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

As with previous years, there has been a sustained and continued growth of Islamophobia in Belgium during 2019. This increase has been apparent across a variety of diverse fields including in explicit and measurable Islamophobic hate crimes. Specific examples from 2019 include vandalism of mosques, and pig heads being left at and swastikas being graffitied onto Muslim property. Manifest examples of Islamophobic hate crime were also often heavily gendered and thus distinctly impacted Muslim women, and visibly Muslim women in particular. Attacks against Muslim women in 2019 include stabbings, forced removal of the headscarf, denial of services, and exclusion from education and the workplace.

In addition, Islamophobia in Belgium during 2019 has also seen the increase in the legislated Islamophobic controls around Muslimness. Examples of this include the bans on ritual slaughter (including halal and kosher slaughter) implemented in Flanders in January 2019 and Wallonia in September 2019, and the issuing of the new Flanders Government Agreement 2019-2024, which stipulates controls on the presence of visible faith symbols (including the headscarf) in the region in schooling and employment on the grounds of neutrality. The agreement sets a precedent and signals legitimacy of gendered Islamophobia towards visibly Muslim women and was, in part, made possible by the growth of the far-right and right-wing parliamentary presence in the Flemish Belgian region.

Notwithstanding, Belgium continues to be home to strong civil society and government-supported counter-Islamophobia initiatives, including monitoring of cyber-Islamophobia by public volunteers.

The report on Belgium closes with conclusions and recommendations, including the warning against the increasing move towards French-style, secular-based argument rooted in narratives centred on neutrality, in order to limit the presence of visibly Muslim women in Belgian society and their presence in education or the workplace.
Note de Synthèse


Nonobstant, la Belgique a une société civile forte et des initiatives de lutte contre l’islamophobie soutenues par le gouvernement, y compris la surveillance de la cyber-Islamophobie par des volontaires publics.

L’édition belge du rapport se termine par des conclusions et des recommandations, y compris une mise en garde contre la tendance croissante vers une laïcité à la française - enracinée dans la neutralité afin de limiter la présence de femmes visiblement musulmanes dans la société belge et spécifiquement leur présence dans l’éducation ou le lieu de travail.
Country Profile
EIR 2019

Country: Belgium
Type of Regime: Federal parliamentary constitutional monarchy
Form of Government: Representative democratic federal bicameral parliamentary system, headed by the monarch.
Ruling Parties: Following May 2019, the Belgian federal government is yet to be decided.
Opposition Parties: Francophone parties include Mouvement Réformateur (MR), Parti Socialiste (PS), Centre Démocrate Humaniste (CdH), Écolo, and Parti Populiste. Flemish parties include Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie (NVA), Christen Democratische en Vlaamse en Open Vlaamse Liberalen en Democratie, Socialistische Partij Anders, Vlaams Belang (VB), and Groen.
Last Elections: The last elections took place in May 2019 and run on a five-yearly cycle in line with the European Parliamentary elections. The highest-ranking parties were as follows: NVA – 25 seats, PS – 20 seats, VB – 18 seats, MR – 14 seats, and Écolo – 13 seats.
Total Population: 11.4 million
Major Languages: Flemish in Flanders (approx. 59% of population) Wallonia and Brussels are predominantly francophone. Finally, 0.7% of the total population is German-speaking and based in francophone Liège. English is also widely spoken throughout.
Official Religion: There is no official state religion in Belgium. However, Christianity, Islam, and Judaism are officially recognised, with much of the nation identifying as Roman Catholic.
Statistics on Islamophobia: The Counter Islamophobia Collective in Belgium (Collectif Contre l’Islamophobie en Belgique – CCIB/Collectief Tegen Islamofobie en België – CTIB) documents statistics annually on Islamophobia in Belgium, based on evidence derived from the Interfederal Centre for Equal Opportunities (UNIA), and direct reports.
Statistics on Racism and Discrimination: Statistics are compiled by the UNIA, under seventeen of the nineteen legal bases of discrimination, including racial discrimination (presumed race, skin colour, nationality, ancestry, and ethnic origin), disability-based discrimination, philosophical/religious discrimination, sexual orientation, age, wealth, civil status, political beliefs, trade union membership, health, physical/genetic characteristics, birth, and social background.
Major Religions (% of Population): Although there is no official state census of religious affiliation in Belgium, estimates suggest a 60.7% Christian population (predominantly Roman Catholic but also including some Protestants and Orthodox Christians), 6% Muslims, and 0.4% Jewish.
**ISLAMOPHOBIA IN BELGIUM**

**Muslim Population (% of Population):** 6% of the Belgian population (estimated 870,000).

**Main Muslim Community Organizations:** The Belgian Muslim Executive (Exécutif des Musulmans de Belgique/ Executief van de Moslims van België – EMB) serves as the official national interlocutor on Islam and Muslim communities in the country (under the official recognition of Islam), comprising representatives from the federal regions. It oversees the registration of mosques and clergy, chaplains, Muslim/ Islamic religious education teachers in state schools, ritual slaughter certificates, and announcing religious festivals among other key details in the function of Islam in Belgium.

