By gathering 39 local scholars, experts, and civil society activists specialized in racism and human rights, the fourth edition of the European Islamophobia Report addresses a still timely and politically important issue. All 34 country reports included in this book follow a unique structure that is convenient, first, for comparing country reports and, second, for selected readings on a particular topic such as politics, employment, or education with regards to Islamophobia across Europe.

The present report investigates in detail the underlying dynamics that directly or indirectly support the rise of anti-Muslim racism in Europe. This extends from Islamophobic statements spread in national media to laws and policies that restrain the fundamental rights of European Muslim citizens. As a result, the European Islamophobia Report 2018 discusses the impact of anti-Muslim discourse on human rights, multiculturalism, and the state of law in Europe.

This fourth edition of our report highlights how European societies are challenged by the rise of violent far-right groups that do not only preach hatred of Muslims but also participate in the organization of bloody terror attacks. The rise of far-right terrorist groups such as AFO (Action of Operational Forces) in France or the network Hannibal in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland confirms EUROPOL’s alarming surveys on the growing danger of right-wing terrorism.

This year, SETA worked in cooperation with the Leopold Weiss Institute, an Austrian NGO based in Vienna dedicated to the research of Muslims in Europe. In addition, the European Union has funded the European Islamophobia Report 2018 through the program “Civil Society Dialogue Between EU and Turkey (CSD-V)”.

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.
ABOUT EDITORS

Enes Bayraklı

Enes 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 was a deputy director at the Yunus Emre Turkish Cultural Center in London in 2011-2013. Bayraklı also served as the founding director of the Yunus Emre Turkish Cultural Centers in Constanta and Bucharest, Romania in August-December 2012. He has been a faculty member at the Department of Political Science and International Relations at the Turkish-German University since 2013. Currently he is also the coordinator of SETA Brussels office and director of European Studies at SETA Foundation. His fields of research include Islamophobia in Europe, far-right movements in Europe, the transformation of Turkish foreign policy, foreign policy analysis, and German foreign policy.

Farid Hafez

Farid Hafez, PhD (Political Science, University of Vienna), is currently lecturer and researcher at the University of Salzburg, Department of Political Science and Sociology and senior researcher at Georgetown University’s “The Bridge Initiative” at the School of Foreign Service. He defended his habilitation thesis on “Islam-Politics in the Second Republic of Austria” at the University of Salzburg. In 2017, he was a Fulbright visiting professor at the University of California, Berkeley and in 2014, he was a visiting scholar at Columbia University, New York. Since 2010 he has been the editor of Islamophobia Studies Yearbook, and since 2016 the co-editor of European Islamophobia Report. Hafez has received the Bruno Kreisky Award for the “Political Book of the Year” for his anthology Islamophobia in Austria (co-edited with John Bunzl). He has more than 80 publications in leading journals such as Politics and Religion, Patterns of Prejudice, and German Politics and Society. His latest publications are Islamophobia in Muslim Majority Societies (Routledge, co-edited with Enes Bayraklı) and Feindbild Islam. Über die Salonfähigkeit von Rassismus (Böhlau).

For more information about the EIR:
www.islamophobiaeurope.com
islamophobia@setav.org
ISLAMOPHOBIA IN BULGARIA
NATIONAL REPORT 2018
HAYRI A. EMIN
The Author

**Hayri A. Emin** is a PhD candidate in International Relations at the Faculty of Economics and Administrative Sciences at Trakya University in Edirne, Turkey. He graduated with a Master’s degree in International Political Relations and Security Studies from the Faculty of Philosophy at Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski,” Bulgaria. His scientific interests include, among others, international relations, Balkan politics, security issues, Islamophobia, freedom of religion and belief, hate crime, civil society, and minority issues.

**Disclaimer:** Statements of fact and opinion in the national reports of the *European Islamophobia Report* are those of the respective authors. They are not the expression of the editors or the funding institutions and do not necessarily reflect the views of the European Union and Ministry of Foreign Affairs-Directororate for EU Affairs.

Executive Summary

This report examines Islamophobia in Bulgaria in 2018. The methodology used in this report is based on data collection from electronic media, the press, Internet, and communication with NGOs, interviews with Islamic community representatives in the country, and reports from international institutions and non-governmental organizations.

