

# Religion News Service

## **In Europe, religious minorities face mounting hostility, harassment**

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PARIS (RNS) — A decade ago, Austria was a European country where Muslims felt they could live in peace. Islam was a recognized religion since 1912, the population seemed tolerant and the government maintained a constructive dialogue with community leaders.

Now the government includes a far-right party openly against Muslims and migrants, some mosques have recently been closed down as security threats and politicians are asking whether Muslims should be barred from fasting at school during Ramadan.

Times are getting more difficult for members of minority religions across Europe as nationalism, security fears and anti-immigrant movements gain ground. Trends building up since 9/11 have accelerated in the past few years, especially hitting Muslims and Jews.

Carla Amina Baghajati, a Muslim school administrator in Vienna, sounded nostalgic as she reminisced about the not-so-distant past. “Even in little Austria, global trends hit us,” she told RNS.

“The old days are long gone,” she said. “If you’re visibly Muslim on the street, for example a woman with a headscarf, you’re looked at differently now. I haven’t met anyone who says it’s like it used to be.”

Casual insults and discrimination are frequent now but young Muslims tell her they don’t bother reporting them. “They say, ‘What’s the use?’” she said.

The Washington-based Pew Research Center issued a [report on religious freedom](#) around the world last week that found that Europe registered the sharpest increase in “social hostilities concerning religion” in 2016, the last year for which it has full statistics.

































About one-third of European countries had political parties that openly agitated against religious minorities in 2016, a jump from one-fifth the previous year, it said. The number of like-minded activist groups harassing minorities was also on the rise.

“The majority of social groups displaying this kind of nationalist or anti-immigrant and anti-minority activity – 25 out of the 32 – were in European countries,” the report said. Harassment was aimed mostly at Muslims and Jews, although other faiths — including some Christian groups in a few places — also faced discrimination.

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## Religious groups targeted by nationalists in Europe

List of countries where *nationalist social groups* targeted religious groups in 2016, and religious groups that were targeted

COUNTRY	REGION	TARGETED RELIGIOUS GROUP
 Brazil	Americas	Jews
 Peru	Americas	Jews
 United States	Americas	Muslims, Jews
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 Australia	Asia-Pacific	Muslims
 Burma (Myanmar)	Asia-Pacific	Muslims
 India	Asia-Pacific	Muslims
 Sri Lanka	Asia-Pacific	Non-Buddhists
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 Austria	Europe	Muslims
 Belarus	Europe	Jews
 Bulgaria	Europe	Muslims, Christians
 Czech Republic	Europe	Muslims, Jews
 Denmark	Europe	Muslims
 Estonia	Europe	Muslims
 Finland	Europe	Muslims
 Germany	Europe	Muslims
 Greece	Europe	Muslims, Jews
 Hungary	Europe	Muslims
 Ireland	Europe	Muslims
 Italy	Europe	Muslims
 Liechtenstein	Europe	Jews
 Lithuania	Europe	Jews
 Malta	Europe	Muslims
 Netherlands	Europe	Muslims
 Poland	Europe	Muslims, Jews
 Portugal	Europe	Muslims
 Romania	Europe	Muslims, Jews
 Russia	Europe	Muslims
 Serbia	Europe	Jews
 Slovakia	Europe	Muslims, Jews
 Spain	Europe	Muslims
 Switzerland	Europe	Jews
 United Kingdom	Europe	Muslims

Source: Pew Research Center analysis of external data. See Methodology for details.  
"Global Uptick in Government Restrictions on Religion in 2016"

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Graphic courtesy of Pew Research Center.

The religious freedom report followed [another Pew survey](#) issued in May that showed about half the continent's Christians — both observant and nonpracticing — thought Islam was not compatible with European values.

Surveys like these can give only partial pictures of how the times have changed. Major issues such as the current migration crisis and violent attacks on minorities grab global headlines, but lower-level hostility slips under the media radar.

The current migration wave, which crested in 2015 with over a million newcomers — mostly Muslims — and prompted clampdowns on entry across Europe, has also made “migrant” and “Muslim” synonymous for many Europeans.

Baghajati, who deals with women's issues for the main Islamic association in Austria, said the government used to regularly invite Muslim leaders to take part in panel discussions on religious issues.

Under the new government of the conservative People's Party (ÖVP) and far-right Freedom Party (FPÖ), the invitations have stopped. “They invite alarmists onto the podium but not us,” she said.

The openly anti-immigrant FPÖ has started a campaign to ban fasting during Ramadan in all state schools. Posters show a veiled girl in school with the headline: “No eating, no drinking, no learning.”

Children are exempted from fasting but teenagers are supposed to follow Ramadan rules. The government, Baghajati said, thinks that “Islam is a bloc, static and dangerous, and all you can do is tell them what to do. There is no partnership anymore.”

