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PR ACTIVITIES OF MUSLIM ORGANIZATIONS IN SLOVAKIA: POLITICAL AND COMMUNICATION ANALYSIS

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Abstract

The article is dedicated to analyzing the PR activities of Muslim organizations in Slovakia, taking into account the political, social, and communicative context. The authors explore the impact of digital technologies on religious communication, examining the use of social media and traditional media to shape the public image of Islamic organizations. Significant attention is given to the issue of islamophobia and the informational strategies aimed at overcoming negative stereotypes about Muslims. The PR campaigns of the "Islamic Foundation in Slovakia" are analyzed, including their role in interfaith dialogue and combating hate speech. The study addresses political challenges, particularly the populist anti-Islamic rhetoric of Slovak politicians, which affects the image of Muslim communities. The authors emphasize the importance of crisis communication and educational initiatives to improve societal perceptions of Islam in Slovakia.

Keywords: religious communication, Islam, PR-activity, populist politics, Islam in Slovakia, islamophobia, mass-communications, social networks, historical memory.

Introduction

Modern digital technologies significantly transform the nature of communication within religious communities. The adoption of digital technologies and social media

profoundly alters the religious-confessional discourse. Believers are now able to create their own communicative environments based on shared values and interests on a global scale. This format also facilitates the inclusion of new members into the communicative community, who may later join physical religious groups and communities. Given the substantial increase in information flows over recent decades, the activities of religious organizations undergo significant transformations. Traditional communication formats persist through communal prayers, the performance of rituals, and the celebration of religious holidays, while the use of digital media is actively established, greatly simplifying religious practices. For instance, Muslims widely use mobile applications that notify them of prayer times, function as prayer beads, and more. The inability to conduct direct religious communication in traditional forms during the Covid-19 pandemic highlighted the need for alternatives—such as online service broadcasts, video conferences, and thematic groups on messaging platforms. Although these forms lost some relevance after the pandemic, they have persisted due to their powerful potential for mobilizing large groups of people. The implementation of PR strategies by religious organizations is driven by the need to maintain a positive reputation and respond to crisis challenges—such as scandals, ambiguous statements, or inadequate responses to socially significant issues.

The Main Content and Results

The PR activities of religious organizations are increasingly becoming the subject of study within the interdisciplinary framework of religious studies and social communication sciences. At the same time, it is worth paying attention to current research in political science, legal studies, and public administration sciences, as it is the specifics of regulating religious policy that shape the strategies of communicative activities. Under conditions of full or partial bans on the activities of certain religious organizations, PR is characterized by a strengthening of informal ties, while under conditions dominated by the principle of freedom, it is marked by a high level of channelization (the use of a significant number of information dissemination channels).

Substantive studies on the transformation of religious PR activities in the context of media evolution are conducted by Stewart M. Hoover. In his work *Religion in the Media Age*, the author analyzes the interrelationship between the religious sphere and the media and political domains, using empirical data from voter sentiments in the 2004 U.S. presidential

campaigns.¹ He also explores the specifics of the formation of the modern religious media market, noting that media and the entertainment industry compete with traditional social institutions (such as religion) and their leaders for attention and influence. Consequently, religion becomes an object of journalistic interest, and media becomes a significant tool for the activities of religious organizations. Douglas Cannon addresses the issues of institutionalizing structural units of religious organizations responsible for PR. He analyzes the activities of the Religious Communicators Council and notes that, due to fears of negative public perception and a desire to preserve spiritual authority, they attempt to conceal the use of PR tools. Extrapolating this to other religious organizations, a similar trend can be observed. However, there is currently a gradual shift toward recognizing the importance of these tools, with an emphasis on honest (i.e., non-manipulative) religious communication.² Research on the PR activities of Muslim organizations has not yet acquired a systematic character. This topic, in the context of specific European countries, is covered in the *Yearbook of Muslims in Europe*, with the 15th volume published in 2024.³ Additionally, the PR activities of Muslim organizations in Ukraine have been studied by several Ukrainian scholars in articles such as “PR activity of Muslim organizations in Ukraine (2010-2023)”⁴ and “PR activity of Muslim organizations of Ukraine (on the example of the RAMU *Ummah*).”⁵ Although numerous scholarly investigations into the issues of Islamophobia in Slovakia and the politico-legal aspects of realizing the rights of this community's believers have been conducted, the PR activities of Muslim organizations in Slovakia have remained outside the focus of researchers.

