ABOUT EDITORS

Enes Bayraklı
Mr. Bayraklı earned his BA, MA and PhD from the Department of Political Science at the University of Vienna, and conducted research for his PhD thesis at the University of Nottingham in Britain between 2009 and 2010. He took office as a deputy director at Yunus Emre Turkish Cultural Center in London in 2011-2013. Mr. Bayraklı also served as the founding director of Yunus Emre Turkish Cultural Centers in Constanta and Bucharest during the period of August-December 2012. Mr. Bayraklı has been a faculty member in the Department of Political Science at the Turkish-German University since 2013. His fields of research include the Transformation of Turkish Foreign Policy, Cultural Diplomacy, Foreign Policy Analysis, German Politics and Foreign Policy. bayrakli@tau.edu.tr

Farid Hafez
Farid Hafez is currently Fulbright–Botstiber Visiting Professor of Austrian-American Studies at the University of California, Berkeley. He is a lecturer and researcher at the Department of Sociology and Political Science at the University of Salzburg. Hafez earned his PhD in Political Science from the University of Vienna and has been teaching at numerous universities across the world. He has been a visiting scholar at Columbia University. Hafez is the founding editor of the German-English Islamophobia Studies Yearbook (www.jahrbuch-islamophobie.de). He was awarded the Bruno Kreisky Award for the political book of 2009 for his German anthology Islamophobia in Austria, which he co-edited with Prof. John Bunzl. He has published more than 10 books and 40 articles. His articles have appeared in high-ranking journals such as Patterns of Prejudice, Austrian Journal of Political Science, Discourse and Society, German Politics and Society, Islamophobia Studies Journal, Journal of Black Studies, and many others. E-mail: farid.hafez@sbg.ac.at

For more information about the EIR:
www.islamophobiaeurope.com
islamophobia@setav.org
THE STATE OF ISLAMOPHOBIA IN EUROPE

INES 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%.

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.

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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.
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. 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

Mitre Georgiev is a human rights advocate, lawyer and researcher born in Bitola, Macedonia. He holds a Bachelor of Law (LL.B) from the Justinianus Primus Law Faculty, Ss. Cyril and Methodius University in Skopje, Macedonia, and an Advanced Master (MA) of European Studies from the University of Zagreb, Croatia. He has worked for several civil society organisations in Macedonia, Croatia and abroad. His research interests include, among others, discrimination, human rights, migration, asylum, extradition, EU law and citizenship. E-mail: mitre.georgiev@googlemail.com

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Executive Summary

The political crisis in Macedonia culminated in the elections of December 2016, which however did not end this crisis; the election campaigns were the main source of Islamophobic discourse that was used to discredit political opponents. The other strand of Islamophobic discourse and discursive events arose from issues related to securitization such as terrorism, migration, asylum, and foreign fighters. Islamophobic speech in Macedonia is present in media and social media. The professional standards and the independence of media in Macedonia remain issues that are relevant to Islamophobia in 2016 as the state of media freedom and independence continues to deteriorate.

Underreporting of Islamophobia is still a problem, mostly because of the intersectionality with ethnic and political discrimination. It can also be presumed that there is lack of trust in the institutions which should, therefore, react, protect and build a protective environment. Civil society initiatives do not directly tackle Islamophobia, apart from the general antidiscrimination discourse and interreligious dialogue. However, NGOs have an important task in monitoring and reporting Islamophobia; education and an increase in awareness of the issue are also important.

Islamophobic initiatives are ad hoc and often seem to be “imported” following the discourse from far right “hate groups” existing in the EU and U.S. The improvement of the framework of the general rule of law, and avoiding and condemning the existing ethno-nationalistic discourse is strongly recommended. Critical coverage of issues relating to Islam in public discourse is also important in order to prevent Islamophobia.
Извршно резиме

Политичката криза и изборите во декември 2016 со кои кризата достигна до кулминација, но не и до решение, беа извор на исламофобен дискурс користен за дискредитација на политичките противници. Другиот извор на исламофобен дискурс и дискурзивни настана кои можат да доведат до исламофобија потекнува од прашаниата поврзани со секуритизација како што се тероризмот, миграција, азил, странски борци. Исламофобен говор е присутен во медиумите и на друштвените мрежи. Професионалните стандарди и независноста на медиумите во Македонија се штетни за тема која е релевантна за исламофобијата во Македонија имајќи во предвид дека слободата и независноста на медиумите продолжува да се влошува.

