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**DIPLOMACY OF DIALOGUE: POPE FRANCIS'S POLICY TOWARDS
ISLAM AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF INTERRELIGIOUS RELATIONS IN
THE EUROPEAN UNION**

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Abstract: This article examines religious diplomacy as a political tool, focusing on Pope Francis' actions in shaping Christian-Muslim relations in the context of the integration challenges facing the European Union. The study focuses on the interfaith dialogue initiatives undertaken by the Holy See between 2013 and 2025 and their reception in the European Union member states. Based on an analysis of Catholic Church documents, papal speeches, diplomatic initiatives of the Holy See and the reactions of European institutions, the article shows that the "dialogue diplomacy" conducted by Pope Francis has been an important, yet often underestimated, political instrument influencing the perception of Islam in Europe, contributing to building a platform for cooperation between religious communities. The article argues that Pope Francis' approach to interfaith dialogue goes beyond the purely theological dimension, becoming part of a broader political strategy aimed at countering social polarization and promoting a model of integration based on mutual respect while preserving cultural identity. The study also highlights the challenges facing the pope's religious diplomacy in the context of growing tensions related to migration, the secularization of European societies, and political polarization in the countries of the European Union.

Key words: Pope Francis, religious diplomacy, Islam, Christian-Muslim dialogue, European integration, migration policy, soft power, European Union.

1. Introduction

The pontificate of Pope Francis (2013-2025) was characterized by a particular commitment to building bridges of dialogue between different religions, especially with Islam. In the context of the European Union, where migration processes have led to an increase in the Muslim population, the Pope's approach to Christian-Muslim relations takes on particular political and social significance. The aim of this article is to analyze the impact of Francis's policies, with particular emphasis on religious diplomacy as a political instrument that influences the shaping of interreligious relations in the European Union, with particular emphasis on its impact on public discourse, institutional initiatives and practical actions for integration. The main research questions include: How does Pope Francis' religious diplomacy influence integration processes in the European Union? What diplomatic strategies and tools does the Holy See use in shaping Christian-Muslim relations? To what extent can dialogue diplomacy be an effective instrument in counteracting social polarization in Europe?

Pope Francis, the first Pope from South America, brought to his pontificate the experience of a country with a rich tradition of religious and cultural pluralism. His approach to interreligious dialogue is characterized by pragmatism, openness and the search for common values, which continues but deepens the line set by the Second Vatican Council and its successors, especially John Paul II.

In recent years, Europe has been facing serious challenges related to the migration crisis, the growth of populist tendencies and social tensions resulting from cultural and religious differences. In this context, the position and actions of Pope Francis towards Islam and Muslims take on not only a religious dimension, but also a political and social one.

This article examines Pope Francis's policies towards Islam, focusing on their impact on shaping interreligious relations in the European Union. The study covers both official documents and papal speeches, as well as specific dialogue initiatives undertaken by the Holy See and their reception in EU member states. The article combines a theological-religious analysis with a political science and international relations perspective, emphasizing the role of the Pope as a political actor in the complex context of European tensions related to Islam and migration.

2. Methodology and Theoretical Framework

This study uses the methodology of qualitative analysis of documents, statements and diplomatic initiatives of Pope Francis from 2013 to 2025, extended by case studies. The main sources are official documents of the Holy See, encyclicals, apostolic exhortations, speeches and addresses of Pope Francis and joint declarations with representatives of Islam, as well as documents of European institutions and scientific publications on interreligious relations in Europe. The analysis of these materials was carried out using the method of critical discourse analysis and content analysis. The database of official documents of the Catholic Church is the official website of the Holy See, which contains all official statements of each Bishop of Rome. The source of literature is also the daily newspaper of the Holy See *L'Osservatore Romano*.

The theoretical framework of the study is based on Joseph Nye's (2004; 2005) concept of soft power, the Copenhagen School's securitization theory (Buzan, Wæver, & de Wilde, 1998), and the concept of religious diplomacy as a special form of public diplomacy (Marshall, 2013). The article also draws on Habermas's (2008) theory of postsecularism, which allows for the analysis of the role of religion in modern democratic societies. They take into account the special status of the Holy See as a subject of international law whose influence goes beyond the traditional instruments of state power. The concept of "dialogue diplomacy" used in the analysis refers to the strategic use of interfaith dialogue as a tool for building peace, preventing conflicts and promoting cooperation between different religious and cultural groups. This study is limited to Christian-Muslim relations. The work also uses a constructivist perspective, assuming that religious and cultural identities are not static but are subject to continuous negotiation and reinterpretation, in which religious and political leaders and institutions play a key role.

