By gathering 35 local scholars, experts, and civil society activists specialized in racism and human rights, the fifth edition of the European Islamophobia Report addresses a still timely and politically important issue. All 32 country reports included in this book follow a unique structure that is convenient, first, for comparing countries and, second, for selected readings on a particular topic such as politics, employment, or education with regard 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 and threaten the whole of society. As a result, the European Islamophobia Report 2019 discusses the impact of anti-Muslim racism on human rights, multiculturalism, and the state of law in Europe.

This fifth edition of our report highlights how European societies are progressively overwhelmed by the Islamophobic discourse of the “Great Replacement” and other far-right conspiracy theories. The 32 country reports demonstrate how governments and mainstream media participate in reproducing such discourses that put the fundamental rights of millions of European citizens in jeopardy and how one can counteract these developments. This compendium of useful insights and data aims to provide European policy-makers, institutions, and NGOs with recommendations on how to tackle anti-Muslim racism in Europe seriously.

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., Berlin and Brussels. 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.
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Executive Summary

This report records and analyzes Islamophobic incidents between January and December 2019. The report notes that there is an obsession among various portals, as well as media practitioners regarding Islam and Muslims filled with negative stereotypes and anti-Muslim sentiments. Furthermore, Muslims in Albania continue to face difficulties in the job market, and often experience levels of discrimination during job interviews.

During 2019, various Islamophobic and xenophobic incidents have been reported, including physical attacks on sites, such as vandalistic attacks on the Turkish Memorial in the capital Tirana which is dedicated to the memory of martyrs of the 15 July 2016 coup attempt in Turkey. The incident follows the trend of other similar provocative incidents that have been occurring in the last few years during the celebration of Eid in Albania.

Similarly, there have been countless hate speech posts on social media from journalists, TV hosts, as well as on Islamophobic Facebook pages. Journalists such as Anila Basha, for instance, have called on Albanian people to unite under one Christian flag, quoting from a book which has been criticized for using Islamophobic language, while the author, Ben Blushi, a politician and writer, is known for his Islamophobic stances. Others, like Mustafa Nano, an Islamophobic central figure in Albanian media, have mocked Muslim public figures on TV such as Elvis Naçi, a local imam in Tirana and the president of the Firdeus Foundation, a charity foundation, for getting emotional during one of his sermons, claiming that such a reaction was hypocritical.

In the same vain, the aftermath of the devastating earthquake on 26 November 2019 in Albania, was followed by a wave of hate speech and anti-Muslim sentiment on social media after the Prime Minister of Albania Edi Rama posted a number of religious quotes on his Facebook page under the heading “The Sacred Words.” Despite the identity nature of Islamophobia in Albania, the report notes that, Islamophobic incidents are mostly limited to an exclusive group of individuals, media, and politicians, who frame the Albanian identity as an exclusively European one, and see Islam and Muslims as a “foreign body” that has no place in Albanian society. Furthermore, Islamophobia and Turkophobia in Albania are strictly connected, where the latest is only a dimension of the general anti-Muslim sentiments promoted especially by a section of the intellectual elite in the country. Turks, Arabs, Iranians, and other Muslim nations are considered part of the “Islamic Orient,” which is seen as opposed to the Westernization of Albanians. The incidents included in this report represent only a small portion of the real problem of Islamophobia in Albania. Therefore, we can say that Islamophobia in Albania is far more prevalent than the data available suggests.
ISLAMOPHOBIA IN ALBANIA

Përmbledhje e shkurtër

Ky raport analizon rastet islamofobe të ndodhura midis janarit dhe dhjetorit 2019. Raporti thekson se ekziston një tendencë në mesin e disa portaleve dhe figurave mediatike në lidhje me Islamin dhe muslimanët ku mbizotërojnë stereotype negative dhe ndjenjat anti-islame. Po ashtu, muslimanët në Shqipëri vazhdojnë të përballen me vështirësi në tregun e punës, dhe shpesh përjetojnë nivele diskriminimi gjatë intervistave për punë.


