

Shining Light on Media Portrayal: Ramadan illuminations and anti-Muslim sentiments across Germany, Poland and Hungary

29 Apr 2024



This year Ramadan took place between the 10th of March to the 9th of April. Ramadan is the ninth month of the Islamic lunar calendar during which Muslims must fast from dawn to sunset, refraining from food and drink, and also partaking in prayer, reflection and community. Throughout Europe, Muslim communities united in observance of this holy month, whilst some cities embraced the opportunity to publicly express the celebration of Ramadan.

Across certain German cities, public illuminations were organised this year to mark and celebrate Ramadan. However, in reaction to this initiative, several media outlets published headlines and opened up debates resulting in the spread of anti-Muslim narratives and discriminatory rhetoric. Media in Germany, Poland and Hungary observed similar patterns of unprofessional media reporting which allowed the space for anti-Muslim sentiments and far-right ideologies to flourish.

Get the Trolls Out! monitors and reacts to hateful anti-religious rhetoric in online and offline media. As part of the project's regular activities, project partners Neue deutsche Medienmacher*innen Association (NdM) in Germany, Center for Independent Journalism in Hungary (CIJ) and NEVER AGAIN Association in Poland came together to write a collaborative piece on the negative media framing of Ramadan celebrations throughout several German cities.

Exclusionary debates and click baiting at the expense of Muslims - how German media reported on Ramadan illuminations

In Cologne and Frankfurt am Main, public illuminations were organised for the first time in March this year to mark the Muslim fasting month of Ramadan. A "Happy Ramadan" sign illuminated a street in Frankfurt city centre. The "Ramadan Project" association organised light decorations in the form of crescent moons, lamps and Ramadan lettering on a busy street in Cologne-Ehrenfeld. The project was modelled on the illuminations marking the same occasion in London.

While the Cologne project was financed by donations, the city of Frankfurt bore the costs for its lighting. Some news media took the funding by the city of Frankfurt as an opportunity to question whether Islam was part of German society. However, the privately financed illuminations in Cologne also caused a media debate, which in some cases led to anti-Muslim hatred on social media.

A chronology of reporting (selected examples)

The tabloid newspaper "Bild", the best-selling daily newspaper in Germany, was the first to report about it. On its online version "bild.de", it titled a commentary about the Ramadan lighting in Frankfurt on 4 March 2024 with the headline "City decides, citizens pay!"

The national newspaper "Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung" (FAZ) took up the issue on 6 March and ran the headline: "Dispute over festive decorations - Ramadan lettering in Frankfurt causes nationwide debate" (faz.net).

The daily newspaper "Welt" linked the Ramadan lighting with the issue of antisemitism: "Ramadan decoration as a sign against antisemitism? Resentment now breaks out in Frankfurt" (welt.de, 07.03.2024).

The topic was also covered on national television: "Do you like the Ramadan lighting in German city centres?", asked the news programme "RTL aktuell" (10.03.2024) to its viewers. This question was suggestive and imprecise because there were Ramadan illuminations in only two German cities, and in one case a private association bore the costs. The result of the non-representative survey: 93% voted "no" and only 6% voted "yes".

The Ramadan lighting also played a role in local and regional media. The Cologne tabloid newspaper "Express" ran a lurid headline: "'Ehrenfeld has given up'. Shock reactions: Lighting in Cologne is met with sheer hatred" (express.de, 11.03.2024).



Headlines about Ramadan illuminations in Germany (04.03 – 11.03.2024)



RTL, Screenshot: Aisha Camara

RTL survey: "Do you like the Ramadan lighting in German city centres?" (10.03.2024)

The negative framing throughout the reporting is striking. In most cases, rejection of the Ramadan lighting is already evident in the headlines. Often, important context is not given, for example statistical information about the inhabitants of the cities of Cologne and Frankfurt: A comparatively large number of Muslims live in both cities.

