*, as defined by its editors, is as follows,

“When talking about Islamophobia, we mean anti-Muslim racism. As Anti-Semitism Studies has shown, the etymological components of a word do not necessarily point to its complete meaning, nor how it is used. Such is also the case with Islamophobia Studies. Islamophobia has become a well-known term used in academia as much as in the public sphere. Criticism of Muslims or of the Islamic religion is not necessarily Islamophobic. Islamophobia is about a dominant group of people aiming at seizing, stabilising and widening their power by means of defining a scapegoat – real or invented – and excluding this scapegoat from the resources/rights/definition of a constructed ‘we’. Islamophobia operates by constructing a static ‘Muslim’ identity, which is attributed in negative terms and generalised for all Muslims. At the same time, Islamophobic images are fluid and vary in different contexts, because Islamophobia tells us more about the Islamophobe than it tells us about the Muslims/Islam”.

We think that with this definition, we clearly address many of the suspicions, which are put against the term as such. As a matter of fact, while supranational institutions such as the OSCE embrace the terminology Anti-Semitism, the OSCE still refuses to use Islamophobia, which we see as part of the problem. Again, we recommend that Islamophobia/anti-Muslim Racism or anti-Muslim hate crime should be included in the collection of “equality data” in all European states. Institutions such as the OSCE need to establish solid monitoring and recording mechanisms for discrimination, hate crime and hate speech towards Muslims. In order to have reliable data, it has to be segregated by bias/category and also segregated by gender. This is even more problematic in countries that do not allow collection of data on religion or race. This seemingly egalitarian approach in reality hides the discrimination of Muslims. Also, response mechanisms seem to be unclear and not adequately used. When there is an incident of discrimination/hate crime/hate speech, there are different response mechanisms available, yet, none of these are familiar to the vast majority of Muslim citizens of European countries. Thus, we recommend that response mechanisms should be made more available, accessible and clear. Last but not least, an empowerment of the Muslim community is needed to strengthen critical citizenship and help European states deepen their democracies.

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Policy Recommendations for European Countries

The authors of every respective national report have suggested specific recommendations regarding the country they have covered. The following list of recommendations serves to underscore some of these recommendations and to add some additional suggestions on the supranational level.

We think it is important for civil society to understand that Islamophobia is a problem of institutional racism. The illusion that Europe is a post-racial society prevents large parts of European societies from recognising the severe challenge of Islamophobia to local societies. The focus has to shift from Muslims’ actions to those of European societies. Racism, including Islamophobia, tells us more about the racists than about their imagined scapegoat or their victims. Hence, Islamophobia reveals aspects of Europe and the internal problems European societies continue to face. A recognition and a critical consciousness of this societal disease is of utmost importance to be able to create more just societies in Europe. At the same time, Muslims must be allowed to enjoy their spaces of freedom like other dominant religious and political groups in European societies without being securitised or criminalised. The securitisation of Islam, especially policies countering violent extremism and their impact on the freedom of religion of belief for Muslims, and even freedom of movement or free assembly have to be challenged by all democratic forces in Europe. Communities must be consulted and human rights frameworks must be respected. National security is not among the criteria that should permit the limitation of freedom of religion or belief.

We especially urge politicians to speak out against Islamophobia as one of the most pressing forms of racism in our days. Europe needs more courageous politicians who do not only challenge the politics of right-wing populist parties, but also challenge institutionalised forms of racism targeting Muslims in the fields of employment, education, state bureaucracy, and media. We also call for journalists and editors to challenge Islamophobic reporting in their news media and give space to more balanced views. Generally, the issue of religious literacy is a huge problem that does not only concern media but also the police, prosecutors and civil servants. We see that people simply lack basic knowledge on Islam and Muslims’ practices. We see a need for the introduction of more comparative religion courses, or religious teaching, in a formal and informal educational setting.

We see that Muslim women are among the most vulnerable direct victims of Islamophobia. ENAR has conducted a report on the impact of Islamophobia on Muslim women and presented 37 recommendations, which we can only underscore given the findings of our report.6 Women who are visibly Muslim are socially ostracised in many places. The combination of internal community prob-

lems, discrimination (education and employment) and hate crimes against Muslim women (data shows that it is 70% more likely for a Muslim woman to be attacked in the street) are leaving their horrible mark on Muslim women. Hence, the protection and the empowerment of Muslim women have to be on the central agenda of states and NGOs. The ruling of the European Court of Justice regarding Esma Bougnaoui’s dismissal by a French company for wearing a hijab when dealing with clients as unlawful discrimination is an important step towards equality and an anti-discriminatory society. At the same time, the case of Belgian Samira Achbita vs. Belgium, where it was argued that a dismissal due to the headscarf would be permissible against the backdrop of a general prohibition of all outward signs of political, philosophical and religious beliefs exhibited by employees in the workplace, is worrying and challenges the reality of a diverse Europe.

