

## Country Profile

# Hungary

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This Country Profile provides a brief overview of religious diversity and its governance in the above-named state. It is one of 23 such profiles produced by GREASE, an EU-funded research project investigating religious diversity, state-religion relations and religiously inspired radicalisation on four continents. More detailed assessments are available in our multi-part Country Reports and Country Cases.

**Countries covered in this series:**

Albania, Australia, Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Egypt, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Hungary, India, Indonesia, Lebanon, Lithuania, Malaysia, Morocco, Russia, Slovakia, Spain, Tunisia, Turkey and the United Kingdom.

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Total population : 9.9 million

**Religious affiliation** (percent)

Catholic Christian	39
Calvinist Christian	11.6
Lutheran Christian	2.2
Other Christian	1.3
Jewish	0.1
Muslim	0.1
Unaffiliated	18.2
Did not declare	27.2

Based on 2011 census data

Source: Central Statistics Office of Hungary Population break-down by religious affiliation Accessed: 9th June 2019

URL: [http://www.ksh.hu/nepszamlalas/docs/tablak/vallas/10\\_01\\_01.xls](http://www.ksh.hu/nepszamlalas/docs/tablak/vallas/10_01_01.xls)

### **Role of religion in state and government**

According to the Basic Law (constitution) of Hungary adopted in 2011, the state is neutral vis-à-vis religious communities. As article VI of the Basic Law states, Churches are separated and independent from the state in Hungary. However, the text also mentions that the state cooperates with Churches for certain public goals. There is no state religion.

However, the Basic Law treats Christianity differently from other religious communities. The preamble emphasises Christianity's role as a force to preserve the Hungarian nation. In this sense, the constitution could be considered a step away from the total secular neutrality of the state as far as religions are concerned, since it reserves a special, symbolic place for Christianity. The new Basic Law combined with the new Law on Churches allows a bigger role for state-recognized churches. It aims to involve churches in areas where the state has had an active role, such as social services and education.

The new legislation, last amended in 2018, created 3 different levels for the recognition of religious communities. The process of registering a religious community is delegated to the judiciary. However, in order to achieve "established church" status, the minister responsible for religious affairs must turn to the Parliament for approval. Thus, to achieve this higher status, a religious community still needs the approval of government and parliament. Being an established church may lead to closer cooperation and increased funding from the state. Failing to reach this status may result in challenges to a community providing religious services and religious education. As of today, there are 32 religious communities recognized as established churches in Hungary.

Recently administration of some primary and secondary schools has been transferred to the major established churches, mainly to the traditional Christian churches. (The Catholic and Calvinist communities are the biggest beneficiaries). With this process, the government gives certain religious communities special roles and funding, creating a number of *primae inter pares* communities even among established churches.

### **Freedom of religion**

According to the Basic Law, every person is free to choose their religion in Hungary. Nobody should be obliged to belong to a certain religious community and everybody is free to change their religious affiliation. Registered churches can function without any state interference in the country.

Founding a religious community is relatively easy in Hungary. According to the latest rules, religious communities are registered by civil courts.

Nevertheless, if a religious community would like to perform certain social roles such as running schools or social services and would like to apply for state funds to do this, it must first obtain the status of “established church” is needed. Thus, religious communities not having this higher status will find it difficult to obtain funding and perform certain roles that are available for other established ones.

There are some instances of people being discriminated against based on their religious affiliations. Due to the increasingly hostile environment surrounding Muslims and Islam in Hungary, hostile behaviour toward Muslim individuals has been reported, including verbal abuse and physical attacks such as pulling the veil from a female Muslim's head. Much of these cases go unreported, and as such, most of them do not become part of criminal statistics.

### **Religiously inspired radicalisation**

As of today, only two individuals in Hungary are known to have wanted to join the so-called Islamic State. Neither of them belong to any of the Muslim communities in Hungary. Their knowledge of Islam is almost non-existent. They were radicalized online in 2014 and had no formal or informal link to the Muslim communities in Hungary. One of them travelled to Turkey, tried to cross into Syria, but was arrested by Turkish authorities and spent a short time in a Turkish prison before being deported to Hungary. The other person did not travel to Syria or Turkey. After the Nice attacks in 2016, he made threatening remarks on a social media page of a former leading far-right politician and former leader of the far-right leaning Jobbik party, Gábor Vona. In a comment he threatened to drive a lorry into a group of people. As a result, Gábor Vona reported the person to the police. Both of them were arrested and tried in Hungarian courts in 2017.