The topic taken up in the article is innovative and has not been studied in this way before. Nevertheless, attention should be paid to the work of Boris Vukićević (2015), which takes up the role of Pope Francis in interfaith and intercivilizational dialogue and diplomatic relations with Russia, China, Israel and Islamic states. An important work analyzing diplomacy in the context of communication with Islam in the perspective of Pope Francis is the study by Abdessamad Belhaj (2024).

3. Religious diplomacy

The growing challenges of migration, cultural integration, and rising nationalist sentiments in Europe are making the role of religion as a factor influencing political processes increasingly important. Religious diplomacy, understood as the use of religious arguments, symbols, and institutions to achieve specific political goals, is becoming an increasingly

important element of international relations (Haynes, 2012). In this context, the role of Pope Francis as an international actor whose actions in the sphere of Christian-Muslim relations have a potentially significant impact on the discourse on integration in the European Union seems particularly interesting.

The active involvement of the Bishop of Rome in promoting dialogue with Islam shows religious diplomacy as a consciously used political tool aimed at improving relations between the followers of both religions. Religious diplomacy is an important, although often underestimated dimension of contemporary international relations. In the case of the Holy See, it is a fundamental tool for influencing the global stage, including the political processes taking place in the European Union. Pope Francis has introduced a new dynamic to Vatican diplomacy, emphasizing its special, dialogical significance, which clearly differs from the approach of his predecessors.

Pope Francis, from the beginning of his pontificate, has consistently presented a new vision of Europe, going beyond the strictly economic and administrative dimensions. In 2016, Francis was honored with the Charlemagne Prize, awarded to individuals or institutions for their contribution to the development of unity and democracy in Europe. During the ceremony of awarding the prize in the Vatican, the Pope said: "The identity of Europe is, and has always been, a dynamic and multicultural identity" (Pope Francis, 2016a). Thus, the papal call to promote a culture of dialogue has become particularly important, which is urgently needed by Europe, which is systematically losing its centuries-old connection with its humanist roots. Francis emphasized the need to engage various social entities in promoting: "a culture which privileges dialogue as a form of encounter" (Pope Francis, 2016a). Emphasizing the importance of the culture of dialogue and its use in religious diplomacy, he indicated dialogue as a platform for creating coalitions, understood not only as military and economic alliances, but above all as cultural (Pope Francis, 2016a), educational, philosophical and religious cooperation. It was a call to arm the population with a culture of dialogue and encounter.

The new European humanism proposed by the Bishop of Rome includes, above all, cultural and religious pluralism, perceived as a wealth, not a threat. For Francis, intergenerational solidarity was a very important aspect of proper functioning in the religion-politics sphere. The ability of young generations to learn from older generations will result in the development of humanity, and especially in overcoming the epidemic of selfishness and progressive individualism. Integration is also important for the proper strengthening of the papal process of diplomacy of dialogue. Francis strongly emphasized that migrants should not be perceived as intruders. In the encyclical *Fratelli tutti* (Pope Francis 2020, 133), he stated: "The arrival of people who are different, coming from a different life and cultural environment, becomes a gift, because "the

stories of migrants are also encounters between people and between cultures: for the communities and societies to which they arrive, they are an opportunity for the enrichment and integral human development of all” (Pope Francis 2019, 93). At the same time, Francis clearly emphasized that a fruitful integration process must be two-way. It requires effort from both the host and the arriving societies.

