

## MUSLIM MINORITY IN SWITZERLAND

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### *Introduction*

In the system of representative democracy, decision-making is combined with a political debate and the process of establishing a coalition, but other mechanisms filtering the political decisions are non-existent<sup>1</sup>.

Multilingual and multiethnic Switzerland had remained unchanged since 1848, when the Swiss constitution and constitutional arrangements, in force to this day, came into life. At that time Switzerland was transformed from a backward nation into a society that enjoys political and economic stability unprecedented in the world<sup>2</sup>.

When analyzing the role of ethnic minorities in Switzerland, the specificity of Swiss direct democracy needs to be undoubtedly taken into consideration. Referendum and citizens' initiative play a vital role. The constantly growing number of Muslims, whose both religion and worldview are different from the Christian ones, is a relatively new phenomenon. The Swiss political system blocks the granting of rights to religious minorities and their full integration in the country and the Swiss society<sup>3</sup>.

### 1.1 *The Muslim minority in the political system of Switzerland*

The influx of the Muslim minority to Switzerland is related to economic migration and a relatively large flow of refugees from the countries of the so-called Third World and former Yugoslavia in the last 40 years. It was in 1945 that the first Muslim immigrants from Turkey came to Switzerland. They were students who, thanks to the financial aid of the Turkish country, obtained higher education degrees at Swiss universities. Majority of them left the country having completed their education, but some of them stayed<sup>4</sup>. The immigration process of Muslims may be divided into three periods. Starting from the beginning of the 1960s to middle 1970s, when Turkish guest-workers, who complemented the fast-developing Swiss economy, came to Switzerland<sup>5</sup>. At that time there also occurred an influx of seasonal workers from Muslim regions of former Yugoslavia; that was a stage of so-called male immigration. Swiss government's intention was to treat them as seasonal workers who would return to their homelands after completing specific short-term and mid-term works. Their religious needs were limited to common prayers in private apartments; however, the situation changed when Swiss temporary work and residence permits were transformed into long-term residence due to the outbreak of war in Bosnia and Kosovo. As a consequence, at the beginning of 1990s, there was an influx of the families of the seasonal workers, which initialized the second stage of Muslim immigration. The influx of women and children constituted a challenge for the Muslim state which was expected to integrate the Muslim women into the process of employment and the Muslim children into the process of education. During the second stage of Muslim immigration, there was a cultural collision between the Swiss society and the Islamic world. Some of its symptoms were connected with a different interpretation of the role of women and men in a family

and society and a different approach to the upbringing of children and to public institutions. The Muslims, who came to Switzerland, were afraid of losing their own religious values, which constituted a direct cause of their establishment of religious, cultural, and language institutions. Muslim immigrants from Turkey and former Yugoslavia countries inhabited the German-speaking regions of Switzerland, while immigrants from Northern Africa the French-speaking part of the country. The smallest percentage of the Muslim minority is found in the Italian-speaking canton of Ticino<sup>6</sup>.

Over the past 40 years the Muslim minority in Switzerland has become the most numerous non-Christian religious group. In 1970 there were 16,300 Muslims living in Switzerland, but ten years later their number increased to 56,600, while in 1990 it amounted to 152,000. Yet in Switzerland Muslims are not religiously, culturally or ethnically unified. They are not politically organized either. Around 56% of Muslims come from the countries of former Yugoslavia; these are mainly Bosnians and Albanians; 20% come from Turkey, 4% from Maghreb countries, and 3% from Lebanon. On the other hand, 15% have roots in the countries of Central Africa and Asia. A significant majority, i.e. 75%, of Swiss Muslims are Sunnis, while 10-15% are Levites mainly from Turkey. The Shiites are mostly Iranian. There are about 40 different religious directions within Islam. The largest ones are Sunnis and Shiites, who differ in terms of interpretation of Quran. In Switzerland these groups are in conflict too. Moreover, Swiss Muslims typically have low skills in terms of national and official languages. Only 47% of them use one of the official languages<sup>7</sup>. Muslims living in Switzerland associate in circa 160 groups, which take care of establishment of mosques or Quran schools. During the first 30 years Muslims were not considered a threat or a cause of social destabilization in Switzerland, but that changed after September 11th, 2001, mainly due

to active media policy. Additionally, representatives of the Muslim minority started to demand recognition of their religious rights and infrastructure, i.e. cemetery plots, religious education, establishment of new mosques. As a result, the Swiss right-wing conservative circles had raised the subject of Islamization of the Swiss society, the culmination of which was a movement against building a minaret from Wangen in the canton of Solura in November 2009. Both the pre-referendum campaign and the result of the conducted referendum led to an establishment of a negative stereotype of the Muslim minority. On the other hand, lately there have been created numerous Muslim religious organizations which attempt to act as representatives of the Muslim minority, particularly in relations with the state authorities and institutions. Nevertheless, there is not a single united country-wide Muslim organization.