This case shows a number of similarities with other Western European individuals who were not born into Muslim families, but later became radicalized. They told the court they had few prospects growing up in rural Hungary, and they saw little chance from breaking out from poverty. They had no previous knowledge of Islam, and since they did not formally convert to Islam they could not be considered as Muslims. They saw joining Islamic State as a way to get away from their reality, find meaning in life, and overcome their perceived lack of opportunity.

During informal consultations, representatives of both the Organization of Muslims in Hungary (OMH) and the Hungarian intelligence community denied knowledge of any other individuals who had become radicalised in this direction. It seems that Hungarian Muslim communities are so small and tightly knit that no individuals they know attempted to leave for Syria to fight on the side of extremist groups. This may be down to the fact that Hungarian Muslims with an immigrant background tend to be highly educated, as most of them came to study to Hungary and later decided to settle down in the country. As a result, a Muslim underclass does not exist in Hungary the way it does in many Western European countries where many Muslims settled down to work in menial industrial jobs or social services. This relatively high social standing, better educational background and small population can explain the reason for a lack of Muslims leaving Hungary to fight abroad.

The relative lack of Muslims in Hungary means that the Islamic community is seldom visible or present in the everyday lives of the majority population. This unfamiliarity contributes to many cases of people being afraid of Muslims. Indeed, it is fair to speak of Islamophobia in Hungary. The governing elite started to focus on Islam with the topic of migration after the events of 2015, when several thousand migrants crossed through Hungary to Western European states.

From the governing elite we can see the propagation of a multi-layered narrative that links Islam and migration. This narrative securitizes Islam and Muslims within Hungarian society.

This rhetoric is paired up with harsh treatment of migrants in the so-called Transit Zones set up on the country's southern border with Serbia. These Transit Zones are the only places where migrants can claim asylum. The Hungarian government has been condemned by the UN High Commission for Human Rights and the European Court of Human Rights for multiple cases of mistreating and starving migrants in the Transit Zones.

This increased attention to Muslims and migration diverted attention from the "usual" targets of radical groups and individuals: the Roma and the Jewish population. These are the two historically targetted ethnic and religious communities in the country.

## Religious diversity governance assessment

The Hungarian government is a source of a nationalistic discourse that links migration and Muslim presence in Europe with security. This narrative would be regarded as radical in many Western European societies. However, this could be considered as the mainstream in contemporary Hungary. Nevertheless, this does not mean the government or any institution would systematically target Muslims or people with a migration background. Indeed, attacks on minorities have been dealt with by police in a proper manner.

The government considers lengthy prison sentences as an effective deterrent for would-be perpetrators, but this is not the case all the time. Rehabilitation and reintegration of perpetrators is still a tangible challenge.

In 2011, the government decided to abolish the role of the ombudsman responsible for minority rights, which covered religious communities, too. This meant a step back for the protection of ethnic and religious communities against discrimination. However, the government and the legislature have designated institutions for liaising and coordinating with religious communities. This policy sphere and related institutions are now part of the Prime Minister's office as far as the executive body is concerned. There is also a designated committee for ethnic and religious groups in the legislature.

As noted above, the Basic Law of Hungary requires the state to play a neutral role as far as religious communities are concerned. Still, it is possible for the state to develop closer cooperation with the so-called established churches. To obtain the title of an established church the executive and the legislature need to give approval. The state considers certain traditional religious communities as partners, and these communities may obtain additional funds for performing certain services for the state. These services include running primary and secondary schools and performing social roles through charitable organizations. This effectively means there are not only three different levels of state recognition of certain religious communities, but there are also a number of *primae inter pares* communities even among established religious communities.

**About the GREASE project**

Radicalisation, Secularism and the Governance of Religion: Bringing together European and Asian Perspectives (GREASE)

Involving researchers from Europe, North Africa, the Middle East, Asia and Oceania, GREASE is investigating how religious diversity is governed in over 20 countries. Our work focuses on comparing norms, laws and practices that may (or may not) prove useful in preventing religious radicalisation. Our research also sheds light on how different societies cope with the challenge of integrating religious minorities and migrants. The aim is to deepen our understanding of how religious diversity can be governed successfully, with an emphasis on countering radicalisation trends.

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