

Islam and Tolerance

in Wider Europe



Islam and Tolerance in Wider Europe

Edited by Pamela Kilpadi

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Islam and Policy in Central Europe

The Mosque Debate and Anti-Muslim Sentiment in Slovenia

Natalija Vrečer

Pages 136–139

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The Mosque Debate and Anti-Muslim Sentiment in Slovenia

Natalija Vrečer

▪ Oleg Nikishin, Panos

During the First World War, many Muslim soldiers defending Slovenia's northwest border worshipped at a mosque in the Slovenian town of Log pod Mangartom. Toward the end of the war, the mosque burned down. Slovenia's Muslim community has been unsuccessfully trying to build a mosque in the country ever since.

Countless obstacles have blocked the construction of a mosque in Slovenia, a country of less than 2 million people and home to some 60,000 Muslims, including many from Bosnia-Herzegovina who have lived in Slovenia for over three decades.¹ Although freedom of religion is a human right and should be a cornerstone of social inclusion, Slovenia's Muslims must gather for prayers in a small private house in Moste (a district of the Slovenian capital city Ljubljana) and congregate in rented sports halls during times of religious festivals.

A thorough media content analysis of press articles focusing on the absence of a mosque in Slovenia beginning in 1971 (when such articles started to appear) through spring 2005 reveals a shift in the nature of the debate before and after the 9/11 terrorist attacks in New York, with the post-9/11 debate much more heated and xenophobic.

Natalija Vrečer is a researcher focusing on human rights, refugees and migrants with the Slovene Institute for Adult Education. Her 2000–1 International Policy Fellowship project investigated the human costs of temporary refugee protection in Slovenia.

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Articles from five Slovenian dailies were analyzed: *Delo* (75 essays), *Dnevnik* (20), *Večer* (4), *Slovenske novice* (6), and *Primorske novice* (1), as well as in the 10 magazines *Mladina* (12), *Mag* (3), *Družina* (2), *Panorama* (2), *Demokracija* (2), *Žurnal* (2), *Start*² (1), *Jana* (1), *Nedeljski dnevnik* (1) and *Mesečnik za kulturo, politiko in gospodarstvo* (1), as well as two articles about the lack of a mosque in Slovenia in the Croatian daily *Vjesnik*. The newspaper *Delo*, in which most of the articles appeared, is Slovenia’s most widely read daily. Most of the magazine articles appeared in *Mladina*—a magazine that had a revolutionary role in the breakup of Yugoslavia—although the reviewed articles appeared after the 1990s.

Yugoslav-era mosque in Slovenia?

In 1969, the Muslim community’s plan to build a mosque in the Bežigrad area of the capital city Ljubljana was evidently problematic because members of the local population deemed it inappropriate near a cycling and jogging route of “brotherhood and unity” (a slogan of Tito’s socialist Yugoslavia intended to encourage ethnic harmony). Such argumentation was quite ridiculous given that the intent of “brotherhood and unity” was to unite rather than divide neighbors of various ethnic and religious backgrounds. By 1974, the Muslim community had proposed 20 locations for a mosque, each time having the proposal shot down by members of local communities. A 1974 essay in *Dnevnik*, for example, reported that residents of the region of Posavje stated that before a mosque was built, the needs of “Slovenians” had to be met in terms of residential, cultural, and leisure centers. In the same year, the Slovenian Commission for Religious Community Relations declared that the delay in building a mosque had become a political problem and that a location for such a building must be approved. Nevertheless, a proposed location near the Ljubljana cemetery Žale was rejected by the Regional Institute for the Preservation of Natural and Cultural Heritage on the basis that it would be out of place.

By 1981, *Vjesnik* declared in the inflated, empty language of “brotherhood and unity” that Slovenians were open and eager to build a mosque. Not surprisingly a mosque was not built, and the media was silent about the issue for the next 15 years.

Renewed media interest in the 1990s

The first relevant article since 1981 was published in *Delo* in 1996 about the increasingly vocal opposition of right wing parties to



The Mosque of Gazi Kasim Pasha (now a Catholic church) and baroque Trinity Column in neighboring Hungary. Built around 1580, it was the main mosque in Hungary until its transformation into a church by the Jesuits after liberation from the Turks ■ Pietro Cenini

the idea of building mosque in Slovenia. They claimed that the presence of a mosque was contrary to the “Christian culture” of the Slovene nation and Central and Eastern Europe. Arguments against the construction of a minaret claimed that the structure would be too high.

In 1998, for the first time in the analyzed Slovene media, *Panorama* noted that opposition to the construction of a mosque in Slovenia was based on ignorance and amounted to a violation of human rights protecting freedom of religion as well as a violation of the basic ethical standards of European civilization. In 1999, the Muslim community suggested a new location for a mosque in the capital district of Vič on Barje. However, members of the local community argued in the media that many Bosnian Serbs live in that area and that they would be opposed to a mosque. Another supposed reason for the “inappropriateness” of the location was its close proximity to the houses of many Slovenian politicians in Murgle (near the capital district of Vič).

A mosque for Slovenia in the new millennium?