Similar difficulties can be found across Europe. France is one of the strictest countries, with a law against headscarves in state schools and full-face veils in public.

Beachside towns and municipal pools have tried to use France's law on secularism to ban the “burkini” — a modest full-body bathing suit for Muslim women — by arguing it was a sign of religious affiliation banned at publicly owned beaches and pools. There have been mixed results enforcing it.

The Dutch Parliament banned full-face veils this month, as did Denmark's last month. Belgium did so in 2011. Building mosques, authorizing minarets, allowing prayer time at work and teaching Islam alongside other faiths in state schools are also controversial topics across Europe.

The new populist government in Italy, whose Interior Minister Matteo Salvini has the slogan “Italians First” on his Twitter page, has closed Italian ports to ships that rescue migrants trying to cross the Mediterranean in flimsy boats. He has suggested a census of Roma or “gypsy” people in the country and deportation of those who are not Italian citizens. Critics promptly asked which minority he would want to investigate next.

Salvini told a rally in Florence last week that he opposed giving Muslims permits to build new houses of worship. “What’s urgent now is to create jobs, not mosques,” he said.

In Germany, the conservative Christian Social Union party in traditionally Catholic Bavaria is threatening to topple the coalition government of Chancellor Angela Merkel — their official ally in national politics — if she doesn’t agree to even tighter border controls against migrants.

“European politics in general has become unhinged. The mainstream is falling apart on both sides, the center-left and now the center-right,” said British European affairs analyst Paul Taylor, who writes for the Brussels-based Politico Europe.

“Almost wherever you go, the mainstream right is being overtaken by the extreme right and being pulled in that direction,” he said.

In eastern Europe, nationalist governments have simply refused to take in migrants, despite European Union guidelines calling for them to be shared out among all EU members. Poland and Hungary, the leaders in this anti-migrant movement, have repeatedly said they are defending their countries’ Christian traditions against outsiders.

Although there are almost no Jews left in the region after the Holocaust and the communist era, populist rhetoric resorts to anti-Semitism to rally support.

Poland’s Chief Rabbi Michael Schudrich speaks at a gala celebration marking the opening of an American Jewish Committee office for Central Europe in Warsaw, Poland, on March 27, 2017. The AJC, a 111-year-old global organization based in New York, has a long history of engagement in the region. It was the first Jewish organization to call for recognizing German unification after the fall of the Berlin Wall, and it supported central and eastern European nations as they worked to become democracies and join the European Union and NATO.

“We’re hearing things we haven’t heard since 1968, (like) ‘there’s no place for you in Poland,’” said the country’s Chief Rabbi Michael Schudrich, referring to a communist-era wave of anti-Semitism.

In February, Poland made it a crime to say Poles participated in the Holocaust, something historians insist is true. Tough criticism from abroad — including from the United States and Israel — prompted claims in the media that Poland was under attack by Jews.

Warsaw backed down on Wednesday (June 27), saying it would remove the criminal penalties from the law.

In Hungary, Prime Minister Viktor Orban has openly vilified the U.S. financier and philanthropist George Soros, who was born to a Jewish family in Budapest, as an enemy of the state for promoting democracy and liberal causes including immigration into the region.

In France, where Muslims outnumber Jews by a ratio of 10-to-1, several violent attacks on Jews in recent years have made international news. These include the murders of a rabbi and three

children at a Jewish school in Toulouse in 2012 and of four hostages at a kosher supermarket in Paris in 2015.

Reinforced police and military patrols at Jewish locations have reduced the number of attacks by half since then, said Bernard Edinger, a French Jewish journalist who writes for French and Israeli publications.

What the Pew survey does not investigate, he added, is the sensitive question of how much of the harassment of Jews comes from Muslims opposed to Israel and Zionism. “In France, the old-fashioned Nazi-style anti-Semitism is microscopic,” he said.

Much of this harassment comes in areas like the poorer northern suburbs of Paris where Jews and Muslims have long lived side by side. Jews have responded by transferring their children from state to Jewish-run schools or moving out altogether.

“About 60,000 to 70,000 Jews lived there before 2000 and now only 10,000 are left,” he said. Some move to other neighborhoods they feel safer in, while others leave for Israel.

An opinion poll published in Germany last week showed a similarly complicated picture. The poll showed some old cliches remain among some Germans but “only a small minority really hates Jews (and) anti-Semitism has gone down in recent decades,” the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung reported.

In Germany, Jewish pupils report they are harassed in school, often by classmates of Muslim origin. Meanwhile, in France, Marine Le Pen, who has tried to soften the National Front’s image since taking over in 2011 and mostly criticized Muslims, won four times as many Jewish votes last year as her father — Jean-Marie, a convicted Holocaust denier — got when he ran for president in 2002.

“They think the enemy of my enemy is my friend,” Edinger said, referring to Jewish voters. “In the National Front leadership, it’s not kosher to be anti-Semitic.”

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