The primary outcome of the 2018 report is that Islamophobia continues to exist in different fields across the country. It remains manifested primarily on the level of hate speech towards Muslims and Islam and to a lesser extent on the level of hate crime and discrimination. Among the most important issues are the unwillingness of the prosecutor’s offices and the courts to deal with cases of discrimination and anti-Muslim manifestations.

Speeches made by high-ranking civil servants and academics that may be classified as Islamophobic, actions of representatives of certain nationalist parties, contradictory actions of some state and municipal administrations against the Muslim community and its properties, and anti-Muslim hate incidents, are among the most significant cases of Islamophobia in the country.

In 2018, anti-Muslim rhetoric became more acceptable in some mainstream media organs, in an intellectual way, as well as in a highly derogatory, racist, and vulgar style. The prosecution and the judiciary’s activities with regard to anti-Muslim acts and Islamophobia continue to be ineffective. In general, the vast majority of perpetrators of Islamophobic attacks remain unsanctioned.

Some international organizations, and in particular the European Union, have made a number of recommendations to improve the local legislative system and laws like the Antidiscrimination Law and the Penal Code. Also, the Bulgarian legislation falls short of addressing the anti-Muslim hatred in Bulgarian society.
Резюме

Този доклад изследва ислямофобията в България през 2018 г. Методологията, използвана в доклада се основава на информацията, събрана от електронните медии, пресата, интернет, комуникацията с НПО, интервюта с представители на ислямската общност в страната и доклади на международни институции и неправителствени организации. Основният резултат от доклада за 2018 г. е, че ислямофобията продължава да съществува в различни области в страната. Тя се проявява преди всичко на нивото на словото на омразата към мюсюлманите и исляма и в по-малка степен на дискриминация и престъпления от омраза. Изказванията, които могат да се окажат като ислямофобски, направени от високопоставени държавни служители, академици, действията на представители на някои национално-традиционни партии, противоречивите действия на някои държавни и общински администрации спрямо мюсюлманска общност и техните имоти, както и антимюсюлманските инциденти от омраза, са сред най-значимите случаи на ислямофобия в страната през 2018 г. Анти-мюсюлманската реторика е станала по-приемлива в някои от основните медиуми, както чрез интелектуален начин, така и в сильно унизиращ и расистки и вулгарен стил. Дейността на прокуратурата и съдебните власти по отношение на антимюсюлманските прояви и ислямофобията продължават да бъдат неефективни. Като цяло, по-голямата част от извършителите на ислямофобски удари остават ненаказани. Също така, българското законодателство не е достатъчно, за да се справи с антимюсюлманската омраза в българското общество. Някои международни организации, както и Европейският съюз, отправят редица препоръки за подобряване на законодателната система и закони като антидискриминационния закон и Наказателния кодекс.
Country Profile

Country: Bulgaria
Type of Regime: Democracy
Form of Government: Unitary Parliamentary Republic
Ruling Parties: GERB and United Patriots (Right-Centrist, Conservative, Nationalistic-Patriotic)
Opposition Parties: BSP (Bulgarian Socialist Party), MRF (Movement for Rights and Freedom) – a centrist political party, ‘Volya’ (Will) – a populist political party.
Last Elections: 26 March, 2017 (Parliamentary Election):
GERB won a plurality of 33.54% of the vote with 95 of the 240 seats in the National Assembly. The second power is the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) with 27.93% and 80 seats, followed by the United Patriots (IMRO, NFSB, ATAKA) with 9.31% and 27 seats; the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (DPS) party 9.24% and 26 seats; and the VOLYA party with 4.26% and 12 seats. The GERB party formed a coalition with the United Patriots. Boyko Borisov (GERB party) was elected prime minister.
Total Population: 7,364,570 (in 2011)
Major Languages: Bulgarian
Official Religion: No official religion (Secularism). The constitution designates Eastern Orthodox Christianity as the “traditional” religion.
Statistics on Islamophobia: In 2018, the Office of the Grand Mufti reported 2 anti-Muslim attacks and 6 cases of Islamophobia.
Statistics on Racism and Discrimination: There is no special statistics and database on Racism and Discrimination.
Major Religions (% of Population): Eastern Orthodox Christianity (76%), 4,374,135 followers or 76% of the population. The Protestant religion has 64,476 followers (1.1%), and the Catholic religion has 48,945 followers (0.8%) according to respondents. 1,162 persons were recorded as Jews (0.015%).
Muslim Population (% of Population): 577,139 (10%) in 2011.
Main Muslim Community Organizations: Muslim Denomination in Bulgaria (Office of the Grand Mufti)
Main NGOs Combating Islamophobia: No specific NGO combating Islamophobia.
Far Right Parties: In Bulgaria, the political parties are nationalistic and patriotic (IMRO, NFSB, ATAKA, and BNU-ND). They are not defined exactly as far right or extreme left. But they combine left and right beliefs.
Far Right Movements: Bulgarian National Union, National Resistance (NS), Blood and Honor
Far Right Terrorist Organisations: N/A
Limitations to Islamic Practices:
- Hijab Ban: No
- Halal Slaughter Ban: No
- Minaret Ban: No (depends on local decision)
- Circumcision Ban: No
- Burka Ban: Law of Prohibiting the Wearing of Clothing Concealing One’s Face in Public Spaces, so-called Anti-Burqa Law was adopted on 30 September, 2016 in the National Assembly.
- Prayer Ban: No.
Introduction