Ngjashëm, ka pasur postime të panumërta në mediat sociale nga gazetarë, drejtues programesh televizive, si dhe faze islamofobe në Facebook të mbushura me gjuhë urrejtje. Gazetarë si Anila Basha për shembull i kanë bërë thirrje shqiptarë të bashkohet nën një flamur të krishterë, duke cituar nga një libër që është kritikuar për përdorimin e gjuhës islamofobe; ndërsa autorit e tij, Ben Blushi, një politikan dhe shkrimtar, është i njohur për qëndrimet e tij islamofobe. Ndërsa të tjerë, si Mustafa Nano, një figure e rëndësishme islamofobe në media, është tallur me figura publike muslimane si Elvis Naçi, imam në Tiranë, për shkak të një reagimi të tij emocional gjatë një prej predikimeve të tij, duke pretenduar se një reagim i tillë është hipokrizi.

Po ashtu, periudha pas tërmetit shkatërrues më 26 nëntor 2019 në Shqipëri, u pasuan nga gjëra të gjuhë urrejtje dhe ndjenjash anti-muslimane në rrjetet sociale kur Kryeministri i Shqipërisë, Edi Rama postoi një numër citatesh fetare, të quajtura “Fjalët e Shenjta”. Përshkëruar natyrës identitare të islamofobisë në Shqipëri, raporti vëren se, incidentet islamofobe kryesisht janë të kufizuara në një grup ekkluziv të individëve, mediave dhe politikanëve, të cilët e konsiderojnë Islamin dhe muslimanët si “një grup i huaj” që nuk ka vend në shoqërinë shqiptare. Për më tepër, islamofobia dhe turkofobia në Shqipëri janë të lidhura fort, ku kjo e fundit është vetëm një dimen-sion i ndjenjave të përgjithshme anti-muslimane të promovuara veçanërisht nga disa elita intelektuale në vend. Turqit, arabët, iranianët apo komitet e tjerë muslime konsiderohen pjesë e “Orientit Islamik”, i cili shihen në kundërshtim me përëndimorizimin e shqiptarëve. Incidentet e përshirë në këtë raport paraqesin vetëm një pjesë të problemit real të islamofobisë në Shqipëri. Prandaj, mund të themi se islamofobia në Shqipëri është shumë më e përhapur nga sa sugjerojnë të dhënat në dispozicion.
Country Profile
EIR 2019

Country: Albania
Type of Regime: Democratic Republic
Form of Government: Constitutional Republic
Ruling Parties: Socialist Party of Albania (Partia Socialiste e Shqipërisë)
Opposition Parties: Democratic Party of Albania (Partia Demokratike e Shqipërisë), Socialist Movement for Integration (Lëvizja Socialiste për Integrim)
Last Elections: 2017 Parliamentary Election (Socialist Party 48.34%; Democratic Party 28.85%; Socialist Movement for Integration 14.28%).
Total Population: 2,862,427 million (as of January 2019, INSTAT)
Major Languages: Albanian
Official Religion: No official religion (secularism)
Statistics on Islamophobia: N/A
Statistics on Racism and Discrimination: N/A
Major Religions (% of Population): Islam (56.7%), Catholicism (10%), Orthodoxy (6.75%), Bektashism (2.1%), Non-affiliated (5.49%), Undeclared (13.8%), Atheists (2.5%), Other Christians (0.14%) (INSTAT/Census 2011)
Muslim Population (% of Population): 1.587 million (56.7%) (INSTAT/Census 2011)
Main Muslim Community Organizations: The Muslim Community of Albania (Komuniteti Musliman i Shqipërisë - KMSH); The Albanian Imam’s League (Lidhja e Hoxhallarëve të Shqipërisë - LHSH); The Muslim Forum of Albania (Forumi Musliman i Shqipërisë)
Main NGOs Combating Islamophobia: The Muslim Forum of Albania (Forumi Musliman i Shqipërisë)
Far-Right Parties: N/A
Far-Right Movements: N/A
Far-Right Terrorist Organizations: N/A
Limitations to Islamic Practices:
- Hijab Ban: None
- Halal Slaughter Ban: None
- Minaret Ban: None
- Circumcision Ban: None
- Burqa Ban: None
- Prayer Ban: None
Introduction