**Main NGOs Combating Islamophobia:** CCIB, UNIA, ENAR, among others.

**Far-Right Parties:** Flemish Interest (Vlaams Belang – VB)

**Far-Right Movements:** Katholiek Vlaams Hoogstudentenverbond, Nationalistische Studentenvereniging, Schild en Vrienden, and Voorpost.

**Far-Right Terrorist Organizations:** Rather than organisations being directly designated as far-right terrorist organisations, far-right actions tend to be condemned.

**Limitations to Islamic Practices:**
- **Hijab Ban:** No national ban, regional ban in Verviers and individual school-specific bans.
- **Halal Slaughter Ban:** Flanders since January 2019, Wallonia since September 2019.
- **Minaret Ban:** Only discussion following the Swiss calls for a ban during the early 2010s.
- **Circumcision Ban:** Only discussion.
- **Burka Ban:** A burka ban is in place since 1 June 2011. Those found wearing the burka in Belgian public spaces are subject to monetary fines of between €15 and €25, and imprisonment of up to seven days.
- **Prayer Ban:** There is no specific national or federal ban on prayer in Belgium. However, it is linked to employment discrimination cases.
Introduction

Throughout the nation, 2019 saw a sustained and continued growth in Islamophobia. As this national report in the EIR details, Belgium has witnessed steadily increasing Islamophobia across a range of fields; for example, visible manifestations of Islamophobic hate crime have been ever-present throughout the year and include attacks on physical locations and spaces presumed to be linked to Muslims apparent in the dumping of pig heads or swastikas being graffitied on cars, yet this only represents the tip of the iceberg that is Islamophobia in Belgium.

Islamophobic hate crime in Belgium, as with preceding years documented in the European Islamophobia report, has continued to have a distinctly gendered focus, as detailed below. Beyond the apparent manifestations of Islamophobia, the phenomenon has continued to grow also in Belgian institutions. For example, the marked success of the right and the far-right in Flanders during the May 2019 Belgian federal elections and similarly the Belgian representation in the European Parliament, paved the way for increased legislated controls of Muslim women’s dress in Belgian education and employment. The growing institutionalisation of Islamophobia in Belgium clearly points to the ways in which Islamophobia in the country permeates the wider Belgian political arena and its increasing banalisation.

This year, however, also marks the growth of civil society projects that attempt to counter Islamophobia in Belgium. These are detailed further in the report, but prominent examples include the Veilleurs de l’Islamophobie (Islamophobia Lookouts) project headed by the Collectif contre l’Islamophobie en Belgique/Collectief Tegen Islamofobie en België (Counter Islamophobia Collective in Belgium, henceforth CCIB), or the newly formed branch of the public body Actiris, dedicated to combatting workplace and labour market discrimination.

The current national report details the developments in terms of Islamophobia in Belgium during 2019: the manifestations, the institutionalisation, and the counter-Islamophobia work that is being undertaken in the country. It concludes with policy recommendations that can be garnered from Belgium during 2019 before presenting a chronology of the most prominent Islamophobic events that took place in the country in 2019.

Discussion of Islamophobic Incidents and Discursive Events

Physical and Verbal Attacks

In terms of Islamophobic physical and verbal attacks on individuals and institutions in Belgium during 2019, several principle trends are clear. First, as stated above, Islamophobia has continued to grow in the nation. The CCIB statistical report published in 2019 detailing the analysis of the Interfederal Centre for Equal
Opportunities’ (UNIA) figures for the previous year indicates the growth in Islamophobic incidents to 278 during the preceding year.\(^1\) Physical Islamophobic attacks include both those on individuals and those enacted on Muslim spaces, which stand at 4%,\(^2\) such as the vandalism of the Al Ihssan Mosque on the very last day of the year,\(^3\) the leaving of pig heads at a Muslim residence,\(^4\) and the leaving of excrement and urine at a Muslim home accompanied by swastikas being graffitied on the Muslim family’s car.\(^5\)

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2. Ibid.
6. Collectif contre l’Islamophobie en Belgique, Facebook, 13 October 2019, https://www.facebook.com/islamophobia.ccib.be/, (Access date: 16 March 2020). – French text reads as follows: ‘Good evening everybody. This Saturday 13/10 between 9 and 11 pm, on Trichon Street in Sauvenière, a cooked pig’s head was dumped at my house. I don’t have the words to describe this act. Given that we are Muslims, in my opinion it is a racist act. If residents of Gembloux of Sauvenière, and especially from Trichon Street, has seen individuals who had anything to do with this act, thanks for sharing your statements with me. Good evening.’