Непријавувањето на исламофобија е суштено проблем, најмногу заради меѓусебната поврзаност со етничката и политичка дискриминација, но исто може да се претпостави дека недостига доверба во институциите кои би требало да реагираат, заштитат и изградат сигурна средина. Иницијативите на граѓанското општество не ја препознаваат исламофобијата надвор од рамките на политика и јавната рамка на заштита од дискриминација и етнонационалниот дијалог. Сепак, организираната на граѓанското општество има важна задача во мониторингот, известувањето како и во поглед на едукација и осветлување на јавноста за важноста на ова прашање.

Исламофобните иницијативи се ад хок, и, се чини, често „увезени“ бидејќи го следат дискурсот на радикално десните „групи на омраза“ кои веќе постојат во ЕУ и САД. Се препорачува подобрување на општата рамка за владење на правото, осуда и избегнување на постоечкиот етнонационалниот дискурс како и критички пристап кон темите кои се поврзани со Исламот како би се спречила и преверила исламофобијата.
Introduction

The report draws on two pillars of data. The first one is data on discriminatory actions on the ground of religion – specifically against those belonging to the Islamic religion - which took place in 2016. The second is what in most cases preceded these discriminatory actions - discursive events or enticement of hatred, and attempts to counter it with critical speech.

Muslims are an important religious minority in Macedonia, significant for both their number and their historical presence. According to the last census of the population and households which took place in 2002, 33.3% are Muslim, 64.7% are Orthodox Christian, and the rest follow other religions including Catholicism and Protestantism. Beyond religion, in the context of Macedonia, the ethnic structure is also important in understanding Islamophobia. Again, the only relevant data is from the 2002 census, in which 64% of the population identified themselves as Macedonians, 25% as Albanians, 3.8% as Turks, 2.6% as Roma, 1.8% as Serbian, 0.8% as Bosniaks, and 0.1 as Muslims. Religious division correlates with ethnic division. Most of the ethnic Macedonians are Orthodox Christians, while most of the Albanians are Muslims; Islam is also the religion for the majority of Turks, Roma, Bosnians and Macedonian Muslims.

This report is based on the analysis of media reports and readily available documents, legislation, official reports by the government or governmental bodies, national human rights institutions, and national and international non-governmental and governmental organisations. Sources of data considered and used were those available in English and Macedonian. This was so because the researcher lacked language proficiency in the Albanian language; this is hereby acknowledged as a limitation for both the methodology and the inclusiveness of the results presented herein. The reader is kindly directed to the 2015 Report on Islamophobia in Macedonia for an extensive description of the general context of Islam, ethnic structure and political background in Macedonia. All information in this report pertains to the period between 1 January, 2016 and 31 December, 2016.

1. A new census should have taken place in 2011, but it was cancelled in controversial circumstances with ethnic and political overtones. Thus, the 2002 census data are the latest available data. According to this data, the total population of the country is 2,022,547. The State Statistical Office estimates that the total population in the Republic of Macedonia on 31 December, 2015 is 2,071,278. See: State Statistical Office Website, data available from http://makstat.stat.gov.mk/PxWeb/pxweb/mk/MakStat/MakStat__Naselenie__ProcenkiNaselenie/225_Popis_reg_31_12_PolVoz_mak.px/table/viewLayout2/?uuid=1b95834b-9218-48dc-9620-5f3004d518b (retrieved February 5, 2017).

2. The author would like to acknowledge and express gratitude for the contribution and support in writing this report to Biljana Kotevska, particularly for the sections dealing with education and employment.
Significant Incidents and Developments

In Macedonia, the year 2016 was marked by a deep political and societal crisis. In the words of the European Commission of the European Union, this was the “most severe [crisis] since 2001”. 3 Two very important events took place: the first was the protests and the societal confrontations related to the political crisis, and the second was the elections which were scheduled for April, then postponed until June, and were finally held on 11 December. Due to the seriousness of the 2015 wire tapping scandal allegations which, among others, revealed possible election fraud, corruption and other criminal acts by the ruling party VMRO-DPMNE (Внатрешна македонска революционерна организација – Демокratsка партија за македонско национално единство, Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organisation – Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity) the election campaign was marked by the “ethnocentric messages conveyed by the ruling party and their warnings of a supposedly planned federalisation of the country”. 4