Anti-Muslim hatred on social media

The media debate about the Ramadan illuminations was also embedded in anti-Muslim hatred on social media. A few days before the start of Ramadan on 10 March, the city of Frankfurt experienced massive attacks from the right-wing and right-wing populist scene on social media. Under hashtags such as "Frankfurt" or "submission", there are taunts and repeated arguments that Ramadan is not part of German culture and should therefore not be celebrated in public spaces. Right wing extremists, above all AfD (German far right wing party) politician Björn Höcke from Thuringia used the debate surrounding the decorations to campaign against Muslims. Meanwhile, the AfD parliamentary group in the Hessian parliament spoke of the "gradual Islamisation of our country".

On 11 March 2024, the daily newspaper “Welt” shared the quote: "Europe is not a place where Islam is at home" on "X" with a link to a news article about the Ramadan decorations in Frankfurt. One notable reaction expressed anti-Muslim sentiment in the replies, exemplified by a user's call for the expulsion of Muslims from the country.



Newspaper welt.de on “X” about the Ramadan illuminations

Responsible reporting against anti-Muslim coverage

Responsible reporting avoids such polarising and exaggerated clickbaiting topics at the expense of minorities. In contrast to the articles mentioned above, however, there were also positive examples of responsible reporting that paint a more nuanced picture of the topic. Some examples include:

- **“Agitation on the internet: Ramadan lighting in Cologne - ‘It's nice!’” in RP Online (13.03.24)**
- **"Islam and charm in one sentence? Unimaginable" in SZ.de (09.04.24)**

As Neue deutsche Medienmacher*innen, a German association that campaigns for more diversity in journalism and against online hate speech, we shared a post on Threads, Bluesky and in an Instagram story post in which we criticised the coverage of Ramadan celebrations and wished all those who celebrate, a happy Ramadan: "German cities wish Muslims a happy month of fasting and German editorial offices turn it into a debate. The result is a polarised discussion at the expense of minorities. Responsible reporting works differently. We wish everyone who celebrates a happy Ramadan!"



neuemedienmachx 11.3.2024



Deutsche Städte wünschen Muslim*innen einen fröhlichen Fastenmonat und deutsche Redaktionen machen eine Debatte daraus. Was folgt, sind polarisierende Diskussionen auf Kosten von Minderheiten. Verantwortungsvolle Berichterstattung geht anders.

Wir wünschen allen, die ihn feiern, einen schönen Ramadan!



1 Antwort · Gefällt 37 Mal

*Statement of Neue deutsche Medienmacher*innen on Threads, 11.03.2024*

Anti-Muslim sentiments and far-right media narratives: How Polish media reported on Ramadan illuminations

Although the number of Muslims in Poland is quite small (less than 1 percent of the population), pointing to real or invented incidents in Western European countries (such as the 2016 New Year's eve in Cologne when young migrants were accused of assaulting German women) has been a strategy frequently employed by right-wing media in Poland which try to warn their audiences against alleged threats of multiculturalism or the 'Islamisation of Europe'. Sometimes such stories originate from Western European sources and they morph into scarecrows.

In this vein, Polish right-wing outlets focused on reports of Ramadan celebrations in the German city of Frankfurt in the spring of 2024.

MULTI-KULTI

Niemcy szykują się do... Ramadanu. Pierwsze miasto zawiesiło "światła jedności, przeciw dyskryminacji i rasizmowi antymuzułmańskiemu"

Świat • opublikowano: 7 marca



"Happy Ramadan" w 2023 r. na Coventry Street w Londynie / autor: Wikimedia Commons-Thomas Dahlstram Nielsen / CC Attribution-Share Alike 4.0

Screenshots from Wpolityce.pl website. 29.04.2024



07.03.2024, 08:03

Fot. via Pixabay

Islamizacja w Niemczech – Frankfurt świętuje Ramadan [ZOBACZ]

Screenshots from Wpolarityce.pl and Fronda.pl website. 29.04.2024

FronDa.pl is a radical-right Catholic fundamentalist-news website. It described the situation in Frankfurt in the following way: “Yet another proof of how Islamisation is progressing in the west of Europe. Frankfurt/Main is the first German city celebrating Ramadan by displaying light decorations.