In recent years, Muslims in Albania have experienced an intensification of Islamophobia in various spheres of life, including employment, education, media representation, justice system, etc., with negative opinions and stereotyping, as well as hate speech on mainstream media, social media, and other online platforms. This discrimination against Albanian Muslims has been fueled by many media pundits, journalists, and politicians in Albania.

Due to the nature of Islamophobia in Albania, which is mainly related to identity politics, as previous reports and studies have found, the anti-Muslim discourse has become a normalized rhetoric where various forms of Islamophobia can be observed in media, politics, social media, textbooks, etc. While many politicians and media—especially online media—have been quick to report and condemn any kind of criminal act committed by alleged Muslims around the world, they have failed to condemn any act of Islamophobia against the Muslim population in any part of the world. Similarly, the mainstream media has failed more than once to acknowledge and correct fake news reported about certain Albanian Muslims and their alleged plans for terrorist attacks.

Furthermore, for many people, the phenomenon of Islamophobia seems unlikely to exist in a Muslim-majority country like Albania. Therefore, the existence of Islamophobia in Albania has often been denied as a phenomenon, particularly in relation to main Islamophobic figures. For instance, the Albanian (Kosovar) journalist Arbana Xharra, known for her Islamophobic stances, has stated various times in the media that “there is no such things as Islamophobia, but there is Albanophobia.” Others have claimed that Islam is a political ideology and that it is normal to have prejudice and phobia towards such an ideology. At the same time, these individuals totally ignore the relationship between the discrimination experienced by Albanian Muslims and Islamophobia as a phenomenon.

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Discussion of Islamophobic Incidents and Discurscive Events

Physical and Verbal Attacks

In March 2019, during two days of protests from the opposition in front of the Albanian Parliament, the police special forces occupied the premises of the Great Mosque in Tirana, which is under the administration of the Muslim Community of Albania and currently under construction, and used it as an observation point to monitor the protesters. Following this incident, the Muslim Forum of Albania (FMSH) issued a press release where the stated that they considered this as an act that violates the sanctity of the mosque.\(^5\)

On 11 August 2019, on the first day of Eid Al Adha, the Turkish Monument in Tirana dedicated to the martyrs of the 2016 coup attempt in Turkey was vandalized\(^6\) by unknown assailants using paper towels. Although the memorial was installed a few days earlier, it was only on the day of Eid that the incident occurred. In recent years, the celebration of Eid has been accompanied by several provocative incidents, fueled by Islamophobia, nationalism, and xenophobic feelings, and particularly by anti-Turkish feelings.\(^7\)

Furthermore, the installation of the monument was followed by a wave of negative comments in the media, especially those close to the opposition. They claimed that the memorial was part of the efforts by Prime Minister Edi Rama to curate the image of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan after the failed coup attempt in 2016. They accused Rama of being a vassal of Erdogan and also claimed that such behavior is not in line with the aspiration of Albania to become a member of the EU.\(^8\)

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One day before the attack on the Turkish Memorial, on 10 August 2019, a self-declared Catholic priest named “Don Agustin Bardhi” posted on his Twitter account asking people “to eradicate” the memorial like the Albanian people did to the statue of the Albanian dictator Enver Hoxha in 1991.10

The monument that was built with the contribution of the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TİKA) was desecrated again on 30 August 2019. According to reports by the Albanian police, the assailants used a heavy object to damage part of the monument that carried the names of the people killed in the 2016 coup attempt and the signs of the Turkish flag.11

