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The Islamic Community and Islamic problematics in domestic politics of Iceland (2000-2015) exemplified by the construction project of the Grand Mosque of Reykjavik

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Abstract. The paper considers the problems faced by the Muslim population of Iceland in their attempts to exercise their basic rights, such as the practice of religious worship. Despite the fact that the Muslim community of Iceland is rather small, its presence is a serious irritating factor for the internal political field of Iceland, which is clearly demonstrated by the long history of the attempt to build the Grand Mosque of Reykjavik - the need for construction of which became apparent at the end of the 20th century, but the project has not been implemented to this day, due to constant opposition from the public and even local authorities. Today, the Muslim community is so negatively perceived by the Icelandic society that some politicians have made it an instrument of political struggle, and social surveys of the Muslim population show that they are often discriminated, especially in attempts to find a successful job. In Iceland, the Muslim population is now more criticized than in any other European country - this criticism is based mainly on prejudice and only intensified because of terrorist acts committed by Islamists factions in the world. The study contains disappointing conclusions that the Icelandic society in many ways tries to isolate itself from Muslims and fears that their presence may affect the cultural, economic, political life and transformation of the space in the country, which leads to a lot of discussions and polemics about the role of Muslims in the Nordic countries.

1. Introduction

Iceland has one of the smallest Muslim communities in the world, but the role of this community within Icelandic political framework is disproportionately large. As of 2015, it officially had only 875 members, and as of 2017, it had grown to 948, which is less than 0.1% of the total population of Iceland, which as of 1 November 2018 was 355,620 people [1]. Unofficial statistics give a figure of 0.24%, i.e. 1517 practicing Muslims. According to the official statistics, in 2017, 542 people of these Muslims were members of the "Muslim Association of Iceland", which was established in 1997 by the refugee from Palestine S. Tamimi and since 2010 has been under the leadership and chairmanship of an Icelandic-born Muslim I.S. Agnarsson. And other 406 people were members of the "Islamic Cultural Centre of Iceland", established between 2009 and 2010 by Moroccan K. Askari, where the religious life is supported by the Imam from Egypt A. Seddeeq. Despite the insignificance of the Icelandic Muslim community, the first *tafsir* - the translation of the Holy Qur'an into Icelandic - was made in 1993, and 10 years later, in 2003, was republished in an amended version, for comparison: the first *tafsir* in Swedish was published by the former Swedish diplomat Mohammed Knut Bernström only in 1998, while in Finland, the Finnish-language printed *tafsir* of the Qur'an was released in 1942.



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2. Main part

In one interview, S. Tamimi shares interesting information regarding demographic data, stating that when he arrived in Iceland in 1971, there were only seven practicing Muslims living there [2]. According to alternative sources, his words are not far from the truth. Thus, from 1971 to 2013, the Muslim community in Iceland increased 100 times. The countdown of the first generation of Muslims born in Iceland should probably begin in late 80's and early 90's of the 20th century, especially with S. Tamimi's own children, such as Y. I. Tamimi (born in 1988) [2]. In 2014, the first generation of Muslims amounted to more than a half of Iceland's Muslims, the vast majority of whom were born on the territory of Iceland. Approximately 40-50 more people were born in non-Muslim, predominantly Icelandic families. The Muslim population of Iceland is different in origin, but most of the Icelandic Ummah consists of people born in international and interracial marriages from the representatives of the Arab world, former Yugoslavia, Albania, Africa, and Iceland.

One of the main Icelandic researchers and scholars in the field of ethnography and anthropology, Professor of Cultural Anthropology at the University of Iceland K. Loftsdottir, claims that many Icelanders are supporters of anti-immigrant attitudes and hold xenophobic views. First of all, it is related to Islamophobia in parallel societies and other European countries, despite the history of contacts with the Islamic civilization and culture different from these countries. Most of the negative social manifestations within the Icelandic society related to Islamophobia were recorded mainly in the second decade of the 21st century. The main controversy in the Icelandic society started over the construction of a mosque in Reykjavik and the consequences that this construction would have. The anti-Islamic opposition often appeals to the concept of gender equality as the main argument against Islam and Muslims, erroneously, according to the assessment of K. Loftsdottir herself and her co-author Lars Jensen, transferring their misconceptions about Islam, its customs, culture, etiquette, and morals to all Muslims living in Iceland, confusing Islam with the ethnographic flavor of the rites and customs of certain peoples of the Islamic world [3]. Critics of Islam in Iceland are most often guided by negative experiences in justifying their views, using as an example the non-constructive policies implemented towards Islam and Muslims in European societies. In the opinion of researchers, most of the negative experiences are manifestations of the justified reaction of the Muslim community to the policy implemented by the state towards them, which in itself is a problem and a mistake, as well as a catalyst for the most serious challenges of recent decades, both inside and outside Europe.