To a significant extent, the nature and strategy of PR activities of Muslim organizations are determined by the number of believers in each country. According to Houssain Kettani's data in the work “Muslim Population in Europe: 1950-2020,”⁶ the Muslim population in Central and Eastern European countries ranges from 0.1% to 0.2% of the country's population. Overall, the religious culture of countries in this region qualitatively differs from that of Central

¹ S. M. Hoover. *Religion in the media age*. New York: Routledge, 2006.

² D. F. Cannon. “Who Do You Say That I Am? A History of How Religion Communicators Have Often Avoided ‘Public Relations’”. *Journal of Public Relations Research*. 2015. № 27. Pp. 280-296.

³ A. Alibašić, S. Akgönül, S. Müssig, J. S. Nielsen, E. Račius, (Eds.). *Yearbook of Muslims in Europe*. Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill. 2024. № 15.

⁴ В. М. Слюсар, О. І. Предко, М. В. Слюсар PR-діяльність мусульманських організацій України (2010–2023 pp.) [PR activity of Muslim organisations in Ukraine (2010-2023)]. *Софія. Гуманітарно-релігієзнавчий вісник*. 2023. № 1 (21). С. 62 – 67. <https://doi.org/10.17721/sophia.2023.21.16>

⁵ V. Slyusar, O. Sokolovskyi, M. Slyusar PR activity of Muslim organizations of Ukraine (on the example of the RAMU "Ummah"). *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe*. 2024 Vol. 44 : Iss. 1 , Article 6. Pp. 91-104.

⁶ H. Kettani “Muslim population in Europe: 1950-2020.” *International Journal of Environmental Science and Development*. 2010. № 1(2). Pp. 154-164.

and Western Europe, as religiosity serves as a peculiar marker of national identity, which is characteristic of Eastern Europe. Under these conditions, PR is directed toward ensuring the publicity and transparency of the activities of Islamic organizations, aiming to increase recognition, shape the image of an organization as one of the entities interacting between the state and religious organizations, and capable of setting the agenda.

In this regard, the PR activities of Muslim organizations in Slovakia are limited in their choice of resources. According to the Law “On Freedom of Religion and the Status of Churches and Religious Societies,” as amended and effective from March 1, 2017, the registration of religious organizations requires proof of the presence of 50,000 adult adherents (Slovak citizens) residing in the country.⁷ According to the Annex to this law, which lists the churches and religious societies operating in the Slovak Republic under the law or with state consent, Muslim organizations are not registered. Since the Muslim population exceeds 5,000⁸ (according to Pew Research Center, over 10,000, with a projected increase to 40,000 by 2050⁹), registration prospects are absent. However, these religious organizations can function as civic associations with the ability to gather for religious rituals in designated prayer houses, though without the right to build mosques.

A key factor shaping the PR activities of Muslim organizations in Slovakia is political, as several political figures proclaim populist Islamophobic statements in their speeches, particularly in the context of analyzing the European Union’s migration policy. As noted by Jozef Lenč, several politicians, including representatives of the Kotlebovci–People’s Party Our Slovakia (*Kotlebovci–Ľudová strana Naše Slovensko*–K-LSNS), who had parliamentary representation from 2016 to 2023, began manipulating fears of Muslims and terrorism to boost their popularity. Thus, compared to previous years, this shift in the lives of Slovak Muslims is evident in the fact that public Islamophobic statements have moved from social media to the Slovak parliament and have become part of the agenda in political communications and discourse, articulated by opinion leaders such as Andrej Danko and Robert Fico.¹⁰ Such populist rhetoric correlates with the fact that the vast majority of Muslims are immigrants. Another factor influencing the PR activities of Muslim organizations in Slovakia is the stigmatization of Muslims in mass culture as “terrorists” or “aggressive, outdated people.”

⁷ Zákon o slobode náboženskej viery a postavení cirkví a náboženských spoločností. [Act on Freedom of Religion and the Status of Churches and Religious Societies]. Zákon č. 308/1991 Zb. Účinnosť od 01.03.2017. <https://www.zakonypreludi.sk/zz/1991-308>

⁸ Kettani, op. cit., p. 161.

⁹ “Religious Composition by Country, 2010-2050.” *Pew Research Center*. 21 December 2022. <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/feature/religious-composition-by-country-2010-2050/>

¹⁰ J. Lenč, “Slovakia In Yearbook of Muslims in Europe.” 2021. 12. 592.