When talking about Islamophobia in Bulgaria, it is crucial to have in mind that debates on Islam are deeply rooted in and strongly intertwined with the experience of a long Ottoman past and its collective interpretations during the post-Ottoman period. The Ottoman rule was a serious trauma and crucial juncture in the creation of the collective identity of the Bulgarians and the Ottoman past is still present in the predominant memories of the national self and ‘other.’

It’s also important to have in mind the significant Turkish-Muslim minority in its capacity as a remnant of the Ottoman period, which has always been perceived as a threat to the national security of Bulgaria. Particularly during the totalitarian period before 1989, the authorities conducted an assimilation policy and policy of reducing the number of the Turkish-Muslim population, which subsequently led to restrictive measures and even to changing Muslims’ names with Slavic ones, which was called the “Revival Process.” After the collapse of the regime in 1989, the country became part of the democratic world. However, some political parties, mostly nationalistic ones, still continue to treat Turks and Muslims as a major threat for society. This can be observed by the party policies, the statements and behavior of politicians related to them, media publications, etc. As a consequence, alongside all contemporary developments associated with the rise of ‘radical Islam,’ this historical past should always be taken into consideration when it comes to the issue of Islamophobia in the country.

On the other hand, the Muslims and Turks have always been loyal Bulgarian citizens. Concepts such as radicalism or fundamentalism are totally untypical of them. Furthermore, there is no single case of participation of Muslims from Bulgaria in terrorist organizations such as DAESH or in any aggression inside the country. However, almost all Islamophobic political and legislative initiatives target Muslims with motives for the prevention of radical Islam, terrorism, and protection of the national security.

Despite the existence of a good institutional and legal framework, practice shows that there is no tangible, effective functioning of the institutions and law enforcement practice. By now, there is a widespread consensus regarding Islam as an existential threat to both the country and Europe, and utterances and discourses referring to Islam and Muslims in negative terms are commonplace in the arenas of politics, media, and the Internet. This report is based on various data that was collected during 2018. However, it is almost impossible to cover every aspect of the issue and moreover collect every single existing material on Islamophobia especially when it comes to the Internet. This report’s main goal is to map Islamophobia in Bulgaria covering the main fields pointed out in the report.
ISLAMOPHOBIA IN BULGARIA

Discussion of Islamophobic Incidents and Discursive Events

Physical and Verbal Attacks

Nedyalka Popova, prosecutor, made Islamophobic statements in an interview for the media on 22 March 2018. She defined the Muslim community in Bulgaria as a threat to the national security and to the future of the nation. In her interview, she called for measures to reduce the number of Muslims and limit their civil and political rights.\(^1\)

Statements by Prosecutor Nedyalka Popova were qualified by the Muslim community in the country as an anti-Muslim hate speech and crime. The Supreme Muslim Council to the Muslim Denomination penned an open letter to the main institutions in the country, and to European and international organizations, in which it appealed for adequate measures.\(^2\) The President of the European Commission Jean-Claude Juncker sent a written response to the Supreme Muslim Council, in which he assured the Supreme Muslim Council that the case would be taken into consideration and that the open letter was forwarded to the Justice Commissioner Vera Yurova, who was expected to undertake the issue.\(^3\) Bulgaria’s chief prosecutor told the media that Popova’s statement would be inspected by the Inspectorate of the Supreme Cassation Prosecutor’s Office.\(^4\) In April, the Commission for Protection against Discrimination announced that it initiated proceedings against Popova.\(^5\) But on 19 June, the newspaper Dnevnik published news claiming that the Commission for Protection against Discrimination will not start a proceeding against the prosecutor. According to the newspaper, this was implied by the committee’s answers to their questions whether any of the nine members of the commission was interested in the case.\(^6\)