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Figure 1: Pigs head left at a Muslim residence (13 October 2019).
Secondly, physical and verbal Islamophobic attacks have continued to have a distinctly gendered focus. Specifically, the CCIB statistical analysis points to 77% of reported Islamophobic attacks being perpetrated against presumed Muslim women, compared to 23% against presumed Muslim men. Examples of gendered Islamophobia include the attack on a headscarf-wearing Muslim woman in Anderlecht in January 2019.7 The event triggered fear across the Belgian Muslim community. The verbal attack on two headscarf-wearing Muslim women by the driver of a public transport bus in Uccle who stated “I am a racist and I hate women who wear the headscarf” in March 2019.8 A Muslim woman was stabbed in front of her three young children in Anderlecht, due to a presumed Islamophobic motive in April 2019.9 Or in August 2019, the case of an inebriated woman attacking and attempting to remove the headscarf of a visibly Muslim woman. The attacker was subsequently arrested on charge of public intoxication.10 Another case bares a distinct similarity: a 50-year-old drunk and homeless woman who, for the second distinct instance, pushed a headscarf-wearing Muslim woman onto the tracks of the Brussels metro.11

These attacks only represent a small subsection of the likely vast and far-reaching nature of manifested Islamophobia in Belgium; however, they too are numerous. The expansiveness of gendered Islamophobia in Belgium in 2019 also highlights the interplay between the institutionalisation of gendered Islamophobia (as detailed further under the themes of Politics and Employment) and the ways in which these often state-sanctioned Islamophobic measures targeting Muslim women seemingly ‘otherise’, banalise, and legitimise attacks and violence by members of the Belgian public sphere on Muslim women in the nation. This trend is not unique to Belgium. Rather, it is indicative of pan-European and global trends in this manner.

Employment

As with other dimensions considered in this report, Islamophobic discrimination has continued to grow throughout the nation. As with other fields, whilst Mus-
Islamophbic males have been significantly impacted by employment-based Islamophobia. Muslim women have borne the brunt of Islamophobia in the Belgian labour market and workforce.

The UNIA statistics published in 2019 point to 510 cases of employment-based discrimination and 25% of these pertain to ‘racial’ or ethnic characteristics. The CCIB’s disaggregation of all reported Islamophobic cases, published in 2019, indicates that 6% of all dossiers it dealt with pertained to employment and Islamophobia.

Specific examples of workplace-based Islamophobic discrimination include the example published in March 2018 which detailed the case of young, headscarf-wearing Muslim women who faced difficulties whilst on a work experience placement at a Belgian nursery. The young Muslim women intended to complete a short several-day observation at the nursery (and thus would not be in direct contact with the children at the nursery) but were asked by the nursery management to remove their headscarves. The UNIA intervened and the Muslim women were allowed to retain their headscarves on a technicality, namely that they would be present as observers rather than interacting with the children. The UNIA welcomed the discussions but indicated the growth in limitations on work experience placements. This is noteworthy since work experience students typically work on a temporary and voluntary basis, thus highlighting the reach of increasing gendered Islamophobia in the Belgian workplace.

Similarly, a Muslim woman wearing a headscarf who is a legal expert took the STIB (Brussels public transport company) to court over workplace and recruitment discrimination on the grounds of her headscarf.

In addition to such specific examples, given the significant growth of the right and the far-right in Flanders, there have been increasing legislative controls over visible Muslim appearance under the guise of neutrality in numerous fields including the workplace. Of course, institutionalised Islamophobia is not the preserve of the right wing of the political spectrum. Furthermore, the framing of such controls echoes the terms and frames of reference employed within the French context, thus pointing to the increasing globalisation of legislated controls of Muslimness in the workplace and beyond.

Notwithstanding, the year 2019 also saw the growth of noteworthy counter-projects in the area, including that led by the CCIB entitled #OpenJobsTesting.
whereby the organisation sought to understand the intersecting discriminations at play (including Islamophobia) in terms of access to the workforce. The work follows on from extensive academic work in this field, albeit in different geographical sites of study.

Additionally, in the Brussels-Capital Region, Actiris launched its “Actiris Inclusive” project in December 2019. The work is headed by Fatima Zibouh and seeks to combat workplace discrimination in the region16 including Islamophobic discrimination.

Education

As with previous years, 2019 continued to present cases of Islamophobia in the education system. The aforementioned CCIB statistical report reveals that 22.5% of all cases it received in the preceding year pertained to education-based Islamophobia. This category was the largest alongside Islamophobia in the provision of goods and services.17

In terms of specific cases during 2019, examples include the instance in February 2019 whereby students at the Pater Jozefieten school in Melle came to school dressed as stereotypical Arabs/Muslims. The students wore Gulf Arab-style thobes, veils, and headscarves, accompanied by explosive belts. The school students proceeded to mock Islamic prayer in the school corridors. Candidly filmed videos surfaced on social and popular media and perhaps unsurprisingly provoked outrage and strong condemnation.18 The incident demonstrates the intersection of traditional racisms with Islamophobia in Belgium and also the increasingly normalised nature of Islamophobia.

Beyond Islamophobia perpetrated by pupils, in May 2019, a Brussels-based primary school issued a disclaimer refuting any responsibility of school students who were fasting for the month of Ramadan.19 Not only are students unlikely to be fasting since they are predominantly too young, but the case also serves to normalise the targeting of practices related to Muslimness.