Fertile ground for such anti-Islamic disinformation includes a) a lack of education about Islam; b) the portrayal of Islam and Muslims in the media; c) stereotypes propagated by churches, politicians, and elements of folk culture.¹¹ Consequently, the primary PR strategy under these conditions becomes the creation of a positive image of the religion to overcome stereotypes and combat Islamophobia, as well as to establish intercultural dialogue between Slovaks and representatives of the ethnonational cultures of Muslim migrants.

These emphases are observed in the activities of the "Islamic Foundation in Slovakia." Specifically, its PR strategy involves monitoring hate speech against Muslims in Slovakia, fostering an atmosphere of mutual understanding between Slovak Muslims and the majority population, and representing the interests of the Muslim community in Slovakia. To achieve this, the following areas of activity are identified: supporting and participating in interfaith dialogue with representatives of other denominations in Slovakia; maintaining the IslamOnline.sk Facebook page and the ISLAMONLINE.sk website, aimed at informing the public about the Muslim community in Slovakia and related topics; operating the Muslim Cultural Center Cordoba, which provides a space for religious activities of Muslims in Slovakia and serves as an information hub for the Slovak public and educational institutions; monitoring hate speech against Muslims in Slovakia and publishing this in an annual summary report; and collaborating with non-profit organizations and state institutions in cross-cutting areas such as migration or humanitarian aid.¹²

One direction is identifying instances of Islamophobia, analyzing the current situation, and describing measures aimed at overcoming negative attitudes toward Muslims. The Foundation collects all cases of anti-Muslim verbal and physical attacks, with seven cases recorded and documented in 2023.¹³ This strategy also includes a series of videos titled "Meet Your '(Un)Known Neighbors,'" which provide real-life accounts of Islamic traditions. The authors note that since more than half of surveyed Slovaks would not want a Muslim neighbor, they propose learning from the experiences of those who have had close interactions.¹⁴

A component of the PR activities of Muslim religious organizations in Slovakia is the posting of basic information about the organization, news (including regarding religious

¹¹ Lenč. "Unwelcome Foreigners: Muslims in Slovakia." In *Muslims Are: Challenging Stereotypes, Changing Perceptions*, edited by A. Bilá, 2017. P. 88. Bratislava: Open Society Foundation.

¹² Islamská nadácia na Slovensku [Islamic Foundation in Slovakia]. (2020). *Ludialudom.sk*. <https://ludialudom.sk/profil/detail/46418>

¹³ Report: Islamophobia in Slovakia 2023 (2023). *The Islamic Foundation in Slovakia*. <https://www.islamonline.sk/download/10470/>

¹⁴ Vyhlásenie k aktuálnej bezpečnostnej situácii na slovensku [Statement on the current security situation in Slovakia]. *IslamOnline.sk*. 07.05.2024. <https://www.islamonline.sk/2024/05/vyhlasenie-k-aktualnej-bezpecnostnej-situacii-na-slovensku/>

holidays), official statements, and thematic media resources (videos, links to social media where media is posted) on official pages. However, topics such as religious services (marriage (*nikah*), rituals related to newborns, funeral rituals (*janazah*), healing (*ruqyah*), and near-religious services (*halal* certification) are absent. This also applies to the widespread practice in other countries of posting instructional verses from the Quran and selected *hadiths* on social media. An essential component of the PR activities of Islamic organizations is the distribution of printed editions of the Quran and the regular publication of individual verses. A significant event for Eastern and Central-Eastern European countries is the translation of the meanings of the Quran into national languages. The Slovak translation was carried out by Abdulwahab Al-Sbenaty, with three editions published in 2008, 2014, and 2015, the latest including commentaries and explanations.¹⁵ Additionally, several Islamic studies have been published, most of which are openly accessible. In this context, the author created the website <https://koran.sk/>, with the initial and primary goal of publishing the forthcoming Slovak translation of the Quran.¹⁶ A key principle of its operation is independence from any organization or school of thought. The site features the author's publications on various topics related to Islam and Islamic law, as well as comments and notes regarding the Quran's translation, such as "How to Transcribe Arabic Words," "Important Note on the Translation of Certain Quran Verses" and "Corrections to the First Edition of the Quran Translation."