Pope Francis's religious diplomacy was also based on theological concepts. The foundation was the culture of encounter, which occupies a special place in the Pope's international policy. For the Bishop of Rome, the culture of encounter was a readiness for authentic dialogue with the other, without resigning from one's own identity. In opposition to the culture of encounter, Francis placed the culture of rejection, which concentrates the negative features of humanity, such as the exclusion of the weakest. The Pope defined his vision of the meeting in the diplomacy of dialogue on June 8, 2014. At that time, Francis, Patriarch Bartholomew, the President of Israel Shimon Peres and the President of the Palestinian Authority Mahmoud Abbas met in the Vatican Gardens. The host of the meeting said: “building peace requires courage, much greater than fighting war. It takes courage to say ‘yes’ to encounter and ‘no’ to conflict; ‘yes’ to dialogue and ‘no’ to violence; ‘yes’ to negotiation and ‘no’ to hostility; ‘yes’ to respect for treaties and ‘no’ to provocations; ‘yes’ to sincerity and ‘no’ to duplicity” (Pope Francis 2014a).

The theological basis of Francis' diplomacy was also mercy perceived as a political principle. He pointed to it because of the universality of mercy, which is an active form of kindness and compassion, expressed in specific actions for those in need. Selfless help and striving to eliminate evil that affects another person is a special form of brotherly love. Moreover, mercy is also present in Jewish and Muslim religiosity. For this reason, the Pope extended the concept of God's mercy to the socio-political sphere. It should shape the perception of the issues of migration, poverty and social exclusion. Francis included the program for implementing mercy in contemporary politics in the bull “*Misericordiae Vultus*” (Pope Francis 2015a), announcing the Year of Mercy. In it, the Pope recalled the duties incumbent on man: to feed the hungry, to give drink to the thirsty, to welcome the stranger, to clothe the naked (cf. Mt 25:31-45). Overcoming doubts that give rise to fear and are a source of loneliness, overcoming the ignorance in which millions of people live, liberation from poverty, forgiving the guilty and rejecting hatred that leads to violence (Pope Francis 2015a). These are universal works of mercy that should become the fundamental political program of the modern world. Looking at these challenges through the prism of specific people and nations meant that they ceased to be just an abstract idea, written on the pages of the Bible, and at the same time became concrete social and political practices.

According to Francis, the dignity of the human person is the starting point for the politics of mercy. Every system should respect universal human rights and provide special protection to the weakest and excluded. Therefore, it is important to create structures that protect the neediest and at the same time enable them to develop. At the same time, it should be emphasized that the Pope does not place mercy in opposition to justice. On the contrary, he sees them as complementary. Only true mercy demands just social structures from politics.

An important element of the theological foundations of Francis' diplomacy was also integral ecology, also referred to as care for our common home. In the encyclical *Laudato Si'* (Pope Francis 2015b), the Pope linked mercy with ecology, indicating that care for the natural environment is an expression of care for future generations. It is proof of social justice and a sign of intergenerational solidarity, and therefore factors of particular importance to the Pope. In this document, Francis did not focus solely on the environment. On the contrary, he extended the issues related to nature to man, showing the need to care for cultural ecology. The Pope warned against the consumerist vision of man, who is supported by a globalized economy, which seeks to homogenize culture and weaken cultural diversity, which is a treasure of humanity. For this reason, it is necessary to ensure the rights of nations and their cultures. It is also impossible to impose one way of life on all groups of people, but to accept and understand it in accordance with the symbols and customs characteristic of them (Pope Francis 2015b).

In the diplomacy of dialogue, the Bishop of Rome used not only official documents of the Church, but above all he used the opportunity to speak directly on current issues concerning religious communities. His attitude and groundbreaking gestures left an intensive mark on his pontificate. Francis chose places symbolic of contemporary European challenges for the purposes of his apostolic journeys. The Pope's presence on the island of Lampedusa in July 2013 was special, because it highlighted the growing problem of migration of people from North Africa and the Middle East to the countries of the European Union. It was also a papal tribute paid to hundreds of victims who died in the waters of the Mediterranean on their way to a better world. During the homily, Francis said significant words: „The culture of comfort, which makes us think only of ourselves, makes us insensitive to the cries of other people, makes us live in soap bubbles which, however lovely, are insubstantial; they offer a fleeting and empty illusion which results in indifference to others; indeed, it even leads to the globalization of indifference. In this globalized world, we have fallen into globalized indifference. We have become used to the suffering of others: it doesn't affect me; it doesn't concern me; it's none of my business!” (Pope Francis 2013a). In these words, he emphasized the disease that is afflicting the rich societies of the West, calling it “the globalization of indifference” (Pope Francis 2013a). This statement has

become a key concept in the social teaching of the Pope, aptly defining contemporary social and ethical problems. According to the Head of the Catholic Church, indifference should be replaced by global solidarity, which is the joint responsibility of contemporary societies for the integral development of man, with particular attention to the needs of the weakest. This is possible thanks to the culture of encounter, based on building authentic interpersonal relationships that are an expression of respect and dialogue.