The Author

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Executive Summary

The dynamics of Islamophobia in Latvia were driven by several factors: (1) the so-called ‘refugee crisis’ triggered by war in the Middle East; (2) terrorist attacks in other European countries; and (3) the position of the Muslim community in Latvia’s society. When addressing the problems caused by the so-called ‘refugee crisis’, Latvian politicians chose a tough policy: a draft law on the restriction on wearing face coverings in public places was drawn up, and it was supported by 77% of Latvia’s population aged between 18 and 55. The opinion of the Muslim community, however, was divided: most Muslim groups expressed the view that the draft law would not interfere with their rights. The tough policy could also be observed at municipal level: the Riga Construction Office withdrew the construction permit for a building which was planned to be used by the Latvian Islamic Culture Centre. Although the views expressed by the Latvian media were not manifestly Islamophobic on the whole, their efforts to increase revenues by attracting maximum audience prevailed: the press tended to attract readers by means of flashy and scandalous headlines that were abusive towards Muslims. The Latvian media continued to report on Muslims living abroad and rarely focused on the Latvian Muslim community. Islamophobic sentiment was most intensive in cyberspace. Social networks provide an opportunity to react to what is going on in a fast manner and this reaction usually is emotionally charged and abusive. The fact that hatred and intolerance against Muslims voiced on the Internet have become a problem in Latvia was evidenced by a criminal case referred to court in 2016: genuine punishment was imposed for a comment containing a message full of hatred and intolerance published on the Internet. If the year 2015 was marked by the first open Islamophobic manifestations in Latvia, 2016 was characterised by the strengthening of Islamophobic sentiment in society which was facilitated by the activities of radical right-wing groups, the unclear position of politicians, as well as the actions and provocative messages of individual members of the Muslim community. However, there were also positive trends: (1) when addressing the so-called ‘refugee crisis’, the activity of non-governmental organisations and responsiveness of individuals increased; (2) the determination to tackle the problem of Islamophobia from a legal perspective; (3) specific education activities have been implemented to prevent marginalization and discrimination.
Kopsavilkums

Introduction

Several incidents signaling the presence of Islamophobia in Latvia stand out against the background of the dynamics of events in 2016; these incidents have been addressed in this report. At the end of 2015, the Latvian Islamic Culture Centre hoped to move to a small two-storey building with a large prayer room. The house was not put into service due to disagreements with the Construction Office of the Riga City Council which insisted on additional construction expertise. The respective law stipulates that buildings in which at least 100 people can be present at the same time need a special expert report, but the figure provided by the Latvian Islamic Culture Centre was that of a maximum of 99 people. The Construction Office did not believe this figure and required an additional expert opinion. As a result of the argument, the Construction Office withdrew the construction permit on 22 February, 2016 since the documents necessary for the reconstruction were not submitted. The head of the Construction Office announced that the Muslims of Riga were trying to cheat construction supervisors in order to avoid an additional expert opinion.1 Zufars Zainullins, who represents the Muslims who arrived in Latvia during the Soviet period (Tatars, Azerbaijanis and Uzbeks), provided the following comments on the situation: “Currently the Islamic Development Bank has suspended financing as repairs of the new premises in Avotu iela 19, Riga, have been discontinued.”

The year 2016 explicitly revealed that the Muslim community in Latvia was not homogeneous, and that the radicalization of two of its members supported the strengthening of Islamophobic sentiment across society. One of Latvia’s first converts was a student of sociology who travelled to the Middle East during the conflict in Iraq, turned towards Islam and later in time, left Latvia. According to the media, he was likely killed among other militants.2 In 2016, other people were reported to have joined combatants in Syria. This, possibly, contributed to the decline in Islamophobic activity of radical right groups, although it was also probably affected by the fact that the refugees who had received in Latvia left the country. We can assume that the radical right considered the emergence of radicals among Latvia’s Muslims the best proof of their threat, and, as a result, did not try to influence society anymore. However, it appears more likely that the radical right groups in Latvia have not received financing for their activities since the spring of 2016.

Significant Incidents and Developments

Although Latvia is geographically distant from the armed conflict zones in Syria and Iraq, the discourse on the war in the Middle East has adversely affected the life of Latvia’s Muslim community. The most significant incident which determined the increase in Islamophobia in Latvia in 2016 was a 12-minute-long video message by the leader of the Latvian Islamic Culture Centre Oļegs Petrovs posted on YouTube in which he expressed deep regret regarding the fact that previously he had no choice but to conceal his real thoughts and to act during interviews. Following the massacre in Charlie Hebdo’s office in France in 2015, Oļegs Petrovs had publicly voiced the opinion that the cartoonists had to be punished but not so severely, and that broken fingers would have sufficed. Conversely, in 2016, Oļegs Petrovs used YouTube to announce the following: “The only punishment for those who mock any Islamic values, according to all scientists, according to the unanimous views of Islamic scientists, is capital punishment. No Muslim opposes this.”

On 28 February, the TV3 programme “Nothing Personal” broadcast a story about Oļegs Petrovs’ video message posted on YouTube in which he lauds Jihad. Journalists had found out that the leader of the Latvian Islamic Culture Centre had left Latvia together with his wife nine months earlier. It was clear from the video that he was in Syria or Iran. Although members of the Latvian Islamic Culture Centre maintained that Oļegs Petrovs had informed them about his intentions to study abroad, the Security Police opened criminal proceedings against him pursuant to Section 771 of the Criminal Law in relation to unlawful participation in an armed conflict. Overall, three criminal proceedings have been opened in Latvia regarding cases when Latvian nationals have joined the so-called Islamic State. Following this incident, the head of the Security Police announced on the LNT programme “900 Seconds” that the Latvian Muslim community has been affected by tendencies of radicalism, an accusation that the leaders of the local Muslim communities have tried to actively deny. However, information about the death of one of the Latvian Muslim community’s activists in the conflict zone in Syria, where he had arrived together with his family, was made public on March 7 - this person was not Oļegs Petrovs, however. Although there have been no quantitative studies of the extent to which these developments have facilitated an increase in Islamist sentiment

in Latvian society, we can dare to assume that they have played the key role in the strengthening of Islamophobia in the country.