Since 2012, a permanent masjid is functioning in the ‘Lyulin 6’ residential district in Sofia. In 2016, nationalist parties, mainly the VMRO, initiated a protest


against the masjid. In addition, a group opposing its existence called “Liulin” was initiated in social media. In this Facebook group, a number of publications and comments contained threats, anti-Muslim, and anti-Turkish hate speech. Some of these calls for violence and threats were directed against Mustafa Izbistalli, the regional mufti of Sofia. On June 6, 2016, supported by the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee (BHC), Mustafa Izbishtali filed a complaint with the Prosecutor’s Office and to the court. Following the refusal of both to investigate and initiate legal proceedings against the perpetrators, in November 2018, the complainant lodged an application with the European Court on Human Rights.7

On the night of 6 September, 2018, the Muslim cemetery in Dobrich was desecrated. The gravestones of nearly 40 graves were overturned and damaged. The incident was reported in the media and was referred to the Prosecutor’s Office.8 The mayor of Dobrich municipality Yordan Yordanov suggested to the municipal council to vote in favor of offering financial support for the damages. The Muslim denomination condemned the attack.9

On 2 July, the Muslim cemetery of Gradnitsa village, Sevlievo municipality, was vandalized. Dozens of graves were desecrated, some of them were excavated, and tombstones were damaged. The incident was reported in the media. The police

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7. Interview with Mustafa Izbishtali, “Regional mufti of Sofia, and the complainant”, held on 27 November 2018
in Gabrovo detained two people against whom pre-trial proceedings were started. The mayor of Sevlievo Ivan Ivanov condemned this act. The regional mufti of Veliko Tarnovo, in his turn, met with the village residents and urged them to remain calm.¹⁰

![Figure 1: On September 6, 2018, early 40 graves were vandalized, overturned, and damaged at the Muslim cemetery in the town of Dobrich.](Photo: Dariknews.bg)

![Figure 2: On July 2, 2018, dozens of graves were desecrated at the Muslim cemetery in the village of Gradnitsa.](Photo: Dr. Ivan Ivanov.)

**Employment**

The Protection Against Discrimination Act (PADA)¹¹ is the main anti-discrimination law, enacted in 2003. It is a single equality law banning discrimination on a range of grounds, including race, ethnicity, sex, religion, belief, disability, age, and providing uniform standards of protection and remedies. The Protection Against Discrimination Commission (CPAD)¹² is the national specialized equality body. It was established under PADA as an independent collegiate semi-judicial authority with adjudicating powers. There have not been any reports of Islamophobic attitudes in the field of employment in Bulgaria. Muslims themselves mentioned in the interviews conducted for this report that they don’t face such issues in their workplace. The only issues raised are related to the lack of flexibility from the part of their employers regarding the exercise of their religious duties, namely prayer and especially the Friday prayer. It is highly possible that discriminations in the workplace are mostly related with the migrant identity first and foremost and secondly, if any, with


the religious identity of the person involved. According to Baki Huseinov, deputy chair of the Protection Against Discrimination Commission, numerous complaints of discrimination in employment have been received in recent years, including on the ground of religion, ethnicity, disability, etc.\textsuperscript{13}

**Education**

Although there have been some changes in the school curriculum, especially in history and literature textbooks, Islam and Muslims are still portrayed in a negative way. In 2018, there was again a debate about whether the assimilation policy of the totalitarian communist regime against Muslims and Turks, the so-called “Revival Process,” should be included in the history textbooks. This, on the one hand, was a positive development, and, on the other, it turned out that there were many opponents of the idea.\textsuperscript{14}