The concept of the globalization of indifference is an extremely important element of the Pope's critique of contemporary development. At the same time, it is a call for a profound moral and social transformation, thanks to which it is possible to restore the values of solidarity and concern for the common good. Francis repeated gestures towards migrants during his subsequent apostolic journeys, especially to Lesbos in 2016 and 2021, visiting a Greek refugee camp (Pope Francis 2016b; 2021).

3.1 Dualism of the Pope's function - head of state and religious leader

The Pope has a unique status: „The Supreme Pontiff, Sovereign of the Vatican City State, has full governing power, which includes legislative, executive and judicial power” (Pope Francis 2023). This position was regulated in the Lateran Treaties in 1929 (AAS 2019) and Fundamental Law of Vatican City State (Pope John Paul II 2000; Pope Francis 2023). Thus, the Pope is a subject of international law, with the prerogatives of a head of state. They grant the right to conclude international treaties, send and receive diplomatic representatives, and membership in international organizations. Such a constitutional foundation constitutes a legal and institutional basis for the Pope's political activity.

Pope Francis was able to implement the diplomacy of dialogue thanks to an extensive institutional network in the European Union countries, including: apostolic nuncios in individual member states, the special representative of the Vatican to the European Union, The Catholic Church in the European Union. Commission of the Bishops' Conferences of the European Union (COMECE) and The Council of Bishops' Conferences of Europe (CCEE).

Pope Francis' effective political activity in the international arena was possible thanks to the application of Joseph Nye's (2005) concept of soft power. This concept promoted gaining allies and influence as a result of shaping partners' preferences by showing the attractiveness of one's own culture and political values as well as the conducted foreign policy. The soft power of the Holy See is manifested in the moral authority of the Pope, significant cultural influence, exceeding the borders of Christianity and the global network of institutions of the Catholic Church around the world (Troy 2018).

This idea was particularly visible in the attitude of Francis, who referred less frequently to the Christian roots of Europe, which were its only foundation, as did his predecessors: John Paul II and Benedict XVI. In his statements, Francis emphasized the need for creative fidelity to tradition, which is not closed to dialogue and development. At the same time, he strongly emphasized the humanistic values resulting from Christianity, that is, the dignity of every human person and solidarity. At the same time, Francis warned against the temptation to reduce Christianity only to a tool of identity, eagerly used in political disputes. He raised this problem in the Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (2013b): „In others, this spiritual worldliness lurks behind a fascination with social and political gain, or pride in their ability to manage practical affairs, or an obsession with programmes of self-help and self-realization. It can also translate into a concern to be seen, into a social life full of appearances, meetings, dinners and receptions” (Pope Francis 2013b, 95).

The Bishop of Rome, as a politician in international activity, was involved in the current problems of the world, always standing up for the weakest, the disadvantaged, usually forgotten by his immediate environment. Often, his activity went beyond the patterns established by his predecessors. The migration crisis became the most expressive example of the involvement of the papal religious diplomacy in issues concerning the European Union. Through consistent calls for solidarity and hospitality towards migrants and refugees, Francis became the conscience of Europe. Firmly calling for combating the root causes of migration, namely wars, poverty and injustice (Pope Francis 2015c). At the same time, he proposed to Europe a model of migration policy based on the principle: welcome, protect, promote and integrate (Pope Francis 2017).

A special type of papal activity in the international forum was the promotion of integration based on intercultural dialogue, and especially relations with Islam. Francis noticed the growing religious diversity in Europe, consistently implementing the goals of his pontificate in the field of conducting practical interreligious dialogue. Strengthening Christian-Muslim relations was aimed at counteracting the progressive radicalization and intensification of Islamophobic attitudes. Moreover, cooperation of followers of different religions, in the future, may contribute to the fruitful integration of migrants and creating space for religion in the increasingly secularized public discourse of the European Union.