In 2016, Islamophobic attitudes were expressed openly in public places. The incidents that took place outside Latvia during New Year’s Eve celebrations in Cologne contributed to such attitudes. One of the most active members of the Latvian Islamic Culture Centre stated during a TV interview that his wife faces “moral terror” and, as a result, carries an electric shock device with her.6

Discussion of Islamophobic Incidents and Discursive Events

Employment

When granting refugee status to a person, the regulatory framework provides the issuance of a permanent residence permit valid for five years. Meanwhile, when granting alternative status, a person receives a temporary residence permit for a year. The above residence permits give their holders unrestricted right to employment in Latvia. This means that a person has the right to be employed by any employer in Latvia, and this is confirmed by an entry in the residence permits: “Has the right to work with no restrictions”.

Employment policies have their origins in integration policies and integration of migrants into the labour market. The complexity of the process is born from a lack of a single authority responsible for the integration of migrants. The Office of Citizenship and Migration Affairs do not have any direct responsibility for the integration policies of the Office of the Prime Minister.

Several state institutions developed an integration policy in relation to access to the labour market for refugees and people who have been granted alternative status. Free Latvian courses are available in Latvia to support integration into the labour market. These courses have several functions, such as providing a chance for the active practice of the language, and educational and entertaining functions. Thus, the complex objective of acquiring Latvian, familiarizing oneself with Latvia and its people can be achieved.

Although Latvia is not considered a country which uses proficiency of specific languages to restrict access of citizens from other countries to its labour market, threats of linguistic discrimination are present in Latvia’s labour market as the Labour Law prohibits employing a person who has not passed the state language exam.


One example is the Iraqi Kurd Tariks who wanted to work as a cleaner at McDonalds but was refused this opportunity since he did not know Latvian. He left Latvia for Germany together with his wife and seven children, where he was refused a work permit and a possibility to apply for benefits. After returning to Latvia, he found a job thanks to the responsiveness of individuals. There is insufficient political will for the integration of refugees into Latvian society and their stay in Latvia currently mostly depends on the support provided by fellow human beings, especially by non-governmental organizations (NGOs), such as Shelter ‘Safe House’ that offers complex assistance to refugees. Tariks’ case is not the only one of its kind. More than 150 people were resettled to Latvia in 2016 and more than 60 of those who were granted refugee or alternative status have already left for Germany where they work in the black market.

Politics

A number of politicians poise between political correctness and hidden Islamophobia, while hardly anybody takes an open position. Manifestations of latent Islamophobia, e.g. doubts about integration possibilities of refugees from Muslim countries in Latvia, were present in statements by several politicians. Indulis Emsis (Latvian Green Party) expressed the view that “one should not expect that we will be able to accept and integrate refugees and succeed in creating a new life environment for them in Europe. It can be done politically and economically, but this is not the right path. This is the road to ruin as evidenced by great empires and cultures that perished in the past”. A member of the liberal-conservative party Unity, Ainars Latkovskis, provided the following comments on the people who after obtaining refugee status left Latvia for Western European countries: “Their departure does not represent security risks. If somebody was forced to stay here, this could lead to frustration which could erupt into, e.g. a terrorist attack later on, but this is not the case. It does not bother us that people have an opportunity to go to other EU countries”. Left-wing politicians take a similar view; for example Ivars Zariņš (Social Democratic Party Concord) pointed out: “A person who has hardly crossed the Mediterranean will not work at a canning factory for 200 euro. This can lead to conflicts as people will look for illegal opportunities to earn money. [...] We are saved by cold and the unfavourable social situation.”

open view, such as Aleksands Kiršteins (National Alliance All for Latvia! – For Fatherland and Freedom/LNNK) who warned that extreme political correctness and self-censorship can threaten national security. He mentioned the instance when the public was not informed in time about the sexual assaults by immigrants in Cologne. Jānis Dombrava (National Alliance All for Latvia! – For Fatherland and Freedom/LNNK) took the firmest position. In March 2016, he suggested rejecting the decision regarding the reception of 776 asylum seekers in Latvia. Politicians of the ruling coalition did not support this proposal: Augusts Brigmanis (Union of Greens and Farmers) explained that the problem would not be solved by refusing to implement the previously adopted decision since asylum seekers can also enter the country through other means, while Solvita Āboltiņa (Unity) emphasized that a call to refuse the reception of refugees means giving in to panic, and she invited everyone to focus on the fight against terrorism, not on banning refugees’ entry into the country. Aleksandrs Gilmans, a former politician (For Human Rights in a United Latvia), opponent of the Russian school reform and board member of the unregistered organisation Congress of Non-citizens, was a participant of the European March for the Refugees Rights organised on 27 February, 2016. He was positive regarding the reception of refugees in Latvia. In his opinion, refugees will integrate into the Russian community. Aleksandrs Gilmans regretted that people in Latvia were negative towards refugees and made their racist opinions known. This was unacceptable to him and therefore, he participated in the event to demonstrate that representatives of the Russian Community support the reception of refugees. However, a survey conducted by the research centre SKDS suggests that Latvians and Russians do not have differing points of view on the admission of migrants, i.e. 78.3% of the population do not support the reception of refugees in Latvia.