When Osman Đogić became the leader of the Muslim community (*muezzin*) in 2001, he embarked on the effort to build a mosque with more enthusiasm than previous leaders of the Muslim community, and the issue was increasingly the subject of media attention. One of the members of the right-wing party New Slovenia stated that building a mosque would “offend Slovene religious sentiment.” Another articulated view was that the *muezzin’s* call for prayer would be too loud and that a mosque would be harmful to tourism because it would position Slovenia as more of a “Balkan” nation. The first response of the local population of Vič claimed that those with gardens in the area opposed it, and they were soon joined by those whose homes neighbored the proposed building site. The latter group even stated that the risk of floods in the area, not to mention earthquakes, prevented the construction of a mosque.

It was only following the September 11 attacks in the United States that a new argument against the construction of a mosque appeared, linking Muslims to terrorists. In 2002 many highly emotionally charged letters to the editor about a possible mosque appeared in the daily *Delo*, with letters in favor always eliciting a negative response and vice versa.³ Opinion pieces and even some letters from politicians stated that “the terrorists” could come to Slovenia if a mosque was built. Newspapers reported in 2003 that the leader of the Slovenian Catholic church at the time Archbishop Franc Rode said that he was against the initiative because a mosque is not only a spiritual and religious center but also a *political* one. In some *Delo* letters to the editor, those against the idea of a mosque in Slovenia compared the peaceful community of Slovenian Muslims to the Turks who invaded Slovenia in the 15th, 16th and 17th centuries, robbing and killing many people. One of the expressly xenophobic articles claimed that larger groups of Muslims would spread diseases. One reporter spoke with Slovenes who said they were afraid that Muslims would reproduce in higher numbers in Slovenia if a mosque was built.

City councillors stated at a 2003 council meeting that the government should be consulted as to whether a mosque should be built in Ljubljana. When one councillor suggested that there should be a popular referendum on the issue, a member of the

Liberal Democratic Party (the leading party at the time) stated that a human rights issue cannot be decided via popular referendum but that freedom of religion must be respected. A number of media reports were published in favor of a mosque as well, including one in which the reporter wrote that “if the Slovenian identity is threatened by one minaret standing beside 10,000 Catholic churches then something is already rotten with this identity.” Nevertheless, right-wing party members collected more than 10,000 signatures in favor of a popular referendum. The mayor of Ljubljana, Danica Simšič, considered that the referendum may not be in accordance with the Slovenian constitution and let the constitutional court to decide the matter. The Slovenian Constitutional Court ruled that a public referendum on a human rights issue would contravene the Slovenian constitution. There was no referendum.

In early 2005 another obstacle prevented the construction of a mosque in Vič, namely that part of the land designated for the site was denationalized and returned to the Lazarists of the Catholic order. In March 2005 the media reported that the Lazarists would be satisfied if the municipality compensated them with another plot of land, since they would not want to be responsible for presenting further obstacles to the construction of the first mosque in Slovenia.

Lessons from three decades of ‘the mosque debate’

Despite the seemingly never-ending back-and-forth regarding the construction of a mosque in Slovenia, it is heartening to note that while some right-wing politicians and members of the population living in the proximity of proposed sites opposed the construction, Slovenian state institutions have considered such opposition to be a violation of human rights and have not actively prevented various initiatives to build a mosque.

Arguments articulated in the media against a mosque reveal the extent of ignorance, discrimination and xenophobia among many Slovenes toward Muslims, which has prevented the construction of a mosque in the country for three-and-a-half decades. Fortunately, the new, more democratic voices of Slovene media reporters, citizens and courts defending human rights and tolerance are strong. They may well succeed in slowly breaking down the barriers to the rise of the first mosque in Slovenia’s recent history.

Notes

- ¹ This estimation was made by the leader (*mufiti*) of the Slovenian Muslims Osman Dogjić. According to official statistics, in April 2002 there were 47,888 Muslims in Slovenia, compared with an estimated 31,000 in the 1990s and 3,000 in Tito’s Yugoslavia. Because religion was suppressed in socialist times, many people in Yugoslavia did not dare to declare themselves as Muslims. They were permitted to declare themselves Muslims only in the beginning of the sixties.
- ² *Start* magazine ceased publication when Yugoslavia fell apart.
- ³ Most of the reporters who wrote about a possible mosque were in favor of its construction. Only one reporter expressed a personal xenophobic opinion. Muslims rarely responded to such articles.

Islam and Tolerance in Wider Europe offers a refreshing new look at the complex interplay between religion, nationalism and expansionism in an increasingly globalized world, as revealed by a new generation of open society leaders working to build a more tolerant Europe. The authors are fellows and colleagues of the International Policy Fellowships program—an initiative of the Open Society Institute that has attempted to combat ‘brain drain’ while developing policy research capacities, initially in emerging democracies of the former Soviet sphere where concepts such as ‘policy’ and ‘fellowship’ were virtually untranslatable. Since its establishment in the late 1990s, some 250 of its fellows have grown into a network of open society leaders spanning more than 40 countries on nearly every continent.

Each chapter—focusing on Western Europe, the Caucasus, Russia, Turkey, Central Europe, and the Balkans—includes several essays by different authors, all of whom are actively involved in the dynamic policymaking processes transforming their respective countries. Their policy perspectives benefit from a uniquely ‘inside out’ rather than the usual ‘outside in’ orientation found in most English-language information about their communities. Taken as a whole, the compilation offers insightful insider stories and comparisons across countries and regions. The results are illuminating.