3.2 The Catholic Church and Islam

The position of the Catholic Church towards Islam has evolved significantly over the centuries. From hostility and confrontation during the Crusades, through neutrality during the colonial period, to the open dialogue initiated by the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965). The

declaration "Nostra Aetate" of 1965 was a breakthrough, expressing for the first time in the history of the Church respect for "Muslims who worship the one God, living and subsistent, merciful and almighty, Creator of heaven and earth" (Nostra Aetate, 1965). John Paul II developed a dialogue with Islam, symbolized by his meeting with Muslim youth in Casablanca in 1985 and numerous interfaith initiatives, including prayers for peace in Assisi. The Polish Pope participated in many projects carried out together with Muslims. His unprecedented gestures, such as his first visit to a mosque and kissing the book of the Qur'an, became part of history. Commentators at the time often critically assessed John Paul II's actions, emphasizing his one-sided, exclusively Christian efforts to improve relations between the two religions.

Benedict XVI continued the dialogue, although his pontificate was marked by controversy after a lecture in Regensburg in 2006, entitled Faith, Reason and the University – Memories and Reflections (Pope Benedict XVI, 2006), during which the Pope referred to Islam. The words of the medieval scholar, quoted by Benedict XVI, aroused much controversy at the time and protests from Muslim circles. In media discussions, it was argued that Benedict had squandered the achievements of Christian-Muslim dialogue, which had been carefully built during the pontificate of John Paul II, in a single lecture. It should be recalled that Pope Benedict XVI quoted the words of the Byzantine Emperor Manuel II Palaeologus, spoken during a dialogue with an educated Persian. The event most likely took place near Ankara, during the siege of Constantinople, between 1394 and 1402. The men lead a discussion about the faith contained in the Bible and the Qur'an. One of the topics of this conversation is the topic of jihad, which the emperor raised when he addressed the Persian with the following words: "Show me what Muhammad brought that was new, and you will discover only evil and inhuman things, such as his command to establish by the sword the faith he preached" (Förstel 1993, 240-241). It was this fragment of the quote cited by Benedict XVI that sparked a long discussion on the mutual relations between Christians and Muslims. On the foundation of the dialogue crisis, the Catholic-Muslim Forum was established in 2008.

Francis's pontificate, which began in 2013, brought a new beginning to relations with the Islamic world. The papal trip to Lampedusa in 2013 drew attention to the tragedy of migrants, many of whom were Muslims, and at the same time indicated that this issue was a priority. During his apostolic journeys, Francis met with Muslim leaders and visited mosques and religious schools in the Islamic world. Undoubtedly, a breakthrough event for Catholic-Muslim relations was Francis's first apostolic trip in the history of the papacy, to the Arabian Peninsula, to the United Arab Emirates in 2019. The purpose of the visit was the Pope's participation in the International Conference on Human Fraternity in Abu Dhabi, organized on the occasion of the 800th anniversary of the meeting of St.

Francis of Assisi with Sultan al-Malik al-Kamil. During the Fifth Crusade in 1219, Francis of Assisi decided to go on a mission to preach the Gospel among Muslims. St. Francis went with peaceful intentions and without the desire to lead disputes, but he set a clear goal for this journey - to bring the followers of Islam closer to Christ, who died on the cross for the salvation of every man. The mission of the Poor Man of Assisi was successful, and the day of the meeting of St. Francis with the Sultan - August 29, 1219 can be considered a symbolic date of the beginning of religious dialogue between Christians and Muslims.

Eight hundred years later, at the end of the International Conference on Human Fraternity, Pope Francis and the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar Ahmad al-Tayyeb signed a joint document on Human Fraternity, a groundbreaking document on *"Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together"* signed by His Holiness Pope Francis and the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar Ahamad al-Tayyib (Pope Francis, and Ahmad al-Tayyib 2019). This document was a breakthrough in Christian-Muslim relations, as it introduced a new paradigm based on human brotherhood, instead of mere tolerance. Its significance goes beyond the religious sphere, touching on fundamental issues of coexistence in a pluralistic world. This document has caused much controversy in both Christian and Muslim circles. However, it has undoubtedly set a new direction in thinking about the role of religion in building peace and social justice. Of course, it is necessary to introduce specific changes in interreligious relations at various levels, from local to global. Only then will its implementation bring tangible benefits. The Document on Human Brotherhood can be seen as a milestone on the way to a new paradigm of interreligious relations in the 21st century. It is therefore necessary to introduce a new way of seeing reality, in which religions are not a source of conflict, but on the contrary, they become the foundation of a global ethic of brotherhood and solidarity.

