Baltic Muslims

Today's flow of Islamophobia advancing in the West and especially in Europe is not reflected in the Baltic states. The atmosphere in Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia, which were included in the European Union in 2004, is quite different than that of Western countries and should be considered in many aspects.

These three neighboring countries are very similar to each other in terms of their history, political systems and structures, as well as the character and behaviors of their societies. In general, Latvians, Lithuanians and Estonians are people who respect laws and rules, have a high level of education, do not like conflicts, and do not intervene in the lives of others. However, although their urbanization and education infrastructure is highly developed, the economy and income per capita is not that high. Young people in these countries continuously migrate to Western Europe and Scandinavia due to unemployment. Their populations are also decreasing because of low birth rates. Nevertheless, the birth rate is quite high among Muslim communities consisting of migrants (Azerbaijanis, Chechens) from the former Soviet Union, thus their number is increasing every day. The common language of the Muslim population in these countries is generally Russian.

Latvia

There are about 10,000 Muslims in the country which has a population of 2 million. Muslim groups are very active in the community, and consist of Sunnis (Hanefi and Selefi) and Shiites who work together without disputes. The country has 15 Muslim NGOs. Among them, organizations named *İman, Selam, Reyyan, Amina, al-Muslim Şebab* and *Mardzani* have become prominent for their activities, awareness-raising, proselytizing and assistance works. These NGOs also carry out the cleaning and maintenance works of two Muslim cemeteries in the country. Besides this, book presentation and distribution activities carried out in front of shopping malls are also included in the routine activities of these NGOs. Such works of NGOs are also welcomed warmly by non-Muslim Latvians. The President of the *Islamic Culture Center* and elected Mufti Zufar Zaynulin, journalist Robert Ahmet Klimoviç (formerly Catholic) and imam Oleg İmran Petrov (formerly Orthodox) are known by almost everyone in the country. Latvian television, radio and newspapers give coverage to them frequently, while their presentations, explanations and proselytizing activities are followed.

Imants Kalnins, Latvia's favorite composer and music academic, converted to Islam in 2012 after reading and researching about the Quran. Afterwards, Kalnins, who knows Arabic, translated the Quran into Latvian. Since this translation was published in the country with the support of local NGOs, a new era has started in the interest in Islam. The high status and influence of Kalnins, who is one of the directors of Latvia Green Party and was a parliamentarian for two periods, has created a significant influence in efforts to proselytize Islam. Kalnins, who has been invited to presentations on Islam to Muslim NGO representatives, students and teachers in Latvian universities in recent years, considers his translation as, "Not perfect, but useful in telling people about Islam."

Lithuania

The history of Muslims in Lithuania began with a group of soldiers and governors sent by the Crimean khans for assistance 630 years ago. Prince Vitautas decreed land to and gave his appreciation to the Crimean Turks who protected the country against enemies coming from Europe, securing their permanent settlement on those lands. The Tatars (as the Lithuanians call them) have lived in Lithuania for centuries and socialized with the local people while serving the country. Today, there are still a few Tatar villages in Lithuania. The people of Lithuania and its authorities have always had sympathy for the Tatars and the state has not intervened in their traditions and lifestyle.

There are 7,000 Muslims in the country which has a population of 3 million. Most of them are local Tatars affiliated with the Hanafi sect. According to Ass. Prof. Dr. Galina Mişkinene from Vilnius University in 1914 the Tatars had 25 masjids and mosques in Lithuania. Today, there are only four masjids available for prayer in the country. The registered Muslims who visit the masjids elect a mufti to represent them before the state authorities. The biggest masjid in the country is in Kaunas, Lithuania's second biggest city. This masjid was built with the support of the state in 1933. Mufti Romas Yakubauskas (Ramazan Yakupoğlu),

who is originally a Tatar, carries out his works here. Works such as the translation of necessary books from Arabic and the organization of courses explaining about Islam are carried out together with young activists and university students.

The Lithuanian government accepted Islam as one of the traditional religions of the country (along with Catholicism and Orthodoxy) in 1995. As of that date, the office of Mufti has started to receive financial assistance.

One of the central streets of the capital Vilnius is called *Mečetės*, meaning "Masjid Street". This street is named after the large mosque which once stood here. During the Soviet occupation, the mosque was demolished by the Communist government in 1962 and other buildings were constructed in its place. Today, there is no mosque there, but the street continues to honor its history in memory of the people who once lived here. Lithuanian Muslims and Mufti Yakubauskas are now having meetings with the government for the construction of a new mosque in the capital city. Currently, the second floor of a building in Vilnius is rented out for use as a masjid. However, there is a nightclub directly underneath it.

The Muslims in Lithuania try to cover their needs on religious publications and other subjects by communicating with Moscow and Kazan (Tataristan) muftis and Crimean Muslims.