Media

The media provided matter-of-fact information about the terrorist attacks in Belgium on 22 March, 2016. It was supplemented by stories of Latvian eyewitnesses living in Brussels and by expressing solidarity with the Belgian people. None of the media used the events in Belgium to pronounce Islamophobic attitudes, and later articles limited themselves to an explanation that “the group DAESH claimed repon-

sibility for these attacks which killed 32 people and three terrorists”. The events in Belgium were mainly perceived as “a subsequent terrorist attack”, and this phrase was the one used most commonly.

In contrast, the emotional headlines of Latvia’s media heralded the mass sexual assaults of women in Cologne on New Year’s Eve. Such headlines included “Just-admitted Refugees Organise a Night of Barbaric Violence and Mockery in Germany”18, “Fear of One’s Own Fear. New Reality of Cologne”19, “Refugees Sneered at People during the Cologne Assaults by Saying: ‘We Were Invited by Merkel’.”20 Comments regarding the Cologne events were full of a pronounced phobia and aggression: “The same will also happen in Latvia, and I hope that Latvia’s men will find a possibility to resist gangs of degenerates. In my opinion, they do not deserve any mercy. God makes us love people, but those who currently commit crimes in Europe and soon will do the same in Latvia must be called enemies and enemies must be physically destroyed to protect our children, daughters and mothers”.21

In 2016, the mass media of Latvia published information about the armed conflict in Syria and other Muslim-inhabited countries on a regular basis. Since local TV channels and news agencies rarely send their reporters to the “hot spots”, the information consisted of republished news provided by Western information agencies. This is why the publicist and member of the Muslim community Roberts Klimovičs reiterated several times that this was one-sided and tendentious information and questioned its reliability. He also asked a rhetorical question: “Have you noticed a piece of news about the bombardment of Gaza in any of the Latvian media?”22

Alongside news about hostilities in the Middle East, refugee reception problems in Europe were still topical in 2016. The Latvian press reflected on these from a more pragmatic viewpoint, e.g. the daily Neatkarīgā Rita Avize Latviai wrote: “The idea of mass integration of refugees has not run up against terrorist inclinations and crimes of individuals but against practical issues, i.e. where to house people and how to educate

children.”23 The journalists writing about issues relating to integration of refugees and migrants balanced between political correctness and Islamophobic undertone. When outlining problems related to Islamophobia, the author of the above article mentioned a Latvian saying “fear is a bad adviser”, but at the end of her article she added: “Sadly, but it has to be acknowledged that humanity based on European Christian values will not win a victory over the Islamic world vision. Currently it is even difficult to imagine what models of peaceful coexistence would be possible in Europe, given that the idea of creating enclaves has already been found to be incorrect.”24 Thus, the article entitled “Fear Is Already an Adviser” fuels further fear. Overall, awareness of the problem of Islamophobia was outlined in the press in 2016 but without any analysis of the local situation, i.e. the analytical articles addressing Islamophobia as a societal challenge did not point to its manifestations in Latvia.25

Announcements about events organised by anti-globalists were published by all leading Internet portals. Although these announcements were informative, they performed an advertising function and contributed to the participation of people inclined towards Islamophobia in these events. During rallies organised by the association Anti-globalists, Latvia’s media showed a strong interest in these developments. On the one hand, journalists were doing their job to reflect socio-political activities in Latvia where civic activity is very low (rallies and pickets are rare in Latvia, and strikes are organised only in exceptional cases). On the other hand, the reflection of these protest rallies in the media encouraged anti-globalists to organise future events since they felt noticed and appreciated.

The press tended to attract readers by means of sensationalist and scandalous headlines in 2016, such as an article published in the right-wing newspaper Latvijas Avīze analysing problems of converts entitled “A New Dangerous Phenomenon – Converts to Islam”. The article itself was an analytical overview of expert opinions regarding reasons and causes of converting to Islam reflected in the foreign press.26

In relation to the development of a Latvian law on the restriction on wearing face coverings, the media paid attention to similar situations in other countries, namely in France27 and Germany, not forgetting to investigate the views of Latvia’s Muslims. The media showed particular interest in two women who wear the niqab.

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in Latvia. Almost all the largest newspapers published interviews with Liga Legzdiņa, who was also interviewed on several TV programmes. Journalists’ position was not Islamophobic during the interviews.

**Justice System**

On 26 February, 2016, the Ministry of Justice (MoJ) under the leadership of Dzintars Rasnačs (National Alliance All for Latvia! – For Fatherland and Freedom/LNNK) continued to develop a draft law on the restriction on wearing face coverings in public places (the first draft law was rejected by the majority of the Saeima in 2015) and invited the population to express its views on it. The public consultation lasted for a month, and the Ministry of Justice received 21 contributions. Eight individuals supported the draft law, pointing out that face covering is not consistent with Latvian traditions and culture; they also said they wanted to see the people they communicate with. Thirteen individuals did not support the draft law on the grounds of the following arguments: (1) the restriction on the wearing of face coverings is an unjustified encroachment on human rights, (2) the principle of proportionality has not been observed in the development of the draft law, (3) such a restriction contributes to the division in society and the isolation of Muslim women from the public, (4) it is discriminatory, does not comply with democratic principles and will create many implementation problems. The opinions of Muslim congregations varied: five Muslim congregations pointed out that the draft law did not affect their rights, whereas two Muslim congregations did not support it.