The theological foundation of the Christianity-Islam relationship for Francis was the documents of the Second Vatican Council, especially the aforementioned declaration *Nostra Aetate*. The Bishop of Rome continued and developed the council's thought, forcefully emphasizing the common elements of faith in one God and the tradition of Abraham. Francis' programmatic document shaping interreligious and intercultural relations was his third encyclical *"Fratelli tutti"* (Pope Francis 2020) published on October 3, 2020. It was undoubtedly inspired by meetings with the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar Ahmad al-Tayyeb. The encyclical promotes a vision of human fraternity that transcends religious, cultural, and geographical divisions. Francis emphasized that all people are brothers and sisters, and this aspect of humanity is the foundation for building relationships also between followers of different religions, especially Christians and Muslims. For this reason, the Pope called for building a "culture of encounter" (Pope Francis 2020, 216), which is the opposite of the "culture of walls" (Pope Francis 2020, 27). The fruitful implementation of this challenge was

made possible by dialogue, a tool for building peace and mutual understanding. Of course, interreligious dialogue requires openness and respect for the diversity of the other side, as well as a willingness to listen. According to Francis, highlighting the importance of human fraternity was particularly important for mutual relations. It stems from the need to oppose various forms of extremism and fundamentalism, which attack true and deep religiosity, leading to a distortion of the spiritual message of religion. Therefore, it is important for religious leaders to combat all forms of fundamentalism, while promoting peaceful coexistence (Pope Francis 2020, 285).

3.3 The Impact of Papal Dialogue Diplomacy on Interreligious Relations in the European Union

The unconventional activities of Pope Francis, reinforced by decisive statements on current issues of a changing Europe, constituted an important element of public discourse in debates on Islam and Muslims in the countries of the European Union. An extremely important aspect of Francis's policy, directly affecting relations with Islam in Europe, was his position on migration and refugees. During a speech in the European Parliament in Strasbourg on 25 November 2014, he said: „Europe will be able to confront the problems associated with immigration only if it is capable of clearly asserting its own cultural identity and enacting adequate legislation to protect the rights of European citizens and to ensure the acceptance of immigrants” (Pope Francis 2014b). The Pope has repeatedly appealed for solidarity with migrants, including those arriving from Muslim-dominated regions. In his appeals, he has emphasized the moral obligation to help those fleeing war, persecution, and poverty. He said: “I dream of a Europe where being a migrant is not a crime but summons a greater commitment on behalf of the dignity of every human being” (Pope Francis 2016b). It is worth noting that Francis did not limit himself to teaching. On the contrary, he put his words into action, taking Muslim refugees from the island of Lesbos to the Vatican, and regularly visiting refugees in camps. These symbolic gestures undoubtedly constituted a stark contrast to the migration policies of some European countries.

The challenge for the interfaith dialogue policy promoted by Pope Francis was the increasing secularization of European societies. In many European Union countries, religion plays an increasingly smaller role in public life, which limits the impact of religious initiatives on wider social circles. As a result, the group of Europeans for whom religious identity is of great importance is growing. An attitude of indifference significantly hinders building bridges based on religious values.

On the other hand, in recent years, Europe has seen an increase in political polarization. Nationalist and populist parties and movements are

gaining popularity, which often and willingly use anti-Islamic rhetoric. This is mainly visible in Italy, Poland and Hungary, where parties declaring their attachment to Christian values promote positions that are contrary to the papal teaching on dialogue with Islam and accepting refugees.

The teaching of Pope Francis on political polarization in the European Union was an important voice in the debate on the future of Europe. The Pope diagnosed polarization as a symptom of a deeper crisis of values and proposed a return to the original ideals of European integration, based on solidarity, dialogue and concern for the common good. After all, the motto of the European Union is: United in diversity. It means the need for common action to ensure peace and prosperity. In this way, it is also possible to protect the richness of cultures, traditions and languages in Europe. At the same time, the Pope emphasized that "unity does not mean political, economic, cultural or intellectual uniformity" (Pope Francis 2014c). Francis understood unity as the richness of the diversities that create it.