In the election campaign for the 2016 pre-term parliamentary elections, both in the official and the un-official campaigns that began long before, there were several noticeable attempts at discrediting politicians and political parties on account of the Muslimness of their members. Interestingly, the Islamophobic discourse which stemmed from the main ruling party VMRO-DPMNE was not directed towards ethnic minority political parties, but at the main opposition party, SDSM (Социјалдемократски сојуз на Македонија – Social Democratic Union of Macedonia). Islamophobic discourse was noted in the attempts at discrediting other Albanian parties by claiming that they have “Islamic backgrounds” and by doing so protecting the ruling Albanian party DUI (Bashkimi Demokratik për Integrim/Demokratska unija za integraciju – Democratic Union for Integration). 5

The attempt to present a civic option that would overcome the ethnic divisions was received by more discrediting along ethnic lines. The representation of Islam in Macedonia and its interrelation with ethnic identity is very important for understanding Islamophobia in Macedonia. Ethnic relations continue to be tense and often politicised.

On the global level, the issues of refugees, the terrorist attacks in Paris, Nice, Berlin, and the U.S. presidential elections gained publicity in local media and cre-

ated discursive events that gave rise to Islamophobia. Uncritical reporting, as well as a sensationalistic approach to these issues contributed to Islamophobic discourse that can be seen in comments sections relating to such news. As the refugees were mainly passing through Macedonia in order to get to Western European countries, in the Macedonian context the so-called “refugee crisis” resonates both on the global and local level. Despite the closure of what was known as the Balkan route, refugees kept arriving and mainly passing through Macedonia; they were in a particularly vulnerable position and numerous attacks were reported on the webpage for reporting hate crime zlostorstvaodomraza.mk.6 The process of securitization of migration that culminated with the closure of the borders put an end to the Balkan Route, which influenced Macedonian society and, in turn, this largely influenced the discourse regarding Islamophobia. The World Macedonian Congress, an organisation claiming to be “an informal World Parliament of Macedonians from all parts of Macedonia in the world”7 demanded from the president and the government of the Republic of Macedonia to “warn the migrants and the international community that the illegal and violent entrance of migrants on the territory of the Republic of Macedonia will be considered an act of war” as the acceptance of migrants from Asia will change the “ethnic and religious map of the Republic of Macedonia”; they also demanded from the government to eliminate all NGOs supporting the acceptance of migrants.8

According to an article by Piro Rexhepi, who examines the emergence of Balkan Islam as more secular and reluctant to engage in terrorism in light of Islam’s securitization, the EU enlargement policies in the Western Balkans through the debates on the “crime-terror” nexus suggest the “acceptable Islamic practices”, thus marking “suspect communities” and “relegating Islam only to the private sphere”.9 Thereby, in the Macedonian context the categories of the “good” and “bad” Muslim are used as well and implicitly or explicitly attributed to certain ethnic groups or designated together with other criteria in a way which induces Islamophobia.

Discrimination both towards ethnic Albanians and towards refugees is fuelled by discursive events that contain among others Islamophobic rhetoric on the platform built by strong ethno-nationalism, securitization and populism.

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ISLAMOPHOBIA IN MACEDONIA

Discussion of Islamophobic Incidents and Discursive Events

Employment

Under the Law on Prevention and Protection Against Discrimination (ADL), religion is a protected discrimination ground (Article 3) and employment is a protected field (Article 4). However, assumed discrimination does not fall within the scope of the ADL. An analysis of the harmonization of the equality and non-discrimination legislation published in 2016 by the OSCE and the Commission for Protection Against Discrimination (CPAD) underlines this as an issue and recommends legislative change – introducing a second paragraph to Article 3 which will include assumed discrimination as well as discrimination by association.

At the time of writing this report, the two national human rights institutions with competences to oversee discrimination in the job market including on grounds of religion, namely the Ombudsperson of the Republic of Macedonia (Ombudsperson) and the CPAD, had not yet published their annual reports for 2016. There is no case on grounds of religion or other belief filed to the CPAD in 2016. In addition, none of the cases on ethnic affiliation in the area of employment seem to suggest an indirect discriminatory action on grounds of religion, or any connectedness to it.