When assessing the draft law, the Ombudsman of Latvia drew attention to the fact that tolerance of those who think differently, including followers of other religions and nonconformist traditions, is one of the most significant values of Western democratic society which have also been strengthened in the preamble to the Satversme (Constitution) of Latvia. The Ombudsman concluded that the draft law substantially limits the right of an individual to private life and religious freedom laid down in the Satversme and international treaties which are binding for Latvia. Sociologists and anthropologists should also provide their assessment since the ECHR, when deciding on the existence and relevance of a legitimate objective in each member state, takes into account the values of and situation in each of the member states concerned. Meanwhile, in the event that the draft law is adopted, a decision on liability of the individuals who force other people to wear such face coverings should be made, otherwise this may result in a situation where victims of coercion are punished while the individuals who knowingly violate the provisions of the law in question are not.

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A survey conducted by TNS Latvia in March 2016 suggested that the majority (77%) of Latvia’s population aged between 18 and 55 supported the draft law (42% – definitely yes; 35% – more likely yes), but 16% did not support it (11% – more likely no; 5% – definitely no).30

The draft law bans wearing face coverings in public places, except in certain cases. Face covering in public places is allowed when it is necessary, i.e. to fulfill requirements set out in laws and regulations, perform professional duties, for participants of sports activities and events, artistic events, events dedicated to national holidays and participants of national cultural events, due to weather and health conditions.

Within the meaning of the law, any place which, irrespective of its actual use or the form of ownership, serves to satisfy the common public needs and interests and is available against payment or free of charge to any natural person who is not an owner, holder, keeper, employee or other person related to the place concerned and whose presence in the respective place does not involve performance of job responsibilities will be considered a public place. Within the meaning of the law, places of worship, prayer rooms and premises where religious activity takes place will not be considered a public place.

The Ministry of Justice explained that the parallel work on amendments to the Latvian Administrative Violations Code will continue to impose penalties to be applied in the event of a breach of the restriction. Initially a warning to the person concerned will be issued but then a fine will be imposed.

When taking the drafted “Law on the Restriction on Wearing Face Coverings” forward for its consideration at a meeting of state secretaries, Minister of Justice Dzintars Rasnačs pointed out that the law is primarily aimed at the protection of Latvian cultural space and integration. Meanwhile, Parliamentary Secretary of the Ministry of Justice Jānis Iesalnieks explained that the objective of the draft law is to build a harmonious society without closed communities which are not able and do not want to integrate into Latvian cultural space. State secretaries at their meeting of 22 September proclaimed the draft law, and it was reviewed by the Cabinet of Ministers. The law is expected to come into effect in 2017.

Muslims in Latvia do not have a unified position regarding the law on the restriction on wearing face coverings. Five Muslim communities acknowledged that they would not have any problems in relation to the introduction of the restriction on wearing the niqab since nobody in their communities wears it. The Riga City Muslim community, the Riga District Muslim community, the Riga Zemgale District Muslim community and the Jēkabpils City Muslim community explained that they continue the traditions of the Orenburg Muslim community established in 1789, and the Sunnah contains no indications with regard to the obligation to wear face coverings. No community member

wears such garments. Meanwhile, information provided by the Riga Muslim community Ideļ suggests that most of its members are families of Tatars and Bashkirs. These peoples have never had a tradition of wearing veils covering the face completely. Therefore, females wear a garment (neckerchief) that covers only their hair. In contrast, the Muslim communities Halal and Makka, as well as the Latvian Islamic Culture Centre explicitly favor the niqab. Representatives of these organisations stated that the niqab is an integral part of Muslim traditions. A representative of the Latvian Islamic Culture Centre provided the following explanation: “If such a ban is adopted, Muslim women will be prevented from both respecting their religious requirement and from feeling comfortable in public. This may lead to a situation where they will refuse to go out of their homes or they will look for opportunities to move to another country where there is no such ban.”

Taking into account the topical issue of the reception of refugees, the discussion on whether to ban wearing face coverings in public places can become increasingly intense in the future. One out of four or five Muslim women who wear the niqab in Latvia is Līga Legzdiņa who converted to Islam nine years ago. During a Latvian TV interview she announced: “If the law is adopted, I, most probably, will consider litigation since private life and the right to religious practice will be seriously restricted. It can create a split between Muslims and the rest of society, engender hostility towards Muslims. I have a feeling that stereotypes are strengthened and maintained.”

Currently the draft law is being coordinated in the ministries, and will be submitted to the Cabinet of Ministers at the beginning of 2017.

**Internet**

Websites, social networks, forums and blogs have become the key means for manifesting intolerance and racism, including Islamophobia. Islamophobic materials are most often posted on the websites of radical movements as, for example, the home page of the association Anti-globalists (http://antiglobalisti.org/and that of the Latvian National Front (LNF) http://fronte.lv/). Although many other portals should not be considered part of the Islamophobic cyberspace, it is notable that before the anti-globalists’ rally took place on 6 February, 2016, a large number of portals had made information about the forthcoming event public, thus actually advertising it.

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Hate crimes are mostly committed on various Internet portals, especially in the form of comments. Provocation of ethnic and racial hatred, as well as incitement to religious hatred are considered hate crimes in Latvia. Such activities could result in criminal liability. The fact that hatred and intolerance against Muslims voiced on the Internet have become a problem was evidenced by a criminal case referred to court in 2016. A person was accused of making a hostile comment against Muslims on the Internet. This comment was added to an article “A Latvian Muslim Woman Openly Talks about the Attitude Towards Muslims in Latvia” published in 2015 by using an assumed name. In October 2016, the court sentenced the accused person to 140 hours of community service. This was one of the rare cases when a punishment was imposed for a comment containing a message full of hatred and intolerance published on the Internet. Comments published on various websites suggest that people most frequently do not assess the consequences of their published opinions. Anonymity provides a feeling of permissiveness. Moreover, sometimes people think that their individual responsibility decreases on a shared Internet site where a large number of users express their opinions.