Earlier a similar situation took place in London - the lights appeared in the area of Piccadilly Circus already a year ago. Now Frankfurt Main is beginning a similar tradition in Germany.

Green stars and shining crescents have been hanged above the streets. A big sign ‘Happy Ramadan’ is also visible. According to media, this way of celebrating Ramadan was justified by the fact that currently between 100 to 150 thousand Muslims live in the city. It amounts to nearly 15 percent of the population.”

Another outlet, Wpolarityce.pl, a popular right-wing news and commentary website, used similar rhetoric. Its headline mocked the discourse of anti-discrimination: “Germany is bracing for... Ramadan. The first city has hanged >the lights of unity, against discrimination and anti-Muslim racism<.” The article described preparations for Ramadan in Germany (mainly Frankfurt Main) and concluded grimly:

“The Germans more and more - in the frames of non-discrimination - submit to the Muslim culture and tradition whilst Christian elements are systematically removed from the public space. Signum temporis [sign of the times].”

Arguably, these and many other similar articles published by the right-wing media contribute to a climate of anti-Muslim prejudice which is pervasive in Polish society and politics since the xenophobic anti-migrant campaign during the European refugee crisis of 2015.

Discrimination and hateful headlines: How Hungarian media reported on Ramadan illuminations

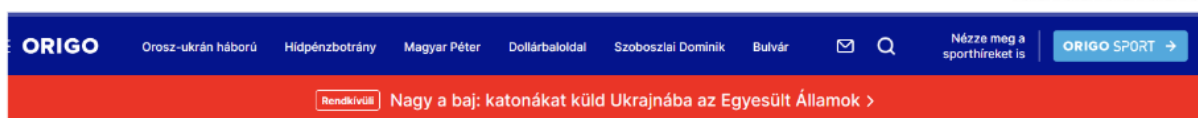
Since 2015, migration has become a prominent political topic in Hungary, with religious and ethnic dimensions emerging in public discourse. Anti-Muslim sentiments, in particular, gained traction, with the pro-government media focusing on negative portrayals of Muslims. In 2017 and 2018, these outlets frequently published stories from Europe that depicted Muslims negatively.

While the intensity of this coverage has decreased, the topic remains alive in Hungarian media. Each week, stories from Western European countries depict Muslims causing harm, crime, or conflict. These reports often feature security experts who claim that Islamisation poses the greatest risk to European peace and the European dream.

This narrative naturally extended to news about Ramadan celebrations in German cities. Hungarian media outlets such as Ripost and Origo framed these celebrations as being in direct contrast to traditional Christian Easter customs, suggesting that Germans are abandoning their heritage for a new tradition. The coverage, largely based on articles from German outlet Bild, lacked diverse perspectives or arguments and emphasised the message of a cultural shift.

Headlines from Ripost and Origo amplified these themes:

- "A huge mess in Germany: instead of Easter, the city centres were decorated for a Muslim holiday" (Ripost)
- "Islamisation has accelerated in Germany: Ramadan is celebrated in more and more places" (Origo)

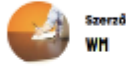


Németország

Felpörgött az iszlamizáció Németországban: egyre több helyen a ramadánt ünneplik - videó

2024. március 14. 14:53 • Olvasási idő: 4 perc

KÜLFÖLD



LÉTREHÓZVA: 2024.03.14.

ÓRIÁSI BALHÉ NÉMETORSZÁGBAN: HÚSVÉT HELYETT MUSZLIM ÜNNEPRE DÍSZÍTETTÉK FEL A BELVÁROSOKAT

Screenshots from Origo and Ripost website 29.04.2024

These sensationalist headlines contribute to the ongoing portrayal of Muslims as a threat to European values and traditions, reinforcing existing prejudices and fears among the Hungarian public.

“Shining Light on Media Portrayal: Ramadan illuminations and anti-Muslim sentiments across Germany, Poland and Hungary”. GetTheTrollsOut.org, 29.04.2024.

<https://getthetrollsout.org/articles/shining-light-on-media-portrayal-ramadan-illuminationsnbspand-anti-muslim-sentiments-across-germany-poland-and-hungary>