**Employment**

Discrimination in the workplace and employment is not something new to Albanian Muslims.12 Despite the constitutional rights to practice their religion freely13 anywhere, including the workplace, Muslims in Albania still continue to face difficulties.14 Muslims, particularly women with a hijab, face difficulties and limitations in the job market.15 Muslims often experience various levels of discrimination at their jobs. Similarly, they face difficulties in their daily prayer practice in the workplace. In fact, workplaces still lack special areas dedicated to prayer. Muslims face difficulties in acquiring permission from their jobs for Jummah prayer. For instance, according to the Muslim Forum of Albania (FMSH), the military personnel in Albania not only lack the conditions to practice their religion freely during working hours, but have been threatened by their superiors to be fired if they choose to do so. The FMSH notes that this is a consistent concern that has not found a solution yet.

According to the report by the Commissioner for Protection from Discrimination, published in 2019, the total number of complaints in the field of employment, which were dealt with during the first half of 2019, was 71. Among the various reasons of discrimination in employment, none of them was reported as being religious.16 Nonetheless, the report notes that in some cases people are not able to recognize the real reasons of discrimination.

10. Ibid.
15. Ibid.
In addition, there are many cases of men and women who have faced various forms of discrimination during their job interviews; however, they refused to make their stories public due to fear of repercussions.18

Education
On 30 May 2019, the Minister of Education, Sports, and Youth of Albania Besa Shahini gave the order to close three private schools, among which was a religious Islamic school19 owned by Imam Sulejman Rustemi. According to Rustemi, the closure of his school was based on false claims and was discriminatory.20 On a Facebook post on 19 June 2019, Rustemi wrote that the inspectors falsely claimed that his institution forces “underage girls to wear the hijab during the class.”21 According to him, his school has been rigorously implementing the law of the pre-education system. According to the testimony of Rustemi, during the control, the inspection team exerted pressure and started behaving like in an investigation process interviewing students on religious knowledge and reasons for practicing religion at the school. Imam Rustemi declared that he did not receive any official notification and that he was informed about the decision by the media.

17. Ibid.
Politics

The anti-Muslim sentiments in Albania are rooted in the psychology and cultural identity of many cultural and political elites. This is influenced by various factors, including politics, their views on religion, individual interests, etc. The heritage of the communist period and the social engineering and identity-making of the last three decades have created a political elite which is either Islamophobic or insensitive toward religion and the rights of the Muslim community.

A few weeks after the devastating earthquake on 26 November 2019 in Albania, the Prime Minister of Albania Edi Rama traveled to Istanbul to participate as a speaker in the OIC (Organisation of Islamic Cooperation) High-Level Public and Private Investment Conference hosted by Turkey on 8-9 December 2019 in Istanbul. The conference called on the OIC member countries to assist Albania after the earthquake of 26 November. At the conference, Edi Rama also met with President Erdogan. During his speech, Rama quoted a few verses from the Holy Quran, which faced many negative comments from the media and social media users.

On 18 October 2019, after long discussions, the leaders of the European Union couldn’t reach an agreement on opening the accession process with Albania and North Macedonia, postponing the process for the upcoming year. This was followed by a wave of negative comments by many anti-Islamic hatemongers, who rushed to blame Muslims and the Islamic identity of the majority of the population for the rejection by the EU. For instance, Gani Mehmetaj, a Kosovar author and publicist known for his Islamophobic stances, blamed the Islamic identity of Albania, claiming that the EU could never accept a country “full of mosques built with Turkish money.” In an article published on 19 October 2019, he claims that Europe is alarmed by the construction of the Great Mosque in the capital Tirana. Furthermore, he said that that Muslims should not be allowed to pray in the main streets (square) of the capital (during Eid prayer). He went on to say that Albania is flirting with Turkey and is losing its sovereignty. He called on the opposition parties to take note and see how Europe rejected “Edi Rama’s Islamized Albania.” “The rejection of Edi Rama’s Islamized Albania by the EU should be an example to the Albanian opposition on how politics and diplomacy should not be done. Albania should be removed from the Turkish vassalage and subordination of the Gulf states to Islamism.”