17. Rapport des Chiffres 2018, CCIB.
a Leuven court ruled that a Muslim schoolgirl who wears the headscarf could continue to do so in school and that her doing so would be lawful.\textsuperscript{20} Similarly, as detailed further in relation to the Belgian justice system, an Islamic studies religious education teacher who had previously faced difficulty and had been asked to remove her headscarf by her employer, reached a resolution with the help of the UNIA and continues to teach. The case is paradoxical given that the Belgian constitution allows for religious freedom, Islam is officially recognised nationally (meaning that Islamic religious education is provided and permitted), and thus in theory demonstrating one’s Muslimness should not be problematic. Similarly, also as detailed under the section of this report pertaining to the Belgian justice system, eleven Muslim schoolgirls with headscarves from Maasmechelen, from the Nikola Tesla and the then Atheneum Maasland school (now GO! Maxwell school) were originally banned from their respective schools on the grounds of their headscarves in 2018. Subsequently, the schoolgirls and their parents took the case to the Tongeren Court and the school’s decision was overturned, meaning that the girls could continue to attend school whilst maintaining their outward Muslim appearance. The Tongeren Court based its decision on the European Court of Human Rights’ rulings on freedom of faith. Unhappy with this ruling, the school appealed the Tongeren Court’s decision at the Antwerp Court of Appeal and won in December 2019, meaning that the schoolgirls are deprived of their education.

The aforementioned cases pertaining to gendered Islamophobia in the Belgian education system, distinctly recall the French headscarf affairs which have been ongoing since 1989 and notably resulted in the implementation of the 2004 \textit{Loi Stasi} which explicitly bans the presence of ‘ostentatious faith symbols’ in French schooling.\textsuperscript{21} However, the Belgian case appears to be following French precedent in an expedited fashion. Previously, religious dress or headscarves were not subject to a national ban; however, there are growing controls. For example, the Verviers region’s wide ban implemented in 2012,\textsuperscript{22} or the ban in Flanders as stipulated in the Flanders’ Government Regional Governance Agreement of 2019, which foresees a region-wide limitation on religious symbols (Muslim women’s dress). It is framed as follows: ‘We also guarantee neutrality in education. In provincial and community education, we ensure the philosophical neutrality for teachers and

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students.”23 The agreement has the potential to send a clear signal to other areas of governance across the country.

Politics
In May 2019, both the Belgian federal elections and European Parliamentary elections took place. Although the Belgian federal government is yet to be decided (something which is not unusual in Belgian formal federal politics in part due to its political structure which is based on proportional representation), the May 2019 elections saw distinct gains made by the Flemish far-right and right-wing parties both in Flanders and in the European Parliament, whilst in francophone Belgium the Greens and left-wing parties’ representative presence grew. Specifically, at the European Parliament the highest-ranking Dutch parties include NVA and VB who each won three seats in the European Parliament, followed by Open VLD and CD&V who each scored two seats. In francophone Belgium, the PS, Écolo, and MR each secured two European Parliamentary seats.24

At the federal level, VB made the biggest gains at the polls nationally, gaining a total of fifteen extra seats compared to the 2014-2019 period. Whilst in the francophone electoral college Écolo made the largest gains, winning a further seven seats (compared to the last voting period).25

This growth in the far-right presence paved the way for increased legislated limitations on visible Muslim appearance in education and employment. The Flemish Governmental Regional Agreement sets out controls of “outward signs of their personal conviction” (i.e. religious symbols such as the headscarf) in Flemish governance and education. It states, “External symbols of philosophical, religious, political or other beliefs are therefore not worn with direct customer contact… We also guarantee neutrality in education. In provincial and community education, we ensure the philosophical neutrality for teachers and students.”26 As stated numerous times in this report, although the far right does not exclusively promote Islamophobic legislation and political discourse (for example, consider left-wing liberal Islamophobia), their presence in Belgium has given way to a rise in Islamophobic political discourse and legislation over the years. The recent move by the Flemish governance sends a clear public signal regarding the permissibility of Islamophobic discrimination both in the Belgian workplace and Belgian education, and sets a precedent for both Belgium and beyond. The terminology employed in the Flemish Governmental Regional Agreement 2019-2024

strongly echoes French discourse, highlighting the increasing cross-national permeability of seemingly legitimised and legislated Islamophobia.

On a local level, local town councillor from the opposition party in Koekelberg, Lucas Ducarme, stated that he doesn't want his town to become like Molenbeek. The connotations here being linked to popular myth of Muslim demographic takeover and more specifically since Molenbeek is densely populated by Muslims and has been implicated with individuals leaving the area to become Islamic extremists in the Levant, Ducarme's comments stoke stereotypes and enforce images of Muslims as barbaric and ‘other’.

In terms of noteworthy Muslim political officials, the year 2019 saw the loss of the first Western headscarf-wearing Muslim politician, Mahinur Özdemir, from the Belgian political arena as she moved on to become the Turkish ambassador to Algeria. Özdemir was a role model for many and undertook a range of political dossiers in her ten-year career as Schaerbeek MP, but regrettably was not immune to Islamophobia during her political tenure in Belgium. Notwithstanding, Belgium continues to have significant and noteworthy political representation by Muslims – something which in itself can serve to counter-Islamophobia.