A significant aspect of the PR activities of Muslim organizations, including in Slovakia, is the coverage of the activities of religious cultural centers through accessible channels. This allows them to serve both as an information hub for Muslims in the country and, to support religious education. Given legislative restrictions and the small number of believers in the country, the "Islamic Foundation in Slovakia" launched the "Get to Know Us" project, which features an interactive map on the organization's website showing cities where mediators reside. These mediators are tasked with answering questions about Muslims, Islamic culture, and religion, participating in thematic discussions, and assisting philanthropists in supporting refugees, among other duties.¹⁷ The organization expresses readiness to match mediators based on age and inquiry and facilitates relevant contacts. This project enables educational outreach while also serving as a platform for communication among Muslims or between Muslims and those wishing to learn more about the religion in depth.

¹⁵ KORÁN. Preklad do slovenského jazyka. Tretie vydanie: LEVANT consulting, s.r.o., 2015. 505 p.

¹⁶ Koran.sk. 2005. <https://koran.sk/>

¹⁷ Spoznajte nás [Get to know us.]. (2025). *IslamOnline.sk*. <https://www.islamonline.sk/neznamy-susedia/>

Lectures on Islam are held at educational institutions. For instance, on February 19, 2025, Imam Mohamad Safwan Hasna of the Cordoba Center in Bratislava delivered a lecture at the Pedagogical Faculty of Trnava University titled “Islam in Slovakia,” presenting Islam as a faith, civilization, and way of life to students. The lecture also discussed the core principles, teachings, and values of Islam, focusing on the experiences of Muslims living in Slovakia.¹⁸ The event was announced in the media space and widely covered on social media. This direction of PR activity is also realized through the participation of spiritual leaders in thematic radio and television programs discussing these issues, meetings with spiritual leaders of other religions, and the organization of cultural events. A notable event was the meeting on December 5, 2022, between Mohamad Safwan Hasna, head of the Islamic Foundation in Slovakia, and Archbishop Bernard Bober regarding interreligious dialogue, which was covered in the media. Significant for PR was his interview with the publication “Týždeň” (April 2019), where the central theme was Islamophobia in Europe generally and Slovakia specifically, along with establishing interreligious dialogue. A notable achievement in this dialogue is the project “A Jew, a Muslim, and a Christian Met for Discussions,” organized and moderated by Mario Nicolini, Executive Director of the Forum of World Religions—Slovakia, in which Mohamad Safwan Hasna represented Islam. The project aimed to debunk myths about the three main monotheistic religions, which was reflected in a book.¹⁹ In 2005, the Islamic Foundation in Slovakia held a special exhibition of posters and items dedicated to Islam at the Aupark shopping center in Bratislava, aiming to provide the broader Slovak public with authentic and reliable information about their religion and believers.²⁰ However, an analysis of Slovakia’s media space indicates the sporadic nature of such activities.

The civic-political PR activities of religious organizations are also realized through public discussions and civic-political actions concerning political events both within the country and abroad. Regarding the activities of Muslim organizations in Slovakia, these primarily boil down to political statements in response to Islamophobic remarks by politicians, including government representatives. Importantly, these statements gain civic-political significance when they lead to further public discussion and are brought into the political discourse agenda. A case in point is the interview of Slovak Prime Minister R. Fico with the

¹⁸ M. Dojčár Islam na Slovensku. *Trnavská univerzita v Trnave*. 10.02.2025. <https://pdf.truni.sk/aktuality/islam-na-slovensku-2025>

¹⁹ M. Nicolini Stretnú sa kresťan, moslim a žid... ...rozhovory rabína, imáma a dvoch kňazov o pestrom svete okolo nás, 2018. 176 s.

²⁰ M. Dojčár Islam na Slovensku. *Trnavská univerzita v Trnave*. 10.02.2025. <https://pdf.truni.sk/aktuality/islam-na-slovensku-2025>

TASR agency on May 25, 2016, in which he stated that he did not want tens of thousands of Muslims in the country who would gradually assert their interests. Specifically, he said: “Islam has no place in Slovakia ... I do not want a cohesive Muslim community to emerge in Slovakia.”²¹ Previously, he had already expressed negative views about Muslims: “And we will never—not even voluntarily—create a self-contained Muslim community, because it would represent a serious security risk.”²² This sparked discussions about the activities of Muslim organizations in the media discourse, with several outlets publishing these statements alongside a response from the “Islamic Foundation in Slovakia”²³ and a description of its activities.²⁴ The statement emphasized that insults and threats against Muslims appear in online discussions daily. This is despite the fact that the Muslim community in Slovakia is well-integrated, financially self-sufficient, and nearly problem-free, with Friday sermons in prayer houses conducted in Slovak for years (a practice not yet widespread in the West). Such Islamophobic statements by the prime minister are at odds with the principles of the European Union, which Slovakia was set to preside over starting July 1, and which is home to nearly 20 million Muslims.