In 2016, seventeen-year-old Emine Shamatareva was removed from school under the pretext that wearing a headscarf contradicts the school’s internal rules. Her last trial was set for November 22, 2017, at the Supreme Administrative Court. The Bulgarian judiciary rejected Emine Shamarereva’s appeal, and in 2018 an application was filed with the ECHR in Strasbourg.\textsuperscript{15}

The Muslim community in the town of Kurdzhalii, including parents of young children, has been requesting from the municipality and government institutions that Muslim children have access to halal food in municipal kindergartens, but their demands have been rejected. The initiative committee “Halal Food for Our Children” decided to lodge a complaint with the ECHR in Strasbourg after the Administrative Court (in 2017) and the Commission for Protection Against Discrimination in Bulgaria rejected its complaints.\textsuperscript{16}

**Politics**

Regularly, in different towns of the country, representatives of nationalistic parties and organizations oppose the call for prayer using loudspeakers by calling on the institutions to ban it. According to the Chief Secretary of the Office of the Grand Mufti despite the low-frequency the municipalities periodically hand out fines for the Friday sermons and calls for prayer. In this regard, in August 2018, a member of the European Parliament and deputy chair of the VMRO party warned the capital

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\textsuperscript{15} Interview with Resim Shamatarev, the father of Emine Shamatareva, held on 27 November 2018.

municipality, the Health Inspectorate, and the Directorate of Religious Affairs by sending a formal request for control and ban. 17

Two years ago, a law prohibiting the wearing of the burqa in public places was passed. Alexander Sidi, a member of parliament from the VMRO party, which was the initiator of the law, publicly threatened women who wear the burqa with police harassment. He made the following statement for the media: “Stopping the burqas by law is not the only solution of the problem with radical Islam ... We definitely have to work actively in this direction and all those people who have strange dependences, traveling and contacts must at least be stricken with awe by our security services, in order to understand that all their actions are being monitored... I hope we will see serious police action soon... I even think that Bulgarian citizens would be willing to pay fines because of police harassment on these people in order to stop them, because we know very well that when the police has come in and started to rummage, some human rights defenders will come and will say that people’s rights are being violated…” 18

Periodic attempts by local authorities and nationalistic parties to change geographical names with a Muslim-Turkish origin are a cause of serious concern among the Muslim community in Bulgaria. In May 2018, on the suggestion of the United Nationalists, the municipal council in Stara Zagora decided to resume the activity of renaming the Turkish-Arab toponyms in the territory of the municipality through forming a temporary commission for the elaboration of a strategy for changing the “foreign” names with Bulgarian ones. As a result of the initiative, 838 toponyms of lands and sites with Turkish-Arab origin were replaced. 19 The Office of the Grand Mufti made a statement according to which the change of names suggested that racism and intolerance against Muslims was at very critical levels. 20

In October 2018, archaeologists from the National Archaeological Institute at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences by order of the Ministry of Culture and the Municipality of Karlovo started new excavations in the local Kurshun Mosque (built in 1485). For years the Muslim community in the country has taken legal proceedings for the restitution of Kurshun Mosque as a community property. According to the Office of the Grand Mufti, the new excavations in the historical mosque aimed to stop the Muslim community’s attempts to restitute the property and to replace its function by

17. Interview with chief secretary of the Office of the Grand mufti, held on 2 November 2018.
another. As the lawsuit continued, the mosque was excavated by archaeologists, and an attempt to turn it into a museum of religions was made by the municipality.21

**Media**

Before referring to the Islamophobic discourse that has been reproduced through the media in Bulgaria during 2018, the lack of an observatory authority that would monitor all media (TV, radio, Internet, and the press) and document possible cases of anti-Islamic discourse, has to be noted. The mainstream media hosts the views of public figures and politicians who reproduce Islamophobic discourse. Especially in 2018, when there was a broad debate on the changes to the Religion Act, Muslims were portrayed by the media as threats to the national security of the country. Besides the obvious negative portrayal of Islam in general, media outlets also provided their audiences with a number of issues linked to an alleged Islamization of Bulgaria. One of the most notorious examples of this segment was the television channel SKAT TV, owned by the political party NFSB. Some of the channel’s programs like “Razbulvane” (Unveiling), specialized in Islamic and multicultural subjects, portraying the Muslim and Turkish community living in the country in a negative manner.