The rather aggressive and concentrated anti-Islamic rhetoric prevailing in the society is the reason why many Icelandic Muslims prefer not to join formal Muslim organizations, legitimately believing that their relationship with God is their purely personal and intimate prerogative, which is never dependent, even if it is a formal dependence on state institutions, let alone membership in any associations.

In 2014, Muslims in Iceland did not have a separate mosque building but rented a place in central Reykjavik. In 1999, for the first time, there was an understanding of the need for building a mosque. In 2000, the "Muslim Association of Iceland" attempted to start building a mosque in Reykjavik. Reykjavik's authorities sanctioned the request in a specific way: by allocating a plot of land (much less than requested by the applicants, and not exactly at the requested location), and never approved construction plans or its design project. The project implementation was suspended until additional land and property issues would be resolved and approved. According to the 2007 report of the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance in Iceland, "this delay can be seen as a possible sign of prejudice against Muslims in Iceland" [4]. And what may seem quite surprising is that the solution to the above problem is connected by the Muslim community of Iceland to the affirmation of the rights of the Russian Orthodox Church in the region and to the establishment of good neighborly relations with it [5].

After a long approval process that took almost 13 years, on July 6, 2013, the Reykjavik City Council under the leadership of J. Gnarr approved the construction of a mosque of no more than 800 square meters, with a minaret, the roof of which should not exceed 9-10 meters. It was reported that the project of the Grand Mosque of Reykjavik would include a prayer hall, a library, an information

center, and possibly even a restaurant. This decision caused a lot of negative feedback from the Icelanders, which was actively reflected in the virtual space, including the creation of the group "We protest against a mosque in Iceland" on Facebook. From September 26 to October 1, 2013, an independent survey of the Iceland's adult population was conducted with the only question: "Do you or do you not allow other religious groups to have an opportunity to build their religious buildings in Iceland?" According to the results of the survey, a rather consistent and positive attitude towards the buildings of the Church of Iceland and the complexes of neo-pagan temples was established (8.5% and 9.1% - "against", 67.2% and 54.7%, respectively, "for"). Nevertheless, there is a rather strong opposition against the projects and buildings of the "Muslim Association of Iceland" (43.4% - "against", 31.5% - "for", 25.1% did not decide on the answer) [6].

It is surprising, but true: 1,000 Muslims living in Iceland, whose numbers will not reach 0.1% of the total population of Iceland in the next 15-20 years with the current growth rate, and Islam, which they represent, became a tool of political struggle within the country. The only significant political figure in Iceland who publicly expressed his negative attitude towards the construction of the mosque [until 2014] was the former Mayor of Reykjavik, O.F. Magnusson. During the 2014 local elections for the position of the Mayor of Reykjavik, the Progressive Party candidate, S.B. Sveinbjornsdottir, commented extremely negatively on the start of the mosque construction. Among other things, she stated that there are no churches in Abu Dhabi [7], despite the presence of at least six on Google's search engine in 2014, and seven in 2018 [8]. Rafn Einarsson, the representative of the Progressive Party in the Breiðholt District Council, had repeatedly expressed explicit anti-Muslim attitudes in public, and on his Facebook page offered to expel all [about 1,500] Muslims of Iceland, justifying his position by the fact that "those who came from Muslim countries are rapists and perpetrators of violence in every case" [9].

A special interest in the Muslim community of Iceland in the Islamic world was shown by the Qatari television company "Al-Jazeera", which produced a documentary film about the life of Muslim communities on the edge of the Arctic in Iceland, and on the other side of the world - in New Zealand. Their interest is caused exclusively by scientific factors, one of which is to trace how the rules of the Holy Month of Ramadan are combined with the objective natural conditions in which Muslims live [10].

Another example of the difficult relationship between the authorities and Muslims in Iceland is the fact that Muslims in Iceland do not have just a mosque, but a separate building for a mosque, the construction of which has been under discussion in Iceland for over 25 years. It is currently housed on the 3rd floor of a building rented in the center of Reykjavik with an address at Ármúli 38 since 1991. In 2000, the "Muslim Association of Iceland" (Skútvogur 1 (H, 105)) attempted to start building the mosque in Reykjavik on the site at Skögarhlíð 20. Reykjavik's authorities sanctioned the request in a specific way: by allocating a plot of land (much less than requested by the applicants, and not exactly at the requested location), and never approved construction plans or its design project. The project implementation was suspended until additional land and property issues would be resolved and approved. Currently, this plot has a structure that does not stand out as a mosque and can accommodate no more than 200 people.