Islam is the third religion in Switzerland, thus it should not come as a surprise that this religion gains so much media attention. One of the main subjects is the co-existence of Christians and Muslims. What is more, it should be noted that the percentage of Muslims having Swiss citizenship is relatively low. In 1970, only 2.8% of Muslims were Swiss citizens; in 1980 it was merely 5.2%. In 2000, the percentage of Muslims having Swiss citizenship increased to 11.75%<sup>8</sup>.

### *1.2. Referendums concerning the Muslim minority*

Between 1974 and 2013, there were eight referendums on canton level conducted in terms of the Muslim question. In all these cases the result of the voting was negative and the canton society spoke out against granting religious rights to the Muslim minority. In 1982, in the canton of Zürich, both the Roman Catholic and the Reformed Evangelical Churches were public recognized religions. The referendum concerned granting the public status to the

remaining so-far unrecognized religious associations. The referendum was obligatory and was voted negatively; only 46.9% were “yes” votes. In 1986, in the canton of Fribourg, Catholic and Reformed Evangelical Churches were recognized as public. The referendum regarded recognition of other religions, such as Islam, as public. But the society voted against such new regulations, despite the fact that all the significant political parties recommended positive voting in terms of the proposed changes. The next referendum concerning the Muslim minority took place in the canton of Bern in 1990. In this case too, the referendum was focused on granting the public status to other religions, including Islam; the result was negative again. The last voting concerning granting rights to the Muslim religious minority was the referendum in Zürich in 2003. The result of the voting was negative.

All referendums concerning recognition of the Muslim minority as public had a negative result. In 1982, during the voting in Zürich, the cause of the negative result was the attitude of the right-wing parties, which objected to the granting of rights to non-Christian minorities. The campaign against recognition of new religious minorities was led mainly by Swiss People’s Party and National Action, and then also liberal parties. The reason for the political debate against Muslims was fear of expansion of Islam to the field of education and domination of Muslims at some state posts. In 1986, in the canton of Fribourg, the referendum also had the purpose of deciding about granting a public status to minorities so-far unrecognized. In this case, the conservative parties led a less intensive negative campaign, but the fears of the Swiss society caused a negative result of the voting. In 1990, in Bern and the canton of Bern, conservative parties, such as Swiss People’s Party, Democratic Union, and National Action, led an intensive campaign similar to that in Zürich in 1982. The political leaders of these parties promoted slogans of betrayal of

Christian values in case of recognition of the Muslim religious minority as public. The conservative parties claimed that Islam is a real threat to the Swiss legal order. The next attempt at granting full rights to the Muslim minority in the canton of Zürich took place in 2003. Again, a negative campaign against Islam of the conservative parties was conducted. As a result of the fierce campaign during which the supporters and opponents accused each other of spreading lies, the Swiss society voted negatively<sup>9</sup>.

### *1.3. The influence of the citizens' initiative and referendum on the integration of the Muslim minority*

The Swiss political system directly influences the public status and integration of the Muslim minority through referendums. The main factor affecting the result of referendums was a campaign of political parties, elites in particular, which spoke about differences between the non-Christian and Christian worlds<sup>10</sup>. The more decisively the political parties spoke against granting additional rights to the Muslim minority, the bigger the support of the Swiss society was<sup>11</sup>. The factors that caused the negative result of the referendums for Muslims were the events outside Switzerland; among others the events of September 11th, 2001, in the USA and the action against Muslim women wearing headwear in France. These events became strong arguments for conservative parties during the pre-referendum campaigns. As a consequence, it was Islam that became the main subject of the political debate in Switzerland at the beginning of the 21st century<sup>12</sup>.

The indirect influence of the Swiss democracy on the process of integration of the Muslim minority occurs through parliamentary debates. Elements of direct democracy act as a *bogeyman* which causes that the matters important for the minority are resolved in a legislative process, so that elements of direct democracy are avoided, as they would

surely bring a negative result<sup>13</sup>. The indirect effect of the Swiss political system, in terms of granting the public status to the Muslim minority, takes place in the parliament and is determined by the possibilities of avoiding the instrument of direct democracy<sup>14</sup>.