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24. Ibid.

25. Ibid.

26. Ibid.
Media
There is an obsession among various media and media practitioners pertaining to Islam and Muslims, tinged with negative stereotypes and continuous negative portrayal of Islam and Muslims in particular.

The Albanian National Observatory Against Islamophobia, an online watchdog platform dedicated to countering Islamophobia, in cooperation with the Muslim Forum of Albania (FMSH), a Tirana-based Muslim NGO, have identified a list of online media and media practitioners that continuously incite Islamophobia and anti-Muslim sentiments among Albanians. The report includes a list of Albanian media from Albania, Kosovo, and North Macedonia. These media continuously promote anti-Muslim rhetoric by posting Islamophobic, racist, and hate-motivated articles and comments. In their writings they attack Islam, Albanian Muslims, and their religious heritage. Their publications contain insults, blasphemies, slander, and untruths about the Islamic religion, the Prophet Muhammad, Albanian Muslim personalities, and ordinary Muslim believers. They question the patriotism of Muslim Albanians, labeling them “Turks” and “Arabs,” and calling for their expulsion from the country. It is worth noting that after the publication of the “Black List” on Observer.al, all the articles listed in the report were removed. However, the media identified in the above report continue to remain on the list due to the many other Islamophobic articles that are still available on their websites.

In April, the Audio-visual Media Authority (AMA) decided to fine the radio and television broadcaster “Ora News” for the hate speech used by Kastriot Myftaraj, a well-known Islamophobe, during his TV show “Moscow Is Speaking.” On the official website of Ora News, there are not many details available regarding the said TV show. The TV show, hosted by Myftaraj, was broadcasted on 18 March 2019 on Ora News and was dedicated to the aftermath of the terrorist attacks in two mosques.

31. For more information, see: “Raport: Lista e zezë e faqeve islamofobe shqiptare on-line”. The report includes a list of Albanian media from Albania, Kosovo, and North Macedonia. We separated the media into two categories: Black List and Grey List. In a recent control of the articles included in both categories, we noticed that all articles listed have been removed. However, the list is not comprehensive and does not include many other media that continuously provoke Islamophobia.
in New Zealand. It was entitled “Scanderbeg and the killings in the mosques in New Zealand” (Skënderbeu dhe vrasjet në xhamitë e Zelandës së Re).³⁴

During the show, Myftaraj commented on the terrorist attack and indirectly suggested undertaking similar action in Albania.³⁶ A visual analysis of the still image from the TV show, shows Scanderbeg, the Albanian national hero, pointing to the minaret with his sword, a clear indication of what the host of the show wanted to communicate to his audience. (Fig. 3) Following the broadcast of the TV show, the Muslim Forum of Albania sent a letter to Ora News complaining about the Islamophobic language used by Myftaraj.³⁷ An online petition was also signed by more than 1,000 people³⁸ condemning Myftaraj’s anti-Muslim rhetoric. The AMA finned the television 400,000 Albanian Lek (around $3,636). In their statement, the AMA considered the language used by Myftaraj as a violation of Law No. 97/2013 on audiovisual media in the Republic of Albania. The AMA’s statement stated: “These statements promote intolerance among citizens, justify violence, and disrespect the diversity of customs, religious beliefs, culture and morality of citizens. Violation of these legal principles during this broadcast constitutes incitement to hatred on reli-

³⁷ Complain sent to Ora News by the Muslim Forum of Albania (FMSH) on 20 March 2019 regarding the Islamophobic language used by the host of the TV show “Moscow Is Speaking” Kastriot Myftaraj, aired on 18 March 2019 (The video is no longer available online).
gious grounds and, as such, is punishable by the law.”39 This is the first time a television channel is fined for using hate speech against Muslims.