In 2016, comments following the publication of an article “In Bed with a Muslim Man: A Story about a Catastrophic Marriage”, describing an unsuccessful marriage of a Latvian woman with a Turkish Muslim man, were one of the most visible manifestations of Islamophobia on the Internet. The comments added to the article were extremely harsh: “It’s called zoophilia if you marry a monkey man”; “There is no more serious crime than the intermingling of races. Injection of Semite blood into the Aryan Latvian DNA is a crime against one’s family, ancestors and the entire nation”; “Everyone knows that Muslims are liars and double-dealers, that their wives rank 12th after their cats and camels”.

It is notable that a surprisingly high number of Internet users hold a view that this particular topic deserved comments. Conversely, articles about the law on the restriction on face coverings did not prompt significant activity of commentators, and their content was also more moderate: “Well, Muslims don’t have to come with their hymn book to our church. If they want to live here, they must behave like all other people in the street, they can do whatever they want at home, respect

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of their human rights or not, the rights of anyone else end where mine begin and this should not be forgotten” 37

Websites such as Facebook, Draugiem, Instagram, Twitter, etc., which have increased the social dimension of cyberspace and have facilitated information exchange, threaten to create a culture which accepts Islamophobia socially as Islamophobic attitudes are not uncommon in certain discussion forums.

Islamophobic ideas were disseminated also by individuals. On 9 January, 2016, a 24-year-old man from the town of Tukums posted an appeal on Facebook: “Hey, people of Tukums, does anyone wanna go and brutally give a thrashing to immigrants at the dairy? They live in Slocene Street just next to the dairy!!!... I don’t give a f…, I’m gonna smash windows today”, etc. A news portal of the capital informed the police about this post. Since it contained concrete threats to be implemented in a specified place, the police went to the location, checked all the apartments and made sure that they were inhabited not by refugees but by Latvian citizens. The young man “explained that he had read about the doings of refugees on New Year’s Eve in Germany and they had made him angry. Therefore, he had written the threats, but actually he did not want to do anything”. 38 Criminal proceedings were instigated against the young man in relation to his call on social networking sites for dealing with refugees. 39 Strangely enough, another inhabitant of Tukums had acted in a similar vein before this event: a policeman had published comments on a social networking site inciting violence and as a result he had received disciplinary punishment. 40 The head of Tukums Police Station was asked why criminal proceedings were not opened in this case as well. He explained that the policeman’s post was general and ambiguous, but the young man had called for concrete criminal acts in a specified place.41


39. Pursuant to Section 78(1) of the Criminal Law: For a person who commits acts directed towards triggering national, ethnic, racial or religious hatred or enmity, the applicable punishment is deprivation of liberty for a term up to three years or temporary deprivation of liberty, or community service, or a fine.


Central Figures in the Islamophobia Network

The association Anti-globalists was the most active Islamophobic group in 2016. After issuing a statement that “Riga might turn into a concentration place of at least 80% of the immigrants received in Latvia”\(^{42}\), the Anti-globalists invited inhabitants of Riga to take part in a meeting and vote on the reception of refugees. Voters received ballot papers and were asked to choose between being for or against the settlement of refugees. The secret ballot revealed 516 out of 519 inhabitants of Riga voted against the resettlement of refugees in the city and three people voted in its favor. Minutes were drawn up and the results of the vote were submitted to the Riga City Council. It should be clarified that in autumn of 2015 a collective application signed by 500 inhabitants of Riga in which they asked the City Council to conduct a survey of Riga’s inhabitants in relation to the resettlement of refugees was submitted to the Riga City Council which refused to do so. Therefore, the inhabitants of Riga themselves organised the meeting and conducted the survey without the participation of the municipality.\(^{43}\)

In response to the call of organisations in other countries to organise anti-immigration and anti-Islamization campaigns simultaneously, a protest rally “against mass immigration supported by the EU and the Latvian government”\(^{44}\) took place on 6 February, 2016. Although the application for a permit to organise the event was submitted by individuals, the rally was organised by the leader of the Anti-globalists Andris Orols, and it took place within the more extensive project “STOP Mass Immigration!”\(^{45}\) When applying for the permit, the organisers noted that the number of participants would be 50, but the responsiveness was higher than expected, i.e. approximately 200 people participated in the protest rally at the Freedom Monument, most of whom were elderly. Participants of the rally explained the small number of young participants by the fact that it was not good for youngsters to come as their presence could affect their careers and by the fact that history was not taught to young people.

There were calls at the rally for the dismissal of *Saeima* and in favor leaving the European Union. Shouts against the immigration policy and reception of

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refugees could be heard in several languages, but posters heralded the following: “Europe for Europeans, the Baltic for the Baltic nations”; “Send [Latvian female politicians] Solvita, Viņķele, Straujuma to Cologne to the blacks”; “Saeima parties treacherously open the gate for the invaders”. Participants of the rally expressed various opinions. Some of them voiced their frustration over the fact that at the time when Latvia’s inhabitants, especially pensioners, are experiencing bad living conditions, they will have to feed others. Someone said that everything had been planned a long time ago to make Latvians leave their country on a wide scale so that Arabs, Muslims and blacks had a place to come, i.e. all wars in the Middle East and Africa take place according to a special plan. The organiser of the rally Andris Ozols understood that he would not achieve anything by means of pickets and rallies; however, he was determined to continue organising such activities in all municipalities. Following the event, the Latvian Radio pointed out on the social network Twitter that its correspondent, Vita Anstrate, was pushed and punched in the stomach during the rally.