Due to the fact that lobbying of the Muslim minority in the Swiss parliament is extremely weak, the chances for positive voting for the acts of the minority are virtually none<sup>15</sup>.

#### *1.4. Perspectives of integration of the Muslim minority*

Muslims are overrepresented in the regions offering the worst housing, their educational achievements do not reach the average, and the unemployment rates exceed the domestic average. A numerous group of young Swiss Muslims encounter obstacles to social advancement, which results in social exclusion. Yet there is no open racism or discrimination in Switzerland. Muslims are isolated in Switzerland. The four factors that decide about the national identity are the mother tongue, the language used every day, the culture of the country of origin, and the Swiss culture. Young Muslims try to find individual forms of professing Islam in everyday life in Switzerland. In the last years, the Swiss Muslims have gone outside the frames of anonymity related to their religions and begun to openly demand their rights in terms of participation in the political and social life of the Swiss Confederacy. For Switzerland as a country that brings new challenges, such as the matter of building minarets or integration of Muslim students at school. All these new situations raise fears and may cause conflicts, both religious and cultural ones.

However, as a country Switzerland has appropriate legal and social means to resolve these conflicts and reach a compromise. Nonetheless, legal regulations are one thing, while execution of the process of integration of the Muslim

minority is another. Moreover, getting out of isolation and integration of the Muslim minority require respecting of the rules by both sides. While searching for the way in which the isolation barriers should be brought down, it is necessary to once again consider the meaning of the constitution, which includes regulations regarding protection of religious and lingual minorities among others<sup>16</sup>.

It is vital to determine the ambiguous relations between the Muslims in Switzerland and to present the possible ways of integrating this community. What is significant in this case is that elements of the integration are institutionalized, which is related to the establishment of a body representing all Muslims in this Alpine republic. There are many Swiss Muslim organizations which aim at obtaining the status of a representative in the dialogue with other entities exercising authority. It constitutes a positive phenomenon that fosters integration. On the other hand, it forces the cantons to adopt an attitude of cautious observation of the involvement of the Muslim society. The bi-directional quality of political integration cannot depend on the support from the state; it needs to be rich in the acceptance of the liberal democracy along with its assumptions and values. For Muslims, Islam is a determinant not only in the cultural context, but also in the political one, which should lead to the establishment of relevant integrating institutions. The conflicting democratic principles and ideology of Islam are not an obstacles to obtaining a minimal political compromise; however, a condition that has to be fulfilled to reach full agreement is an attempt at mutual acceptance and developing a clear stand in the Muslim question, which should make it possible to find common ground for communication now and in the future. But developing a common stand requires existence of common political institutions.

Establishment of one common Muslim institution, which would connect all organizations and Muslims existing



within Switzerland, would be a significant improvement in terms of a dialogue with the federal and canton authorities concerning the integration of the minority and granting religious and political rights thereto. There are currently numerous Muslim organizations which are scattered, do not have one common representative, are in a conflict, and have different views on the question of integration in the Alpine country. As a consequence, it can be concluded that a common institution, capable of maintaining a dialogue with the federal and canton authorities, is necessary.

Both the means and practices, related to countering marginalization and isolation of the Muslim minority, should be a priority for the federal and canton policy. The cantons should fully implement the federal directives regarding countering the isolation of Muslims and more extensively use the regulations concerning the promotion of equality. Moreover, the cantons should consider going beyond the minimal legal requirements and make sure that the groups at risk of discrimination are aware of their rights. What is more, it is necessary that the Muslim minority is actively consulted in terms of formulating the principles of policy aiming at their social integration. It is also essential that more intensive efforts are made to improve the chances of employment, especially for the Muslim youth. The cantons are encouraged to research the basic causes of the differences in educational achievements. The authorities should avoid placing the students, who belong to the minority, in the same classes. What is more, the cantons should conduct a review of the textbooks in order to make sure they present history of the minority groups, and discussions on racism and xenophobia should be a stable element of the curriculum<sup>17</sup>. The Muslim communities should provide additional classes on Islam, but there are concerns regarding invitation of imams from other countries who do not have formal qualifications and have virtually no knowledge of the local social and cultural context. Apart from that, the

Swiss Muslims should be encouraged more to participate in the public life, e.g. in political or economic institutions. In fact, many Swiss Muslims admit that they should do more to get involved in the functioning of the society, but the Swiss political leaders should make effort to promote the cross-cultural dialogue and effective conflict solving. Media, on the other hand, should change their way of reporting so that they ensure maximum of objectivity. Recruitment and training initiatives for journalists should be implemented so that they can better present the varied reality of Switzerland. The cantons should be encouraged to adopt or enforce the legislation in terms of online service providers so that racist materials are not distributed.