However, on 14 October 2019, the Administrative Court abolished the decision40 of the Audio-visual Media Authority concerning the show aired on 18 March 2019. Myftaraj reacted on his Facebook page, considering the court’s decision as a victory against the AMA and “the radical Islamic NGOs,”41 referring to the Muslim Forum of Albania. In his Facebook post he claimed that this was an operation based on the “Shariah, not secular laws of Albania” aimed to damage the laïcité in Albania and the image of Scanderbeg as a national value.42 (Fig. 4)

Figure 4: Kastriot Myftaraj reacts on his Facebook page after the decision of the court to abolish the decision of the AMA: “This day, 14 October, is an important day regarding the freedom of speech, Laicite (Secularism) and the preservation of national values, especially concerning the constitution…”43

Furthermore, as reported in various online media, Kastriot Myftaraj called for the destruction of the Great Mosque of Tirana with explosives,44 claiming that the construction of the mosque is illegal. Myftaraj made a similar call in 2015 following the visit of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan to Albania. In a Facebook post on 16 May 2015, he called on the people to destroy the Great Mosque of

42. Ibid.
43. Ibid.
Tirana, considering it a “military barrack,” and described Muslims who would pray there as “Mujahideens.” At that time, he considered the visit of President Erdogan in Albania as an open call to Jihad. He also called for the assassination of the Turkish president.

On 22 October 2019, during a monologue on his show “Provokacija” broadcasted on ABC News, Mustafa Nano, a central Islamophobic figure in Albanian media, mocked Elvis Naçi, a local imam in Tirana and the president of the charity Firdeus Foundation, for getting emotional during one of his sermons in his mosque in Tirana. Nano considered the imam’s emotional reaction a “theater” and a “comedy.” In the conclusion of his monologue, Nano simulated an emotional scene, similar to that of Imam Naçi.

![Figure 5: Mustafa Nano during his TV show “Provokacija.” He mocks the imam Elvis Naçi for his emotional reaction during one of his sermons at his mosque.](image)

Furthermore, during the same show, he ridiculed the modern way of dressing of the imam, saying that even Ronaldo, the football player, looked more Muslim than him. “Even Ronaldo seems much more Muslim when talking about his dressing style.

50. Ibid.
compared to the imam. The only extreme thing about him is that moment when he cries. He cries with tears.51

In November 2019, Imam Elvis Naçi was attacked again publicly by various journalists and social media users, after he bought a private clinic in the name of the Foundation Firdeus. Despite the fact that the imam had announced this indirectly a few months earlier during his TV show “Albanians for Albanians,” this did not stop them from speculating and accusing him of using charity funds to buy the hospital. However, Naçi later announced the purchase of the hospital on his Facebook page. He informed the public52 that the hospital will provide free visits to all the people in need, especially orphans, who cannot afford to pay.53 In recent years, Imam Naçi has gained fame with his charity foundation for helping people in need and with his TV show “Shqiptarët për Shqiptarët” (Albanians for Albanians). He has gained a great number of followers on social media with almost two million followers across his social media platforms, ranking him amongst the most followed Albanian public figures online. His videos have been viewed millions of times. For this reason, he has been attacked and accused for using his popularity to gain ground for future political purposes.54 Despite the fact that Imam Naçi has openly denied many times that he has any intention of entering politics, this did not stop journalists and media pundits from speculating.

Justice System

On 4 December 2019, the Prosecution for Serious Crimes dropped the case against four Albanian Muslim citizens who were arrested in 2016 on suspicion of planning a terrorist attack during the football match between Albania and Israel.55 After three years of investigation, the Prosecutor’s Office declared that it was not possible to prove that they intended to carry out a terrorist attack. According to the media accounts, the prosecutor who followed their case was expelled from the

juridical system due to allegations of crime and misappropriation of property. Nevertheless, their release in December 2019 was reported in the media with headlines similar to those used in 2016.

**Internet**

Islam and Muslims are continuously attacked on social media, especially Facebook, by all sorts of people from journalists, political figures and TV hosts to random citizens, who spread hatred and use anti-Muslim rhetoric with the pretext of freedom of speech.