A study of the implementation of the just and equitable representation principle in the public sector, published in 2016 by the European Policy Institute focused, among others, on equality and non-discrimination on ethnic grounds. It explicitly notes the fluidity in Macedonian context between religion, ethnicity and language, in line with what is at the international level understood by ECRI and others as “race”. This study found lack of knowledge on the legal protection against discrimination, internal mechanisms for addressing discrimination issues and protecting

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against discrimination internally. This conclusion is drawn on the grounds of results from a survey conducted within the frame of this study with public servants, which shows that 44.3% of respondents consider that they do not know what to do in case of discrimination, as opposed to 39.8% who say that they do. They also think that the Ombudsperson and the CPAD have never dealt with a discrimination case from/in relation to the institution where they work. In addition, it also shows that 23.8% of the survey respondents “identified members of the Albanian community as the most subjected to prejudice. Half of the respondents do not express distrust towards any of the communities, while 14.5% of them express distrust towards Macedonians. Meanwhile, 11.2 % of the total number of female respondents does not trust Albanians. When asked how colleagues from different ethnic communities treat each other, 64.8% answered that there is equal treatment and 25.3% reported partially equal treatment. A small number (2%) of respondents believe they are treated unequally.”16 Also according to the respondents, women and persons with disabilities seem to be subject to multiple types of discrimination.17

**Education**

An unpublished OSCE and CPAD 2016 analysis of stereotypes, prejudice and discrimination in primary school textbooks reached worrying results. The 24 analysed textbooks suggest that beyond doubt it can be concluded that the textbooks impose Christianity as the norm and consider some religions to be “right”, “normal” and omnipresent. Islam and other religions are presented through a discourse of Othering.18 Below are some of the findings noted in this analysis.

The authors of textbooks presuppose that the children are Orthodox Christians and have, thus, phrased the exercises or the homework tasks in relation to this. For example, they ask the children who colours eggs in their home, which songs they sing for **Kolede,**19 what they do on Christmas which is dubbed “the happiest night”, and so on. Authors then ask students whether they know the meaning of a term which is related, for example, to “Muslim”, but, conversely, do not ask whether they know a term related to Christianity, for example “Christian”.20

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17. Ibid.


19. The evening before Christmas Eve.

This analysis notes that in a lesson called “Religion and religious institutions in the Republic of Macedonia” from the textbook Society for V grade, Christianity and Islam are noted as “dominant religions” in Macedonia. However, the lesson does not ascribe Christianity as faith to ethnic communities in the country, but it does for Islam by explicitly numbering ethnic communities which are predominantly Muslim.  

The focus group that Analytica think tank held for the research “Assessment of Macedonia’s Efforts in Countering Violent Extremism, View from Civil Society” noted cases of veiled Muslim women who have been “ridiculed and bullied by professors at state universities”. However, there was no information of such cases in the media or any such cases reported to institutions or NGOs.

**Politics**

The elections which were supposed to take place in April, then in June and finally happened in December left their mark on 2016 though they have not solved the political crisis as no political party gained majority, while the VMRO DMPNE gained the most seats in parliament. The election campaign as mentioned before was marked by tense political debates and Islamophobia was instrumentalised in order to discredit political opponents or for populist purposes.

The opposition party SDSM included several ethnic Albanians on its voting lists in so-called “winning places”. They attracted the votes of ethnic Albanians who are not satisfied with the corrupt and clientelistic practices of the existing Albanian ethnic parties. Muhamed Zekiri, a former journalist and member of the executive board of the SDSM, was labelled as an “Islamistic radical” in a news article that reported that the SDSM opened their headquarters in a “mosque” or improvised religious premises in Kriva Palanka, posing the question “whether the executive board [of the SDSM] is secretly advocating for total Islamization of Macedonia, even in places such as Kriva Palanka where over 99% of the population is Christian Orthodox”. Another news portal, Infomax.mk, labelled another SDSM candidate, namely Ferid Muhic, as a “radical Islamist” and stated that the genocide in Srebrenica was organised by Izetbegovic and Clinton in order to justify the military intervention.

21. Ibid., p.31.  
In order to discredit its political opponents, it was speculated that the Albanians who voted for the opposition party were paid by the Albanian diaspora and that these funds were distributed through religious facilities.25

Zahir Beqiri (aka Chaush) was accused of forging documents in a highly politicised court case. In the case it was stressed that the accused is a member of the opposition political party SDSM and asked the judge and the public prosecutor to be acquitted as he considered that he was discriminated on religious grounds.26

Media
The Law on Media set the professional standards for media and forbid hate speech. However, professional standards and the independence of media in Macedonia remain issues that are relevant for Islamophobia in 2016 as the state of both continue to deteriorate.29 In such an environment, a critical approach is often lacking and discriminative and Islamophobic speech is seldom sanctioned.

Islamophobic content or discourse that may lead to Islamophobia was found in media in the context of reporting on the election campaigns for the purpose of political discrediting.

