

## **Anti-Muslim sentiments and disinformation in Hungary**

### **The historic roots**

Hungary has a history of cohabitation with the Muslim culture, as the central and southern parts of the country were conquered and ruled by the Ottoman Empire for more than 150 years, between 1541 to 1699. This did not automatically create historical animosities: mosques and baths, for example, built during the Ottoman occupation, are regarded to be part of the national cultural heritage.

### **The issue of immigration in the Hungarian political agenda and the refugee crisis**

According to the data of Pew Research, Muslims comprise only 0.4 percent of Hungary's population<sup>1</sup>, and other sources indicate even lower figures. Due to the lack of a large, visible Muslim community, hardly any Hungarians encounter Islam in their everyday lives and have deep knowledge of it. Therefore, Islam was not present in the public discourse before the 2015 refugee crisis. Due to the lack of a visible Muslim community, hardly any Hungarians encounter Islam in their daily lives and have any knowledge of it. The situation changed when an unprecedented number of asylum-seekers passed through the country in 2015. However, the number of migrants fell in Hungary considerably after the tightening of asylum regulation and the construction of the Southern border fence in the fall of 2015<sup>2</sup>.

### **Political campaign on the topic**

Hungary's governing party Fidesz's campaign against immigration and Muslims exploited the objection of Hungarian society to "others," which is traditionally strong in Central and Eastern European countries. With the most centralized media system within the European Union, Fidesz was able to control the public discourse. Exploiting the political opportunity, the main enemies of the government have become refugees and migrants, and those actors who, in the government's rhetoric, help, organize and bring them to Europe (e.g., NGOs, European Union, American-Hungarian billionaire George Soros). Fidesz has been able to keep immigration on the top of the agenda via continuous state-sponsored disinformation campaigns based on hate-inciting rhetoric, conspiracy theories (e.g., about the existence of a so-called "Soros-plan" and disinformation about the Muslim communities), fake news, and half-truths. In the dominant narrative, Hungary is waging a two-front war: they defend Christian values by fighting against the "Islamization" of Europe and protect traditional values against the liberal, "post-1968" ideologies such as multiculturalism, LGBTQ+, and gender equality. This narrative is often supported by references to Hungary's defensive war against the Ottoman Empire from the late 14th century and the Ottoman occupation between the 16th and 17th centuries: Hungary has again become the bulwark of Christian Europe and protects the continent from Muslim invasion.

### **The public opinion towards Muslims in contemporary Hungary**

The hate-incitement rhetoric has helped whip up Hungary's xenophobic attitudes and conspiracy theories. According to the poll of Pew Research Center, 72 percent of Hungarians had unfavorable views of Muslims in 2016 compared to the EU median of 43 percent. Hungarians were also more

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<sup>1</sup> "Muslim Population Growth in Europe," Washington, D.C (November 29, 2017), <http://www.pewforum.org/2017/11/29/europes-growing-muslim-population/>.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.brookings.edu/research/anti-muslim-populism-in-hungary-from-the-margins-to-the-mainstream/#footnote-18>

likely to consider refugees a burden or a significant threat than the average European.<sup>3</sup> However, according to more recent data from Pew Research, the animosity towards Muslims has dropped from 72% to 58% percent between 2016 and 2019, as the topic became less important on the political agenda. Also, the last poll indicated that anti-Muslim sentiments in the Central and Eastern European region are not exceptionally high: negative sentiments towards Muslims were found to be higher in Slovakia (77%), Poland (66%), and the Czech Republic (64%) as well.

Conspiracy theories sometimes spread from the official level also had a massive impact on public opinion. In a poll of Political Capital back in 2018, a relative majority, 45% of the Hungarians, agreed that Muslim leaders have a secret plan to conquer Europe and make it an Arabic continent, and 48% agreed that Muslims want to enforce their culture upon us stealthily. 51 % agree that George Soros is the driving force behind this process.

The anti-Muslim political hysteria in public opinion led to a moral panic in the Hungarian population, leading to the misperception of average citizens/tourists/guest workers as illegal Muslim migrants. According to Vivienne Walker and Lóránt Győri, in 2015, independent online media outlets have reported a total of 21 instances of misperception involving more than 250 victims. At least half of those “spotted” were Hungarian citizens. Not one of the individuals denounced had broken the law but usually has been reported to the police by the local population<sup>4</sup>.

### **Some policies of the government contradict statements**

The HU government’s immigration policy is more practical than the rhetoric suggests: issuing residency permits from non-EU countries has accelerated in the last five years. 55,297 residency permits were issued only in 2020 (in a country of 10 million). Most of them are for guest workers from Muslim countries, but a considerable proportion is (e.g., from Iran).

Prime Minister Viktor Orbán’s treatment of Islam, Muslims at official diplomatic events strongly contradicts the official narrative over the clash of the Muslim and Christian civilizations. For instance, during the visit of Egyptian President Abdel-Fattah El-Sisi to Hungary in 2015, Prime Minister Orbán praised Islam for its honorable, spiritual, and intellectual contributions, and he described Muslims as representatives of a high civilization. He also mentioned the sympathy between Hungarians and Arabs. The foreign policy of the HU government is „pragmatic” enough to build close ties to (partly religious, partly secular) authoritarian countries with dominantly Muslim backgrounds such as Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Turkey, in the so-called Turkic Council where Hungary has observer status. Anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant rhetoric, therefore, is more of a political marketing product than a deep ideological and religious commitment in Hungary.

The government had some recent problematic statements as well regarding Muslims. Recently, Viktor Orbán spoke about Bosnia Herzegovina (scene of the Yugoslav wars less than three decades ago), saying that integrating the country into the European Union could be a challenge because “how we manage the security of a state in which 2 million Muslims live is a key issue for their security too,” pointing to other EU states. Bosniak leaders condemned the statements and canceled a meeting with the Prime Minister. Hungarian authorities have failed to publicly condemn China’s policies against Xinjiang and the persecution of its Uyghur population- but at least reluctantly supported some soft EU sanctions against some Chinese officials over human rights abuses in the Xinjiang region.

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<sup>3</sup> Matthew Goodwin and Thomas Raines, “What Do Europeans Think About Muslim Immigration?,” Chatham House, February 7, 2017, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/node/27756>.

<sup>4</sup> <https://warontherocks.com/2018/07/migrants-moral-panic-and-intolerance-in-hungarian-politics/>