Estonia

Fifty-five percent of the population described themselves as atheists in Estonia's 2012 census. This official rate is the highest rate of atheists in the world. Of course, this outcome has historical roots. The people of Estonia, where paganism (the worship of nature) is common, came into contact with the crusades in the 13th century. The extreme violence imposed by the Catholic Teutonic knights has been remembered for a very long time. Today, the knights from Germany, Denmark and Sweden, the Catholic Christianity they brought to these lands by force and its effects are taught in history classes in schools. Heavy taxes imposed by the Orthodox church under Czarist Russia, the inability of the church to adapt to the local culture and the violent repression of public uprisings has had highly negative effects on the religious feelings of the Estonian people. During the Soviet occupation between 1940-1990 a complete atheist propaganda was implemented and the people were distanced from every kind of religious belief.

Today, there are around 5,000 Muslims in Estonia which has a population of 1.5 million. These people are generally Tatars, Azerbaijanis, Chechens and Arabs who have settled in the region in the last 25 years. The number of Estonian Muslims increases every day thanks to the proselytizing and missionary activities of such NGOs as the *Tatar Society, Azerbaijani Culture Center, TURAS Society* and *Islam Center* (whose president is Mufti İldar Muhametşin). The publication named *Baltic Muslims Bulletin* is published in Estonian and Russian for their use. Although Salafism is more common among Muslims, most of the local Tatars are traditionally affiliated to the Hanafi sect. The common problem for all Muslims in the country is the lack of mosques. TURAS Society's office is partially used as a masjid thanks to the financial assistance of Saudi Arabs and the venue is also used for Friday prayers. However, as this office is registered as a place of business, the law does not allow it to open for morning and evening prayers.

Mufti İldar Muhametşin, who is leading the requests to the state authorities for official mosque status, has spoken about negations regarding the situation. Muhametşin says that the lack of a mosque has made it easier for some people who have newly converted to Islam to be preyed on by radical groups. One of the most famous examples in this regard is Estonian Abdurrahman Azan (Ivan Sazanakov), the Estonian taekwondo champion who migrated to Syria together with his family and young children to join Daesh in 2015.

This incident was given broad coverage by the media in Estonia, as well as in Latvia and Lithuania, and kept the public occupied for some time. The possibility of local Muslims becoming radicalized and the threat this situation posed to society was discussed for months. In light of this event, Estonian Law Enforcement Agency *KaPo* recommended that several precautions be taken in its annual report. However, as it was expressed in the report that Muslims do not pose a threat to citizens and the state in general, this situation eased the public's concerns. Even so, local Muslims ask for support to carry out their education and awareness-raising activities in masjids and mosques, and thus, satisfy their needs for houses of prayer in order to prevent such kind of incidents from happening in the future.

Today, we see that Muslims in these countries tend towards interesting but intelligible and practical solutions in order to overcome the lack of mosques in the capitals of each of these three countries. Some Muslims living in border regions even go to mosques in the closest neighboring countries of Poland and Finland for their Friday prayer. To do this they travel three to six hours by car or two hours by ferry.

Turkish Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, visited Estonia in October 2016. Çavuşoğlu announced during this visit that Turkey was preparing for the construction of a mosque in Tallinn. This announcement was welcomed warmly by the Muslims of the region. Even though there are thousands of kilometers between them, Turkish Muslims and the Turkish state has always had a privileged place in the eye of the Baltic public.

The positive image of the Turkish people and the generations who came to protect them from the Teutonic knights in the Medieval Age is still in the memories of the region's people. Ottoman soldiers who were taken prisoner during the Ottoman-Russian War in 1877-1878 (the war of '93) were brought to Estonia and Latvia. The local people did not refrain from sympathizing with and helping these prisoners, and the graves of Ottoman soldiers in Estonia and Latvia are still protected by local municipalities after all this time. The Russians established an Estonian village consisting of 300 people in Kars province at the end of the war of '93. The positive experience that these Estonians had with the Turkish people after living in the village for two generations and returning to their own country, also had a positive effect on society.

The people of these EU member states do not see Turkish Muslims as radicals or terrorists and do not perceive the Islamic model coming from Turkey as a threat to themselves. But of course, the Baltic Muslims are not only in need of mosques. The small number of people properly equipped to provide religious education, the lack books explaining the religion, and the lack of communication with Muslim brothers who can provide assistance on these subjects can be listed among the main problems facing Baltic Muslims.

The official announcement of the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, in Tallinn was welcomed with joy and hope in all Baltic countries. However, in addition to the works of official authorities, NGOs should also take a part in this. Turkish NGOs should go to these places with their own facilities, experience, knowledge and volunteer teams because the Baltic Muslims are awaiting moral and logistic contributions and assistance from their brothers in Turkey.