Apart from domestic issues, Islamophobia in the media was built mainly through the securitization discourse with reference to global issues such as terrorism and migration, but also regarding the so-called “foreign fighters” and religious conversion. The issue of foreign fighters continued to be present in public discourse in 2016, mostly because of the arrest of four persons accused of participation in a terrorist organisation as part of a case named ‘Cell 2’, and the statements of the President of Republic of Macedonia Gjorge Ivanov.30 Regarding the debate on foreign fighters it is important to note that the think tank Analytica has published the policy brief entitled “Assessment of Macedonia’s Ef-
forts in Countering Violent Extremism, View from Civil Society” which is an important contribution towards a critical and informed debate on countering violent extremism and foreign fighters by framing the discourse in facts and analysis. However, in another text on the same issue on the portal Religija.mk, while trying to follow the same approach it is claimed that “the number of people who are converting to another religion is concerning, who are accepting the Islamic faith and who are the most radical”.

The reporting of conversions makes the news in media outlets. The most notable case is that of a young Christian woman who converted to Islam according primarily to her posts on Facebook. The media continued to report on the events that followed such as her marriage and giving birth. Although there were no direct Islamophobic references in the news coverage of this case, the lack of a critical approach and the emphasis given to the issue resulted in Islamophobic messages in the comment sections of the relevant articles.

Reporting on terrorist attacks around the world continues to bring issues of Islamophobia to the forefront and frequently results in Islamophobic comments on Internet portals. The most prominent is the case from 9 December, 2016, when in a very short period the media reported on three terrorist attacks: the assassination of the Russian ambassador in Turkey, the shooting in Zurich and the incident at the Christmas Market in Berlin. However, the first news of the attack on the Islamic Centre in Zurich did not characterise the attack as terrorist and was very careful in drawing any conclusions, sticking instead to the known facts. The attack in Berlin was described as a terrorist attack and the issue of whether the perpetrator was a migrant, a refugee, or an asylum seeker - categories which are often not understood and are used incorrectly - was continuously raised.

In the media, Islam is presented as a threat. The news portal of the daily newspaper Dnevnik published an article entitled “Brussels by year 2030 will be a Mus-

31. Selimi/ Stojkovski, “Assessment of Macedonia’s Efforts in Countering Violent Extremism, View From Civil Society”.
lim-majority city” with the subheading “Islam is slowly conquering Europe” bringing together the attitudes towards Muslims and terrorism, sharia law and Islamization.39

Internet
Hate speech is on the rise in social networks as well as on Internet news outlets and other web pages.40 On the web page govornaomraza.mk, which is a service for reporting hate speech, there are numerous reports on hate speech and Islamophobic speech in the comment section of social networks and Internet portals.41

The Facebook page of Pegida Macedonia as reported by Global Voices and other media and organisations combating hate speech became the first webpage that on 26 January, 2016 was suspended by Facebook; this was also reported in the Macedonia Islamophobia Report on 2015.42 The Facebook page was suspended for hate speech, or violation of Facebook’s Community Standards after being reported several times for its Islamophobic content.

However the Facebook page of Pegida Macedonia continued to regularly post messages online; their posts, however, did not received significant support, with an average of 1 to 7 likes for each post. The first post was uploaded on 1 February 2016, so it is yet unclear whether the new Facebook page is still undercover and does not attract public attention in order to be protected from reporting and another suspension.

Pegida Macedonia or the person(s) behind the webpage seem to have connections with other international counterparts and the diaspora. They may have roots in the diaspora (countries with strong(er) anti-Islam movements such as Germany, U.S.) and be trying to promote the same model in the Macedonian context. Pegida Macedonia regularly shares posts from other Pegida organisations/pages, such as Pegida Canada, Pegida USA, Pegida Scotland, Pegida Norway as well as articles that support Donald Trump, Vladimir Putin, and Geert Wilders. Besides being Islamophobic, the Facebook page of Pegida Macedonia is also highly nationalistic, Orthodox and openly expresses anti-migrant tendencies.