As a consequence, it should be concluded that the current instruments of integration are insufficient and fulfill the needs of only part of the society. It seems essential that all members of the Muslim minority are reached, those who do not speak any of the official formal languages too<sup>18</sup>. Inability to speak the language should not be a reason for isolation. People, who despite the process of lingual integration, cannot communicate using one of the formal languages, should be offered state aid in the form of interpreters<sup>19</sup>. The next step should be recognition of new minorities and acceptance of their languages, which is objected by both, the right-wing and the left-wing political groups in Switzerland.

### *Conclusions*

The assimilation of the Muslim population in Switzerland can be possible only when the country is genuinely interested in the integration of this minority, and when it strives to solve assimilation problems not only in the political, but also in the economic or religious spheres. However, in order to successfully complete this process, good will of the other party, namely the Muslims, is necessary as well.

In the Swiss Confederation, there is a group of immigrant Muslims who can be described as conscious citizens of the Swiss state, although those constitute a minority within the general Muslim population. Another conclusion that can be drawn on the basis of analyses of the situation of the Muslim minority in Switzerland is the fact that there is a parallel community composed only of those Muslims who do not wish to integrate with the Swiss, and who place Islamic principles above democratic values. For various reasons, this group locks itself in its own world.

Problems related to the Christian-Islamic dialogue are also present in linguistic issues, as some terms or expressions have different meanings in different languages, which may lead to conflicts and misunderstandings<sup>20</sup>. All those problematic situations result in the need for intercultural dialogue between the Swiss state and the Muslim groups, which should become a common ground for agreement. At present, there are many problems to which neither the Confederation nor the cantons are able to provide satisfactory solutions. This situation is caused by lack of a representative Muslim institution. Swiss authorities propose the creation of a general Muslim association, which would be subject to the state's financial and legal control on the one hand, without any religious control.

It currently seems impossible to answer the question whether the Muslim population is able to adapt to the conditions of contemporary democracy and, consequently, become a civic community. Direct democracy postpones the granting of equal rights to national minorities in Switzerland. Swiss referendums have generally brought results unfavorable to the country's national minorities: each time, the granting of equal rights has been postponed, while laws on the basis of which the rights are granted to minorities have been made stricter. However, one must remember that not only instruments of direct democracy, such as the popular initiative or referendums, have adversely affected

the position of national minorities in Switzerland—an important role has been played also by government offices and political elites. Even in a situation when political elites do recognize and accept national minorities, they do not touch upon this issue in Parliament, fearing political struggle in case of a referendum<sup>21</sup>. Furthermore, the values espoused by the Swiss society are also significant.

Both Swiss politicians as well as other citizens, open to the outside world, are generally open to the idea of extending the rights of national minorities. However, the conservatives are trying to limit those rights to a minimum. The minorities themselves also influence their position, as those groups that fail to assimilate and that espouse foreign values have little chance of being accepted by the country's voters. The political or social integration of the Muslim minority in Switzerland should occur in several stages. At the beginning, Muslims should be publically and legally recognized as a religious minority, which is a prerequisite for complete integration. Moreover, state institutions should fulfill a more active role here, and promote equality of the Muslim religion. Another important step would be for the Muslims to create a representative body, which would speak in the interest of all followers of Islam, and provide a platform for talks with both cantonal and federal authorities. Another stage is subjecting the integration process to critical evaluation, both on the federal and cantonal level. Only in this way can one eliminate or reduce the conflict and differences of interests. Especially on the local forum, there is a need for constructive dialogue between the representatives of municipal and cantonal authorities. It should allow for a limitation of the role of political elites.

Without all those compromises, it will be difficult for multicultural Switzerland to integrate the Muslim minority. The collision between the Muslim and Christian cultures is visible at every turn, while the complexity of

the Swiss political system along with instruments of direct democracy inhibits the integration process for the Muslim minority in this country<sup>22</sup>.

#### NOTES

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