Combining consideration of the far-right growth and Muslim political representation in Belgium in 2019, Écolo co-president Zakia Khattabi saw her candidature for a Belgian constitutional judge post postponed in November 2019 following the NVA and VB’s lobbying against her candidacy. Her campaign was defeated in January 2020. Although the NVA and VB claimed their blocking was on the grounds of her alleged ‘activist’ behaviour, it is difficult to disaggregate ethnic, gendered, religious, and even age-based features from this affair.

Similarly, in 2019, the Brussels Youth Parliament circulated an advertisement showing the photograph of a youth parliamentarian, Chéima, who wears a headscarf. The advertisement came under attack, perhaps unsurprisingly, under the frames of neutrality and secularism.

Finally, in terms of political legislation, the year 2019 saw the implementation of the ritual slaughter ban (i.e. halal and kosher) in Belgium; first in Flanders, in January 2019 and then in Wallonia, in September 2019. Journalist Fabrice Grosfilley ar-

27. See for example: “LOI n° 2004-228 du 15 mars 2004 encadrant, en application du principe de laïcité, le port de signes ou de tenues manifestant une appartenance religieuse dans les écoles, collèges et lycées publics”, Légifrance.
29. For more information, see: www.islamophobiaeurope.com.
30. Isabelle Anneet, “Ducarme: ‘Je ne veux pas que Koekelberg devienne Molenbeek bis’”.
gued for the extension of such bans to the Brussels-Capital Region also, highlighting the spread and perceived legitimacy of Islamophobic controls over Muslim practices.

Media
As with previous years, 2019 saw a sustained presence of media-based Islamophobia in Belgium. As before, in Belgium and beyond, the popular media serve as a mouthpiece for Islamophobic discourse, and work to silence positions that are not sympathetic to hegemonic and normative discourses in the nation. Nonetheless, from a global perspective, Belgium is recognised for its largely plural press. 32

The CCIB statistics published in 2019 highlight that 10% of the eighty dossiers that they handled pertained to Islamophobia in the media and online. 33 However, importantly, these statistics are likely to be an underrepresentation of the real state of affairs in the nation, as the CCIB points out that Muslim citizens don’t report hate crimes they face given fear of ‘reprisals’ or ‘prejudicial media coverage’. 34 This highlights the power of the Belgian media in national Islamophobic discourse and in directly contributing to the underreporting of Islamophobia in Belgium.

Specific examples of media-based Islamophobic media coverage in Belgium in 2019 include providing a platform for controversial cases, such as making the videos from the Melle school viral whereby students dressed up and mocked Arabness and Muslimness. 35 Or, providing a platform for the call for the extension of ritual slaughter bans to the Brussels-Capital Region.

Meanwhile, Belgian media also has the potential to be a mouthpiece for the diffusion of positive counter-narratives in the country within the frame of Islamophobia. For example, the media stories that reported growing Islamophobia in the country published in August 2019. 36 Examples of this include the publication by DH.net noting that an Islamophobic attack takes place every two days in Belgium. 37

Justice System
As previous sections of this report have demonstrated, the Belgian justice system has the potential to stoke Islamophobia through implementation and maintenance of Islamophobic legislation. Perhaps the most noteworthy of these in 2019 in-
cludes the implementation of the bans on halal and kosher slaughter in both Flanders and Wallonia.

Similarly, the justice system at the Belgian regional, federal, and European supranational levels has the potential to spread ambiguity surrounding potentially Islamophobic cases. For example, in December 2019, the Antwerp Court of Appeal overturned the previous ruling issued by the Court of Tongeren regarding the permissibility of young Muslim schoolgirls being allowed to wear the headscarf to their respective schools. The case is detailed further under the education section of this report. Essentially the case went from a school-imposed ban, which was appealed by parents, to a ruling issued by the Court of Tongeren that followed legal precedent and guidance from the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) and allowed for the young girls to wear the headscarf, to an appeal by the school and an overturning of the previous ruling by the more senior Antwerp Court of Appeal. In face of this legal to-ing and fro-ing, the Muslim schoolgirls and their education has been compromised. In addition, the legal ambiguity has the potential to send a signal both to further instances of control of Muslim women’s dress/bodies in the Belgian education system and the potential to legitimise further gendered Islamophobia, especially concerning visible gendered Muslimness.

However, the Belgian justice system also plays a distinct and significant role in the criminalisation of Islamophobia. For example, in June 2019, Belgian courts issued an €800 fine to a 65-year-old Twitter user who had been posting racist and Islamophobic tweets and harassing UNIA co-director Els Keytman. In the same month, Belgian courts heard the case of a Schaerbeek woman who had had headscarf forcibly removed whilst in a parking lot. Or the case of a Muslim job-hunter who took the STIB to court in September 2019.

At the same time, the Belgian legal system has a role to play in effectively countering Islamophobia. The most apparent examples of this in 2019 pertain to the work of the UNIA and the CCIB. For example, in October 2019, the UNIA was able to support a Muslim woman who wears the headscarf in a resolution with her employer. The woman, who was contracted to teach religious education in a Belgian state school, had been asked to remove her headscarf. By intervening in writing and recalling Belgian legislation (most likely that concerning the constitutionally agreed
freedom of faith and also legally based acknowledgement of Islam and the subsequent scope for Islamic religious education within the Belgian education system), the UNIA was able to help the woman reach an agreement with her employer whilst maintaining her headscarf. Similar guidance was issued following the case that received media attention of a headscarf-wearing Muslim woman driver, who was using her headscarf to hold her phone (thus creating a hands-free way of using her phone and driving). Her actions were deemed lawful, but nonetheless the case sparked controversy. Perhaps the case, and many of the others detailed in this section, do not pertain to secularism, security, or neutrality, but rather serve to problematise Muslimness in Belgian society.