A few weeks after the attack on the Turkish Memorial, the well-known journalist Anila Basha posted a quote on Facebook from the author Ben Blushi calling on people to unite under a Christian flag, regardless of their ethnic background.

![Image](https://example.com/image.png)

**Figure 6:** The journalist Anila Basha posted on her Facebook page: "Christianity lost in front of the Turks because of its own divisions, but now we have to come together under one Christian flag whether we are Albanian or Serbian or Greeks. The Byzantine Empire was the brightest because it managed to unite under one power three elements: a Greek spirit, a Roman mind, and a Muslim body. This is the most perfect balance that history has ever seen… Living on an Island by Ben Blushi".


60. Ibid.
The book which Basha quoted, namely *Living on an Island*, has been criticized for using Islamophobic language, offending Prophet Muhammed, comparing Muslims to animals,61 etc. The author, Ben Blushi, is also known for his Islamophobic stances.

In September 2019, the Former Deputy Minister of Education, Sports, and Youth Taulant Muka made a series of posts on his Facebook page complaining about the number of mosques in the two major Albanian cities, the capital Tirana and the coastal city of Durres. He also claimed that most of the people who serve in these “mosques or religious institutions” don’t have the minimum religious education required.62 He further suggested that instead of building mosques, the money should go towards building schools. His comments provoked reactions from Muslims, and were followed by racist and anti-Muslim comments on his Facebook page.

Figure 7: The former Deputy Minister of Education, Sports, and Youth Taulant Muka wrote a series of Facebook posts during September 2019 complaining about the number of mosques and claiming that many of the people who work in these mosques/religious institutions don’t have the appropriate religious education.63

63. Ibid.
In the aftermath of the devastating earthquake in Albania on 26 November 2019, which killed 51 people, left thousands injured, and hundreds homeless, Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama posted several religious quotes on his Facebook page, including Islamic, Christian, and even polytheistic quotes. He was criticized for doing this by both Muslims and non-Muslims. He was accused of using religion in a difficult moment for Albania. Furthermore, the journalist Ylli Rakipi mocked the prime minister for his clothing in one of his public appearances and ironically compared him with the Prophet Muhammed.

Moreover, during 2019, Facebook restricted or closed many Islamic pages and personal accounts of Muslim activists in Albania, with the justification of using hate speech, but has failed to do the same for countless Islamophobic pages and individ-

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ual accounts that use social media to spread hate speech against Islam and Muslims, Turks, Arabs, etc. In December 2019, Facebook closed the official page of the Albanian National Observatory Against Islamophobia for three days for posting a pro-Palestinian post. Since then, despite the high number of followers, the page has suffered significant losses in its audience reach, going from tens of thousands to several dozen.

Central Figures in the Islamophobia Network

There are no formal organizations focusing on the spread of Islamophobia in Albania, but there are several media pundits, journalists, TV hosts, bloggers, politicians, etc. who continuously promote hate speech against Islam and Muslims in the mainstream media or social media platforms. In 2017, the Albanian National Observatory Against Islamophobia and the Muslim Forum of Albania prepared a list of well-known public figures who usually promote Islamophobia in their writings and media appearances. The list, although not comprehensive, includes names such as Kastriot Myftaraj, Mustafa Nano, Maks Velo, Arbana Xharra, Berat Buzhala, Gani Mehmetaj, Sadri Ramabaja, etc.

Observed Civil Society and Political Initiatives to Counter Islamophobia

There are several NGOs in Albania focused on human rights, but none of them focus on Islamophobia in particular. Nevertheless, certain Muslim NGOs such as the Muslim Forum of Albania (FMSH) have tried to tackle the issue of Islamophobia in various ways. The FMSH prepares an annual report on the situation of Islamophobia in Albania. It also provides legal advice to victims of Islamophobia.