The Anti-globalists wanted to become a serious political force by forming a party which they hoped to establish on the basis of civic activities such as “STOP Mass Immigration!” In April 2016, the programme of the new party was made public for discussion. Since participation of at least 200 Latvian citizens is required to establish a party, the Anti-globalists organised several so-called pre-establishment meetings, but they did not succeed in bringing together the necessary number of people.

Endeavours of individual radical groups to cooperate started to emerge in 2016, and this was illustrated by two noteworthy events. Igors Šiškins, chair of the Gustavs Celmins Centre, was an active speaker both during the meeting of Riga’s inhabitants held on 16 January and the rally organised on 6 February. Meanwhile, the Anti-globalists, aspiring to establish a party, included the issue of the DDD (De-occupation. De-colonization. De-Bolshevization), which was initially the goal of the LNF, in their programme. In autumn, the LNF newspaper


49. The offshoot of the radical right group „Pērkonkrusts” (1933) which exhibited ideological affinities to German National Socialists.
DDD several times published a call to join the Anti-globalists in the creation of a new political force to gain real power and execute their policy tasks. Despite this, responsiveness was negligible.50

Civil Society and Political Initiatives Undertaken to Counter Islamophobia

To counter Islamophobia in Latvia, the Memorial of Žanis Lipke in cooperation with the Norwegian Embassy and the online magazine Punctum prepared the material for a series of lectures to be published under the title “Dangerous Relations: The Present Time of Old Phobias in Latvia”51 with the support of the U.S. Embassy and Konrad Adenauer Foundation. It is a collection for teaching staff of educational establishments consisting of ten lectures, supporting material and a list of recommended literature. The material contains reflections on marginalization, fears and discrimination, and addresses the issues of the promotion of tolerance in society, acceptance of the Other, and the provision of opportunities for exercising everyone’s rights.

The emotionally negative Islamophobic response triggered by the terrorist attacks and the so-called ‘refugee crisis’ last year was replaced by reflections in 2016 illustrated by a series of public debates, such as a public discussion “Diversity on the Border: Islam and the West”52 organised in the Anglican Church on 2 March, 2016 with the participation of philosopher Maija Kūle, representatives of the Muslim community Roberts Klimovičs and Liga Legzdiņa, the head of the Arabic Culture Centre Hosams Abu Meri and researcher of religions Valdis Tēraudkalns. It is notable that icons were removed before the discussion which was led by Nils Sakss who was mentioned in last year’s report as a person whose statements contained Islamophobic sentiment. Meanwhile, the topic of the annual Andrievs Eiche discussion organised at the Latvian National Library on 20 October, 2016 was “How Foreign or Close is Islamic Culture for a Latvian?”

The year 2016 was marked by a willingness to address the issue of Islamophobia from a legal point of view. During the annual conference on human rights and good governance organised by the Ombudsman’s Office on 13 December, 2016, a discussion on identifying hate crimes and hate speech in Latvia took place under the theme “Promotion of Tolerance in Society”. Both those who face such crimes in their professional lives and researchers participated in the discussion.53

51.Gubenko Igors, Denis Hanovs (Eds.), Bīstamie sakari: seno fobiju šodiena Latvijā: lekciju cikla materiāli (Riga: Memorial of Žanis Lipke, 2016).
To find practical solutions, the Latvian Christian Academy launched the project *SURPRISE, as a meeting of cultures*,⁴ four within the programme *NORDPLUS*. The aim of the project is to develop teaching materials for specialists and volunteers in their work with immigrants and refugees.

The mass media tried to carry out their function of public education and reduce Islamophobic sentiment in Latvian society. For instance, the supplement to the right-wing newspaper *Latvijas Avīze Mājas Viesis* published an article “Married to a Muslim Man” written after interviews with Latvian women living in Ireland. Their experience suggests that each marriage is individual and that its foundations are important. The article helped break down stereotypes about Muslim men and at the same time touched upon the problem of marriages of convenience between Latvian female citizens and Muslims living in Western countries. One of the interviewed women explained: “They, of course, don’t do it because they are Muslims or according to their faith. Everybody is looking out for his own benefit, they don’t think they hurt women or that abusing fallen women is a wrongdoing. They just use her, it is not an issue of faith. They want to stay in Europe and, therefore, they will do anything, and these women are completely worthless for these people.”⁵⁵

Getting closer to the local Muslim community might help dispel the Islamophobic sentiment in Latvian society. In 2016, the State Culture Capital (SCCF) Foundation financially supported the creation of a documentary about the everyday life of the Latvian Muslim community. Its director Kārlis Lesiņus entitled the film “Under the Overturned Moon”.⁶⁶

To demonstrate support for the human rights of refugees and to encourage the governments of European countries to ensure a safe and legal way of reaching countries of asylum, the European March for the Refugees Rights was organised in Riga on 27 February, 2016. It brought together around 60 people. Their slogans read: “Jesus was also a migrant”, “I would also flee”, “We are for humanity”, “Be just a human being, that’s it”, “Refugees are also people”, “Human rights refer to everyone”, etc. The event was organised by a group named “I Want to Help Refugees”. The event was strongly supported by the LGBT community, who were the number one advocate against Islamophobia. A very limited number of those against refugee reception were interested in the march and, therefore, it ended without violent clashes.