Another Facebook page that uses Islamophobic discourse is ‘Macedonia Supports Donald Trump’ created to show support for the candidate of the U.S. presidential elections; the page continued to be active after he was elected president. Islamophobic content was noted in the aftermath of the Berlin attack and on the occasion of reporting the news that allegedly the daughter of an EU official was murdered

and raped by an Afghan migrant. Another post shows what appears to be a Muslim praying on a bus alluding to the fact that this is allegedly happening in the centre of Belgrade and calling out for it not to be allowed in Macedonia.43

Civil Society and Political Initiatives Undertaken to Counter Islamophobia

Initiatives undertaken to counter discriminatory practices in general, as well as initiatives undertaken to combat discrimination on grounds other than religion (discrimination on the ground of ethnicity or language), or in particular targeting Islam and its followers, can contribute to the reduction of the general level of Islamophobia in Macedonia. For example, activities directed towards combating discrimination or the reduction of the social distance of people belonging to the Albanian or Roma ethnic community are greatly needed.

In the situation where there is a lack of political will for independence of institutions, including judiciary, supervisory and regulatory bodies who should sanction discrimination and hate speech, the role of fact-checking services is particularly important. The fact-checking project Servis za proverka na fakti does immensely important work in this regard and in several occasions critically analysed media pieces which were contributing to Islamophobic discourse, as well as other forms of religious intolerance.44 Support of such initiatives is very important in order to build a critical debate and prevent the further radicalisation of the discourse.

The reporting of Islamophobia remains an issue as there is a relatively small number of reports of discrimination and hate speech on religious ground by Muslims. On the webpage religija.mk there are often articles which introduce basic concepts of Islam and discuss issues related to religion, including interreligious dialogue. The website also presents a series of videos where imams and Orthodox priests dis-


cuss radicalization and its relation to religion.\textsuperscript{45} They also present the results of research on the perception of religion by Macedonian citizens.\textsuperscript{46}

The ZIP Institute is also implementing a project entitled “Imam or priest? Whoever, just in the role of peace!” with the aim of improving interreligious relations and the prevention of escalation of ethnic conflicts. The project includes representatives of the Orthodox Church and the Islamic Community who participate in discussions and training sessions in communities with a mixed religious structure.\textsuperscript{47}

**Conclusion and Policy Recommendations**

The ethnic tensions in Macedonia have the potential to transform into religious tensions and ethno-nationalistic discourse, while discriminative actions against certain ethnic minorities overlap with religious intolerance, including Islamophobia.

The key recommendation for politics is to re-establish rule of law and ensure the functioning and independence of institutions in order to secure that the state does not violate human rights, including the right to equality and freedom of religion; to provide an environment in which there is trust that institutions will act on reported discrimination; and as a positive measure to create an environment in which there is no place for Islamophobia by encouraging public discussions on the relevant issues.

The pacification of the discourse and the rejection of populist politics, through calls for the responsibility of politicians is needed in order to prevent Islamophobia. The securitization discourse should be avoided and not connected with Islam and Muslims. The state authorities should cooperate with the Islamic community/communities and the attempts of deradicalization should be carefully framed in order not to violate religious pluralism and religious freedoms. Informed public debates are needed as well as professional, critical and fact-based journalism.

Particular attention in suppressing Islamophobia should be addressed with Muslim women in mind. In the focus group that Analytica think tank held for the research “Assessment of Macedonia’s Efforts in Countering Violent Extremism, View from Civil Society” particular attention was given to the issue of Muslim women, especially veiled women who are more vulnerable to discrimination both in the field of education and employment.\textsuperscript{48}

\textsuperscript{45}See: \url{http://religija.mk/category/na_ista_strana/} (retrieved January 11, 2017).


\textsuperscript{48}Selimi/Stojkovski, “Assessment of Macedonia’s Efforts in Countering Violent Extremism, View from Civil Society”.
Chronology

- **14 January:** Nikola Gruevski resigned as prime minister in accordance with the Pržino Agreement while he remained president of the ruling party VMRO DPMNE.
- **16 March:** The Constitutional Court quashed the provisions of the Abolition Act that restricted abolition to criminal acts related, among others, to elections.
- **12 April:** President George Ivanov published the decision for the abolition of politicians; this caused mass protests, which lasted until June, and that would later become known as the “Colourful Revolution”.
- **6 June:** President Ivanov withdraws the abolition decision.
- **1 July:** An Islamophobic press statement regarding the refugees issued by the World Macedonian Congress.
- **11 December:** Parliamentary elections in Macedonia result in fewer parliamentary places for the ruling party of the last 10 years, which still, however, wins the elections. The overall number of MPs from the Albanian parties decreased, while Albanian MPs were selected from the main opposition party, SDSM.
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, brain storming sessions, conferences and policy recommendations, SETA seeks to guide leaders in government, civil society, and business, and contributes to informed decision making mechanisms.