An important component of the PR activities of Muslim organizations in Slovakia is crisis communications. These primarily involve issuing official statements regarding specific events that serve as conflict triggers in relations between Muslims and non-Muslims in the country. For example, on May 7, 2024, the Islamic Foundation in Slovakia released a statement condemning the actions of an unknown perpetrator who, on that day, reported bombs in over a thousand schools across the country. The organization’s representatives noted that, according to the released information, the offender supplemented their threatening letters with references to Islam and Muslims, and the statement emphasized that it is unacceptable to misuse faith for such heinous acts.²⁵ Crisis communications also include official statements in response to

²¹ Ficov prvý rozhovor: Bojovali sme s mimovládny sektorom, ktorý bol často dotovaný zo zahraničia [Fico's first interview: We fought with the non-governmental sector, which was often subsidized from abroad]. (2016). *Dennik*. 25.05.2016. <https://dennikn.sk/470467/fico-poskytol-rozhovor-tasr-bojovali-mimovladnym-sektorom-ktory-bol-casto-dotovany-financovany-zo-zahranicia/>

²² Slovak election: PM Fico sees Muslim 'threat'. (2016). *bbc.com*. 04.03.2016. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-35718831>

²³ Reakcia Islamskej nadácie na Slovensku na výrok predsedu vlády SR o isláme [The reaction of the Islamic Foundation in Slovakia to the statement of the Prime Minister of the Slovak Republic about Islam]. (2016). *IslamOnline.sk*. 25.05.2016. <https://www.islamonline.sk/2016/05/reakcia-islamskej-nadacie-na-slovensku-na-vyrok-predsedu-vlady-sr/>

²⁴ Slovak election: PM Fico sees Muslim 'threat'. (2016). *bbc.com*. 04.03.2016. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-35718831>

²⁵ Vyhlásenie k aktuálnej bezpečnostnej situácii na slovensku [Statement on the current security situation in Slovakia]. *IslamOnline.sk*. 07.05.2024. <https://www.islamonline.sk/2024/05/vyhlasenie-k-aktualnej-bezpecnostnej-situacii-na-slovensku/>

remarks by public figures or inaccurate formulations in Slovak media that cause reputational harm to Islamic organizations. This includes the Islamic Foundation in Slovakia's statement regarding a Facebook post by the Pezinok district organization of SMER–SSD. In that post, mosques were compared to nightclubs associated with drugs and radicalization. The Foundation's response, posted on the same day, expressed concern and pointed out the inappropriateness of comparing mosques—places of prayer, peace, and spiritual growth for countless believers worldwide—with nightclubs.²⁶ Such challenges are currently isolated and are addressed through appropriate crisis communication measures.

Conclusions

As a result of the politological-communicative analysis of the PR activities of Muslim organizations in Slovakia, it was found that their strategy is largely determined by their limited legal status, the small size of the community, and the need to counter Islamophobia. The key organization implementing PR activities is the "Islamic Foundation in Slovakia," which focuses on shaping a positive image of Muslims through educational projects, interreligious dialogue, and monitoring hate speech. The use of digital media, such as the IslamOnline.sk website and social media pages, has become an important tool for informing the public and combating stereotypes, though their potential has not yet been fully realized. The political context, particularly the populist anti-Islamic rhetoric of certain figures, forces Muslim organizations to resort to crisis communications, responding to scandalous statements and disinformation. An essential component of PR activity is crisis communications, which include prompt responses to negative remarks and instances of discrimination. The experience of Slovak Muslim organizations demonstrates a gradual adaptation of their PR strategies to the contemporary political and media context.

²⁶ Vyhlásenie Islamskej nadácie na Slovensku k prirovnávaniu mešít k nočným klubom [Statement by the Islamic Foundation in Slovakia on comparing mosques to nightclubs]. (2024). *IslamOnline.sk*. 30.09.2024. <https://www.islamonline.sk/2024/09/vyhlasenie-islamskej-nadacie-na-slovensku-k-prirovnaniu-mesit-k-nocnym-klubom/>

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