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Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

The dynamics of events in 2016 has led to the conclusion that research is required in the field of criminal law in relation to hate crimes. Section 150 of the Criminal Law provides that a person can be sentenced to a term of imprisonment of up to two years or community service or fined up to 40 minimum monthly salaries for wounding religious feelings of people or the incitement of hatred in relation to the attitude of these people towards religion or atheism.\(^{57}\) No knowledge on the application of this section is available in the case law and theory of criminal law of Latvia. On the one hand, attention should also be drawn to the cases when Section 150 of the Criminal Law is confronted with the right to the freedom of expression. On the other hand, state institutions, when investigating incidents, should take all possible steps to denounce Islamophobic motivation and find out whether Islamophobia has affected the respective events.

It is necessary to increase visibility of discussions on hate speech on the Internet. Only registered users or individuals who are authorized via their social network profiles should be entitled to provide comments. However, offensive comments are also often published on social networks where users’ data is not mentioned. This confirms that part of society does not sufficiently assess the strength and impact of its words. It is necessary to educate the public about the consequences of abusive opinions expressed publicly, about what is and is not acceptable in public space, and what kind of communication facilitates public discussions and aggression.

Discussions, forums, and workshops on Islamophobia and its relation to racism and other forms of discrimination organised in collaboration with religious communities, NGOs and student clubs would contribute to the eradication of its diverse forms.

Chronology

- **04.01.2016**: The Office of Citizenship and Migration Affairs announces that there are two men registered in Latvia whose given name after birth is Jihad, a name of Arab origin. One of these men was born in Latvia.
- **09.01.2016**: Police receive information that a young man has posted a call on Facebook inciting violence against refugees.
- **16.01.2016**: 519 inhabitants of Riga participate in a voting on the reception of refugees organised by the Anti-globalists. From those who voted, 516 were against the resettlement of refugees in Riga. Minutes were drawn up and the results of the vote were submitted to the Riga City Council.
- **05.02.2016**: Within the EU Resettlement Programme, the first six people arrive in Latvia: two families from Syria and Eritrea.

• 06.02.2016: A protest rally against mass immigration is organised at the Monument of Freedom.
• 22.02.2016: The Riga Construction Office withdraws a construction permit for the conversion of a building into a mosque started by the Islamic Culture Centre since the documents necessary for the reconstruction have not been submitted.
• 27.02.2016: A march in support of refugees takes place in Esplanāde, a park in Riga.
• 28.02.2016: The TV3 programme “Nothing Personal” broadcasts a story about the former head of the Latvian Islamic Culture Centre Oļegs Petrovs who supported terrorist attacks in France and lauded Jihad.
• 02.03.2016: The Security Police publish information about opening criminal proceedings against two people for unlawful participation in an armed conflict in Syria; one of them is the former head of the Latvian Islamic Culture Centre Oļegs Petrovs.
• 02.03.2016: A public expert discussion entitled “Diversity on the Border: Islam and the West” takes place.
• 20.10.2016: A discussion “How Foreign or Close is Islamic Culture for a Latvian?” takes place at the Latvian National Library.
• 25.10.2016: The Riga District Court sentences the accused person to 140 hours of community service in criminal proceedings for publishing hostile comments about Muslims on the Internet.
• 26.10.2016: The results of the project competition organised by the SCCF are made public: financial support for the creation of a documentary about everyday life of the Latvian Muslim community has been awarded.
This is the second issue of the annual *European Islamophobia Report (EIR)* which was presented for the first time in 2015. New countries are included in this year's *EIR*; while 25 countries were covered in 2015, the report for 2016 includes 27 country reports. *EIR 2016* is the result of 31 prominent scholars who specialise in different fields such as racism, gender and Islamophobia Studies.

Islamophobia has become a real danger to the foundations of democratic order and the values of the European Union. It has also become the main challenge to the social peace and coexistence of different cultures, religions and ethnicities in Europe. The country reports of *EIR 2016*, which cover almost all the European continent from Russia to Portugal and from Greece to Latvia, clearly show that the level of Islamophobia in fields such as education, employment, media, politics, the justice system and the Internet is on the rise. Since the publication of the last report there is little improvement. On the contrary, one can see from the country reports that the state of democracy and human rights in Europe is deteriorating. Islamophobia has become more real especially in the everyday lives of Muslims in Europe. It has surpassed the stage of being a rhetorical animosity and has become a physical animosity that Muslims feel in everyday life be it at school, the workplace, the mosque, transportation or simply on the street.

*About SETA*

Foundation for Political, Economic and Social Research (SETA) is a non-profit research institute based in Turkey dedicated to innovative studies on national, regional and international issues. SETA is the leading think tank in Turkey and has offices in Ankara, Istanbul, Washington D.C. and Cairo. The objective of SETA is to produce up-to-date and accurate knowledge and analyses in the fields of politics, economy, and society, and inform policy makers and the public on changing political, economic, social, and cultural conditions. Through research reports, publications, brainstorming sessions, conferences and policy recommendations, SETA seeks to guide leaders in government, civil society, and business, and contributes to informed decision making mechanisms.