Designers and architects from all over the world took part in the design of the Grand Mosque of Reykjavik, while all the necessary and associated costs were covered by Saudi Arabia, the Icelandic authorities held a competition for projects in November 2015 (a total of 63 proposals were submitted) [11], selected and approved the best and most appropriate for the harmony and standards of the Scandinavian culture (the winner was the project by architects Gunnlaugur Stefán Baldursson and Pia Bickmann), but the project was not allowed to be implemented. According to their design, the Grand Mosque of Reykjavik will have two floors, an 18.5-meter minaret, and a low-pitched roof with grass, making the whole structure resemble a hill. The total area is 640 square meters. The aim of the project is to combine the traditions of Icelandic and Islamic architecture, the architects said. Despite the fact that in September 2013 the Reykjavik City Council agreed to give the "Muslim Association of Iceland" land for the construction of the mosque [12], its decision was criticized by the society and

civic activists who feared that the mosque would become a breeding ground for radical Islam and that its very existence could irreparably change the face of Reykjavik and Iceland in general. Their opinion is also shared by the former President of Iceland, Olafur Ragnar Grimsson, who said in the interview with the Icelandic National Broadcasting Service [24 November 2015] that he was extremely shocked when, at the meeting with the Saudi Arabian ambassador in March last year, he had learned that the Saudi Arabian government had decided to interfere with the religious life of Iceland by donating a million U.S. dollars to the planned mosque, and also feared that the financing of the Reykjavik mosque would fuel radical Islam in Iceland [13]. What may seem somewhat surprising is that the solution to the above problem is connected by the Muslim community of Iceland to proclaiming the rights of the Russian Orthodox Church in the region and to the establishment of good neighborly relations with it. However, despite the middle 2018, the mosque in Reykjavik was never built.

3. Conclusion

According to the 2007 report of the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance in Iceland, the Icelandic researcher writes that "this delay can be seen as a possible sign of prejudice against Muslims in Iceland" and that it is a manifestation of what is described by the same scholar in her work on Icelandic identity [14]. Unfortunately, Iceland is not an exception in this matter in relation to Muslims. A study conducted in 2011 by the Open Society Institute in 11 EU cities with a significant Muslim population (three capitals in Northern Europe were London, Copenhagen, and Stockholm) [15]. The Institute has published disappointing results in its research:

- 50% of Muslim respondents (compared to 9% of non-Muslims in the EU) reported religious discrimination over the past 12 months. Every fifth respondent specified that he has faced religious discrimination in the last 12 months, and precisely because of being a Muslim.
- Women are discriminated in the labor market if they wear a hijab. Women in hijabs are denied jobs where intellectual abilities are required, they cannot engage in creative activities in public spaces or where frequent contact with clients is required, a rare exception is the civil service, where the work itself involves uniforms, external discipline, and strict dress code (work in hospitals, police, etc.).
- Women who comply with basic Islamic rules and regulations can only find jobs in the services and trade sector, but even in this area, a combination of factors is needed to fill the vacancy: most often, the candidate must have certain preferential personal characteristics and outstanding skills (knowledge and proficiency in several languages, high communication skills, and often accept irregular working hours).
- Many Muslims, regardless of gender, have to work at marginal and low-paying jobs that can only lead to segregation or parallel work life in society.
- Practicing Muslims are almost three times more likely to be denied jobs than non-Muslims. 19.8% of Muslims in Europe are officially unemployed, which is 3 times more than 6.8% of non-Muslims.

From all of the above, it may seem that Muslims seek "autonomization" and parallel life. However, the present study has shown that it is exactly the opposite: the indigenous population of European countries wants to dissociate themselves from Muslims. The Muslim population is only forced to respond to this process, since the initiative comes from the indigenous population. This statement can be supported by numerous examples when indigenous, autochthonous Europeans adopted Islam, they noted that they were criticized by those who surrounded them - friends, colleagues, and if they were public people, such as sportspeople, artists, or media figures, they certainly faced negative reactions from the whole of the society.

Currently, Iceland is the only European country where the Muslim community and its activities are subject to unjustified criticism from the authorities at the systemic level, and it is in Iceland that an extreme case has occurred in the history of European countries, when anti-Islamic, rather than anti-

immigrant, rhetoric has been the actor and the object of internal political struggle for the electorate (before that, the most significant crisis within the European society was the Muhammad cartoons controversy of 2005-2006). However, after the European migration crisis of 2015, the anti-Islamic polemics within the problems inside the European society reached a completely different level, also due to terrorist acts committed by Islamist groups and the speeches made by some Islamic theorists against their opponents. The most active discourse in the North European society nowadays is the one caused by the above-mentioned crisis and the resulting discussions about the role of Muslims in the political, cultural, and economic life of the Nordic countries (and sometimes by the example of Sweden and the administrative-territorial ones) [16], about the status of Islamic financial instruments in the daily life of the European countries, as well as the changes in people's appearance and the transformation of space - first of all, it is referred to the construction of places of worship in the capital and major cities of the region, which sometimes leads from open discussions to social debates, political crises, and situations like ones that we described above exemplifying the internal policy of Iceland (2000-2015).

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