**Internet**

Regarding cyber-Islamophobia, given the expansiveness of the internet it is difficult to determine the scale and extent of online Islamophobia in Belgium. The CCIB statistics published in 2019 note that 10% of the cases handled the previous year are rooted in the cyber and media world. The year 2019 has seen a sustained growth of online hate towards Muslims that often intersects with ethnicity and gender (among other features).

![Figure 2: Still image from a video on Filip Dewinter's Facebook page](https://www.facebook.com/fdwvb/videos/2189638998033293/)

42. “Rapport chiffres 2018: Renouer avec les droits humaines”, UNIA.
A key example of the use of the internet and in particular social media for furthering Islamophobic narratives (that intersect with political gain/popularity), is that of the Facebook page of Vlaams Belang politician Filip Dewinter, who, for example, on 26 May 2019, posted an arguably Islamophobic video to his Facebook page (which has over 29,000 followers). (Fig. 2) The video, entitled ‘Time for De-Islamisation’ was viewed over 13,000 times, sparked 318 Facebook reactions, 300 comments, and 53 shares, and showed Arabic script on Belgian shopfronts, with particular emphasis on halal signs. The video continues to show these shop signs being covered with ‘Stop Islamisation’ posters and concludes with a call to vote for Filip Dewinter and Vlaams Belang in the then upcoming elections on 26 May 2019.45

In response to this, the CCIB published details of its Veilleurs de l’Islamophobie (Islamophobia Lookouts) project, launched the preceding year. The project is supported by the Federation of Wallonia and Brussels and consists of twenty volunteers who were trained on four themes: understanding prejudice stereotypes and discrimination, hate speech, (Belgian) secularism and freedom of expression, and how to react to online Islamophobia. This example demonstrates best practice in countering online Islamophobia.

Central Figures in the Islamophobia Network
In previous years and previous editions of the Belgian national report in the European Islamophobia Report, there have been consistent standout figures in the Islamophobia network including key politicians as highlighted earlier in this report such as Filip Dewinter. This year in Belgium, Islamophobia has been marked by its increasing institutionalisation. In sum, the

45. Ibid.

46. “Collectif contre l’Islamophobie en Belgique”, Facebook, 13 October 2019, https://www.facebook.com/islamophobia.ccib.be/, (Access date: 16 March 2020). Selected translations from the image of comments shared by CCIB following the 2019 terror attacks on New Zealand Muslims, including: ‘For once it’s not a Muslim terrorist who committed an attack… I am surprised.’ or ‘it is not a terrorist, it is someone who rights wrongdoings, and there will be more and more’, or finally ‘At the same time we don’t give a damn, you reap what you sow.’
ination, hate speech, (Belgian) secularism and freedom of expression, and how to react to online Islamophobia. This example demonstrates best practice in countering online Islamophobia.

Central Figures in the Islamophobia Network

In previous years and previous editions of the Belgian national report in the European Islamophobia Report, there have been consistent standout figures in the Islamophobia network including key politicians as highlighted earlier in this report such as Filip Dewinter. This year in Belgium, Islamophobia has been marked by its increasing institutionalisation. In sum, the year 2019 has seen the state via its national normative mechanism at the centre of growing Islamophobia. This, in turn, has signalled the growing acceptability of Islamophobia, and in particular gendered Islamophobia, in the nation. This is borne out in the everyday attacks on Muslim practices, Muslim sites, and Muslims individuals in Belgium by a wide variety of members of the broader public. Arguably, this year suggests a change in the tone and pace of Belgian Islamophobia – no longer does the network exist through lone or marginal far-right actors, but rather it is becoming increasingly normalised.

Observed Civil Society and Political Initiatives to Counter Islamophobia

Like in previous years, in 2019, Belgium has continued to demonstrate a strong civil society response to the ever shifting and ever-growing Islamophobia. Examples in 2019 include the CCIB – VIB project aiming to tackle - or at least document - growing online Islamophobia in the nation.

Similarly, in 2019, the UNIA has continued to document and support those facing Islamophobia. In particular, their practices of data collection and data sharing with Belgian civil society organisations, namely the CCIB, allow for the further analysis and disaggregation of hate crime data, which is often under-reported and poorly understood.

Finally, given the growth of workplace-based Islamophobic discrimination of Muslims and Muslim women in particular, the launching of the “Actiris Inclusive” project, represents a positive move towards combatting Islamophobic discrimination in the Belgian labour market and workforce, and the widespread levels of discrimination and prejudice that exist in this field within the nation.

Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

By way of principle conclusions based of this year’s Belgian report of the European Islamophobia Report, the following principle points are clear: Islamophobia in Belgium in 2019 has continued to grow steadily and is distinctly gendered in nature. This is
evident in the numerous individual and detailed cases presented above and includes damage to mosques; swastikas being graffitied on Muslim property and pig heads being left at Muslim homes; stabbings of Muslim women; forced removal of Muslim women’s headscarves; Muslim women being pushed onto the metro tracks; and Muslim women being denied employment and education. These events are only the tip of the iceberg, and show the intersectional nature of Islamophobic discrimination as it crosses with traditional racisms, anti-Semitism, and sexism.

Furthermore, and perhaps most importantly, rather than being confined to key figures, actors and networks, Belgian Islamophobia in 2019 has distinctly been marked by its growing institutionalisation. Examples of increasingly institutionalised Belgian Islamophobia include the implementation of the ban on ritual slaughter (meaning halal and kosher) in Flanders in January 2019 and in Wallonia in September 2019, and the controls on philosophical and religious symbols (including Muslim women’s headscarves) in Flemish Belgian workplaces and education thanks to the Flemish Governmental Agreement (aided in part by the 2019 right and far-right parliamentary growth) that was implemented in 2019. The latter follows on from specific local bans and is often framed around principles of neutrality. This national report highlights the remarkable similarities with French-style and secular-based limitations on Muslim women’s dress in neighbouring France. Yet, while the French affairs began in 1989 and have continued since, the Belgian case appears to be an expedited track towards similar levels of control of Muslimness in the nation. The legislation of Islamophobic action in Belgium in 2019 points towards the wide-reaching scope of such controls, its potential to signal legitimacy of Islamophobic action among the wider public, and the possible growth and trajectory of the phenomenon in Belgium in coming years.

In terms of recommendations, measures must be taken across the diverse levels of Belgian society to stem the legislated growth in Islamophobia. These steps may be taken by civil society actors, media, jurists, educators, and political figures alike, and should include the documentation, contestation, and deconstruction of dominant Islamophobic narratives in the nation. For example, where the headscarf is being constructed as a threat to Belgian neutrality, measures should be taken both to normalise its presence in Belgian society and to highlight the incongruence of limiting Muslim women’s dress on the grounds of neutrality in Belgian society, which guarantees religious freedom and furthermore officially recognises faiths including Islam within its state-level structure.

At the civil society level, given the already strong presence of counter-Islamophobia initiatives, work should be done to continue to support such projects and the strong track record of data and good practice-sharing across organisations in the country. On the whole, the precedents set in Belgium in 2019, point to remarkable and concerning trends that going forward should be stemmed.
Chronology

- **01.01.2019**: Flanders bans halal slaughter.47
- **19.01.2019**: Reports emerge of a Muslim mother being attacked by a man with a taser in Anderlecht (presumably motivated by her headscarf).48
- **20.01.2019**: Muslim woman hit in Anderlecht. Attack is believed to be Islamophobic and as a result, the attack sparks concern among Muslim women in Belgium.49
- **30.01.2019**: A nineteen-year-old woman who converted to Islam is stabbed by her mother. The 54-year-old mother is sentenced to three-year imprisonment.50
- **04.02.2019**: Controversy erupts following publication of Belgian Youth Parliament advertisement campaign featuring a young Muslim woman. The campaign sparks widespread online Islamophobic hate. It also triggers a defence statement by the Belgian youth parliament, assuring its commitment to inclusivity and diversity.51
- **08.02.2019**: The University of Liège hosts the event ‘Dialogue sur la présence Musulmane en Belgique’ (Dialogue on the Muslim presence in Belgium) thus highlighting its problematised nature.
- **13.02.2019**: Brussels Parliament gives the go-ahead to a project seeking to encourage diversity and counter discrimination in the workplace (civil servant focus).52
- **18.02.2019**: Woman photographed on E411 Brussels-Namur highway using her headscarf to hold her mobile phone, sparks controversy, but deemed lawful.53

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48. “Aggression Islamophobe d’une maman à Anderlecht”, CCIB.
• **28.02.2019**: School students dress up as stereotypes of Arabs/Muslims and mock Islam. The event sparks controversy. 54
• **15.03.2019**: Following New Zealand attacks, the EMB issues a statement to Belgian mosques warning against gatherings outside of the mosque space, encouraging vigilance amongst worshippers, promoting calm and prayer for New Zealand victims – demonstrating the globalisation of Islamophobia and the fear it creates. 55
• **16.03.2019**: *Veilleurs de l’Islamophobie en Belgique* record surge in online hate following New Zealand attacks.
• **20.03.2019**: Two women report facing Islamophobia on public transport bus in Uccle. The driver is alleged to have said ‘Je suis raciste et je déteste les femmes voilées’ (I am a racist and I hate women who wear the headscarf). 56
• **21.03.2019**: *Rassemblement contre l’Islamophobie* counter-Islamophobia gathering held in Brussels.
• **29.03.2019**: Controversy emerges surrounding the term Islamophobia in Schaerbeek local council. The area has high levels of Muslim political representation. 57
• **02.04.2019**: Woman stabbed in front of her three children, aged between 8 and 9, whilst on the school run in Anderlecht - presumed Islamophobic motive. 58
• **04.04.2019**: The UNIA recalls the lawful nature of a religious education teacher’s headscarf. The woman wasn’t permitted to take her teacher’s certificate exam on the grounds of her visibility as Muslim. 59
• **06.05.2019**: Brussels-based school issues a disclaimer of any culpability of injury or ill health of any of its students fasting during Ramadan. Disagreement within local authority and limited likelihood of young primary school-aged children fasting. 60