Furthermore, the Albanian National Observatory Against Islamophobia (OKI), an online platform established in 2015 that is fully dedicated to countering Islamophobia in Albania, Kosovo, and North Macedonia, has been regularly addressing the phenomenon of Islamophobia. The platform continuously monitors hate speech, anti-Muslim, and Islamophobic rhetoric in the mainstream media, internet, politics, etc. It also collects information on various Islamophobic incidents in Albania,
Kosovo, and North Macedonia. Among others, the platform aims to raise awareness about the negative impact of Islamophobia on society; to provide guides and opinions on how to counter Islamophobia; to present a more positive view of Muslims in the media; and to enhance the Muslim voice. Since its establishment, the platform has denounced many Islamophobic incidents, including hate speech in the media, politics, textbooks, etc. The platform is a repository of over 250 articles exclusively dedicated to countering Islamophobia, and continues to grow.

In the same vein, other online media such as e-zani.com, tesheshi.com, Muslimania.al, and other online portals, mainly managed by Muslims, have dedicated a significant space and attention to the issue of Islamophobia in recent years, with many articles denouncing the anti-Muslim rhetoric.

Yet, these initiatives are not coordinated, which makes it difficult for them to have the desired impact on countering Islamophobia. A common action plan could direct these energies and efforts in the right direction.

Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

Islamophobia in Albania is real and is affecting the everyday life of Muslim practitioners. Islam and Muslims are being attacked and demonized in the media in the name of freedom of speech. This form of racism should be addressed on a governmental level as well as among NGOs working in the area of human rights. In fact, anti-Muslim sentiments and Islamophobic hate speech negatively affects not only Muslims, but seriously harms the country's social cohesion, especially considering that Muslims represent the religious majority in Albania. As shown in the report, Islam in Albania is racialized along with the Turkish and Arab identity as foreign to the Albanian identity. This rhetoric is focused on presenting Islam as something imported from Arab countries or inherited from the Ottoman Empire. The nature of Islamophobia in Albania facilitates the use of anti-Muslim stereotypes by politicians from all sides of the political spectrum who often weaponize such stereotypes to criticize their opponents, media, social media users, etc., contributing to the normalization of Islamophobic rhetoric in Albanian society. In conclusion, we suggest the following recommendations:

• Muslim NGOs and other civil society organizations should cooperate more closely to address the issue of Islamophobia.

• Muslim NGOs, in particular, should cooperate more closely and come up with a common action plan to address the issue of Islamophobia in various fields.

• Media should avoid the use of anti-Muslim stereotypes to the maximum extent possible. They should also avoid reporting unverified news on Muslims and should correct any fake news in this regard.

• The authorities in Albania should investigate any hate crime against people or sites. They should also monitor the continuous hate speech incidents in the media and social media, especially when the perpetrators are major public figures.

• Local governments in Albania should take into consideration complaints coming from the Muslim community regarding any obstacle or concern to perform their Jummah prayer in order to secure the freedom to practice one’s religion.

• The government of Albania should prepare a draft law to regulate the constitutional rights of Muslims to perform their daily prayer in the workplace, especially regarding the necessary permission to take time off work to perform the Jummah prayer.

Chronology

• 18.03.2019: Anti-Muslim hate speech used during the TV show “Moscow Is Speaking” in the aftermath of the terrorist attack at Christchurch, New Zealand. The show was aired on 18 March 2019 on Ora News (now RTV Ora).

• 30.05.2019: The closure of the Muslim school Visare by the Ministry of Education.

• 22.10.2019: Journalist Mustafa Nano mocked Imam Elvis Naçi during his show “Provokacija” aired on ABC News.

• 25.11.2019: Imam Elvis Naçi was publicly attacked after he bought a private clinic in the name of the Firdeus Foundation, over which he presides.

• 19.12.2019: Four Albanian citizens accused 3 years ago of an attempted terrorist attacks were acquitted. The media did not only not retract the fake news reported at the time, but some outlets continued with similar headlines even after their release.