**Justice System**

Islamophobia is often manifested in parliament when MPs debate or propose laws related to religious denominations. Their main motives are that the Muslim community represents a danger to the state and should, therefore, be controlled. One such example can be observed in the official grounds for amendments to the Law on Religions in May and October 2018, when the parliamentary parties GERB (the main party in the government), the BSP, and the MRF (both of the latter are opposition parties) made a bill proposal for an amendment to the Law of Religions. In parallel, another bill was submitted by the United Patriots, a coalition partner in the government.22 The grounds of both bills were to protect the national security and stop dangerous influences from abroad. The bills proposed financial support for Orthodox Christianity and Islam. But at the same time, the United Patriots’ project introduced a ban on occupying religious positions for persons who have graduated abroad; religions are obliged to use only the Bulgarian language during worship and religious rituals; a prohibition on donations from abroad or foreign citizens; and a prevention of foreign citizens from conducting religious services. The bill of the nationalists noted that the proposals have been caused by religious radicalism, terrorist acts, indications of religious politicization, dissemination of religious doctrines


to change the state order and the secular character of the state, etc. According to experts, the law was made solely in respect to the Muslim community and this was known to everyone. Their main grounds were that the Muslim denomination was a danger to the state and should therefore be under its control.

**Internet**

During the recent years the emotions of nationalistic, xenophobic Internet portals, news sites publishing fake news on Muslims, etc. have increased. The level of anti-Muslim sentiment on social media is beyond the capacity of this report; it is impossible to document all occurrences that involve people in Bulgaria or relate to the Bulgarian context.

**Central Figures in the Islamophobia Network**

In Bulgaria, there are few main fields that have played a crucial role in the reproduction of Islamophobia in the public domain: the political field, mainly extreme nationalist political parties and organizations such as VMRO, ATAKA, NFSB, and the social media.

**Observed Civil Society and Political Assessment and Initiatives**

The only organization, dealing with religious issues is the Office of the Grand Mufti in Bulgaria (*Muslimansko izpovedanie* or Muslim denomination), which periodically reports anti-Muslim incidents and rhetoric. The Bulgarian Helsinki Committee also deals with and reflects serious violations in this respect. There are a number of NGOs working to protect refugees and their rights, such as the Foundation for Access to Rights (FAR), but none of these organizations deal explicitly with Muslims, Islam, or Islamophobia.

**Conclusion and Policy Recommendations**

The main conclusion of this report is that despite the high degree of integration and relatively good legislation, Islamophobia in Bulgaria can be observed in the public sphere. Although the Criminal Code contains elements against hate crimes, these are rarely applied in practice. Furthermore, Bulgaria’s law enforcement authorities do not acknowledge the biased motives of hate crimes. Public understanding of issues such as social marginalization of minority groups and the difficulties faced by refugees and victims of hate speech and crime, remains very limited. Many Muslim individuals are unaware that biased attacks and discrimination against them are ille-

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Combating Islamophobia and intolerance of Muslims in Bulgaria is a slow and difficult process. It’s related to the change of perceptions and prejudices and their deep-rooted manifestation in decision making of politicians or media. In general, the lack of adequate knowledge about Islam, the tendency to spread false and distorted information about Islam and Muslims in the public domain by pseudo-experts on Islam and malevolent public figures seem to have created the space for an increasing number of Islamophobic utterances that remain uncontested in the country’s current political atmosphere. On a positive note, although there is no organization to combat Islamophobia except the Office of the Grand Mufti, some segments of civil society are conducting relatively large efforts to combat racism, xenophobia, and related discrimination. There is also a relatively good interfaith dialogue in Bulgaria. Representatives of the major religious organizations, including the Muslim leaders, maintain a good dialogue and try to set a good example to society.

Chronology

- **22.03.2018**: Anti-Muslim statements of prosecutor Nedyalka Popova.
- **31.05.2018**: Changing the toponyms in Stara Zagora.
- **02.06.2018**: Muslim cemetery of Gradnitsa village was desecrated.
- **11.06.2018**: The issue of anti-loudspeakers of the mosques.
- **20.07.2018**: Anti-Muslim comments of Alexander Sidi (VMRO party) in Pazardzhik.
- **06.09.2018**: Muslim cemetery in Dobrich was desecrated.
- **15.10.2018**: The case of ‘Kurshun Mosque’ in Karlovo.
- **05.11.2018**: The regional mufti of Sofia lodged a complaint with the ECHR.