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54. Eickhoff, Dubocquet and Guévart, “Un nouveau service chez Actiris pour lutter contre la discrimination à l’embauche”.
56. Dinant and Broutout, “Uccle: deux femmes voilées se disent victime d’une agression raciste par un conducteur”.
60. Fadoul, “Ramadan: une école primaire de Bruxelles décline toute responsabilité en cas de malaise”.

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• **26.05.2019:** Belgian Federal and European Parliamentary election – strong far-right growth, particularly in Flanders.
• **05.06.2019:** A 65-year-old from Antwerp was sentenced to ten-months imprisonment and ordered to pay €800 fine for tweets inciting hatred both racist and specifically Islamophobic in nature. The man also harassed UNIA director Els Keytman.61
• **17.06.2019:** First hearing in the Brussels correctional court over case in August 2018, whereby a woman had her headscarf forcibly removed in a Schaerbeek car park.
• **06.07.2019:** An inebriated woman attacked a headscarf-wearing Muslim woman in Duerne and tried to forcibly remove her headscarf (although some reports state face veil). The attacker was arrested due to being publicly intoxicated.62
• **04.08.2019:** Local councillor Lucas Ducarme of opposition party in Koekelberg states that he doesn’t want his town to become like Molenbeek.63
• **08.08.2019:** BePax report “Islamophobie: mettre fin aux discriminations” (Islamophobia: Put an End to Discrimination) is published detailing growing rates of Islamophobia and in particular, its gendered dimensions.64
• **21.08.2019:** Newspaper report published noting significant increase in Islamophobia in Belgium.65
• **27.08.2019:** Flemish judge rules that a Muslim schoolgirl from Leuven can wear her headscarf to school in spite of the school operating a ban on religious symbols. The judge deemed the school ban to be in contradiction with laws governing religious freedom.66
• **01.09.2019:** *Halal* slaughter ban comes into action in Wallonia.
• **18.09.2019:** Reports emerge of a Muslim woman and her family facing racist abuse – verbal taunts, swastikas graffitiied on their car and excrement/ urine left at their doorstep. Difficult to disaggregate race, ethnicity, etc.67

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62. SaRe. “Dronken vrouw valt moslima aan in Deurne”.
63. Anneet, “Ducarme: ‘Je ne veux pas que Koekelberg devienne Molenbeek bis’”.
64. For more information, see: http://www.bepax.org/files/files/BePax-Signes-des-Temps-08-2019-%20Islamophobia.pdf
66. Decr, “Rechter beslist dat meisje uit Leuven hoofddoek tóch mag dragen op school”.
• **01.10.2019:** Flemish governmental declaration published. Given the strong far-right gains made in May elections, the declaration curbs religious freedoms in the workplace and education. 68

• **03.10.2019:** Calls for extension of halal slaughter ban to Brussels-Capital Region from Fabrice Grosfilley aired on BX1.

• **04.10.2019:** News reports indicate that an Islamophobic attack takes place once every two days in Belgium. 69

• **05.10.2019:** Fifty-year-old inebriated homeless woman pushes headscarf-wearing woman on the tracks of the Brussels metro. This is the second time that the woman has done this. 70

• **13.10.2019:** Pig head left at residential address in Wallonia (reported to the CCIB).

• **16.10.2019:** School allows for a Muslim religious education teacher to wear her headscarf to school following support by the UNIA. 71

• **27.10.2019:** STIB (Belgian public transport management company) taken to court by a headscarf-wearing job applicant over discrimination based on the headscarf. 72

• **27.11.2019:** At the **Université Libre de Bruxelles (ULB)** the **Cercle des Etudiants Arabo-Européens de ULB** (The Circle of Arabo-Europea Students at ULB), along with other students’ organisations submit contestation surrounding the restriction of Muslim women’s dress.

• **04.12.2019:** ‘Actris Inclusive’ – Belgian office for work launches its office dedicated to combatting workplace/job-hunter discrimination. 73

• **24.12.2019:** The Court of Appeal in Antwerp rules that a ban on wearing headscarves in two schools in the municipality of Maasmechelen in the Limburg province is justified. 74

• **31.12.2019:** Al-Ihssan Mosque in Leuven is vandalised and attacked as the year closes. 75

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71. UNIA, “Une future prof de religion Islamique à le droit de porter le voile”.

72. Blogie, “La Stib attaquée pour discrimination à l’embauche”.

73. Eickhoff, Dubocquet and Guévart, “Un nouveau service chez Actiris pour lutter contre la discrimination à l’embauche”.

74. Chini, “Headscarf Ban in Public Schools”.

75. D.R., “Une mosquée vandalisée à Louvain”.