Therefore, it was particularly important to emphasize the need for social and political dialogue as a method of overcoming divisions. Francis consistently promoted the culture of encounter and dialogue as an alternative to growing polarization. He pointed out that true dialogue does not mean renouncing one's own identity, but on the contrary enables opening up to the perspective of another person.

The consequence of the Pope's postulates at the European forum was the involvement of the Council of Europe in intercultural dialogue, specified in the Meetings on the Religious Dimension of Intercultural Dialogue (Council of Europe 2015). This initiative was a platform for an open exchange of views, in which participants respect each other, despite different origins, ethnic, linguistic and religious traditions. Such meetings are particularly important in the contemporary, multicultural and multipolar world. They force a wise combination of the centuries-old European identity with the values brought by other nations arriving on the continent (Michałowska 2014).

3.4 Challenges of Religious Diplomacy

Islam is not a monolith, neither in Europe nor around the world. The centuries-long history of this religious tradition has produced various currents and factions that perceive religious principles and interpersonal relations in different ways. The multiplicity of views complicates the process of dialogue. These obstacles are further reinforced by the lack of a single religious and moral authority in the Muslim world, a model and guide for all believers. Islam does not have an equivalent of the Pope. Each Muslim community gathers around its own leader, and thus Muslim organizations have different visions of cooperation. Some are eager to join

initiatives promoted by the Holy See, while others remain skeptical or show no involvement at all. The aim of Francis' diplomatic dialogue was to reach out to conservative and traditionalist Muslim communities. They posed a particular challenge, because they usually perceived interfaith dialogue as a threat to their identity. It was undoubtedly a difficult task, but the Pope did not cease his efforts to implement it. He believed that limiting dialogue to a favorable environment was not enough. He patiently encouraged people to start talks, often breaking down barriers that seemed insurmountable (Yucel and Tahir 2021).

It should be emphasized, however, that despite Pope Francis' great commitment to dialogue with Islam in the political context, he encountered obstacles. The main barrier was the implementation of declarations and interreligious documents in local societies. It was necessary to prepare the foundations for such activity, through education, especially in closed, homogeneous environments, without previous multicultural experiences. However, it should be remembered that the educational aspect is often extremely complicated, because the church hierarchy in different European Union countries shows an uneven level of commitment to the process of dialogue with Islam, often diverging from the Pope's teaching (Byrnes 2017).

Pope Francis's policy contributed to the intensification of inter-institutional cooperation between Catholic and Muslim organizations. Catholic-Muslim dialogue commissions were established, operating at the episcopates of individual European Union countries. The cooperation between Caritas Europa and Muslim charities is also fruitful, especially in the field of helping refugees and migrants. Also noteworthy are the increasingly popular academic initiatives, dominated by joint research projects of Catholic and Muslim universities and student exchanges.

5. Case Studies

Analysis of papal diplomacy of dialogue with Islam in the European Union requires indicating practical initiatives in this area, undertaken in selected Member States. Italy, as a country inextricably linked to the Holy See, is a special case of the influence of papal policy towards Islam on interreligious relations. Throughout Francis' pontificate, initiatives of The Bishops' Conference of Italy have been very active in the field of dialogue with Islam. A model example of practical activity was the program "Corridoi umanitari" (2018) (Humanitarian corridors) implemented by The Bishops' Conference of Italy, The Community of Sant' Egidio in Rome, Caritas Italy, The Federation of Evangelical Churches in Italy, and Muslim organizations of course. This program enabled the legal transfer of refugees from camps in Lebanon, Morocco and Ethiopia to Italy. These actions have been noticed by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees,

becoming an inspiration for other countries struggling with illegal migration. It combines the moral imperative of helping those in need with a pragmatic approach to integration and security.

An important document in Italian relations between politics and religion was the signing in 2017 of the National Pact for an Italian Islam (2017), as an expression of an open and integrated community respecting the values and principles of the Italian legal system. Drawn up in collaboration with the Council for Relations with Italian Islam. Adopted by the Italian Ministry of Interior. The postulates contained in the document refer to the values of dialogue promoted by the Pope. The signatories particularly emphasized the need to counteract religious radicalization, while also emphasizing the long-term and fruitful dialogue between Islam and the Italian government. The document emphasizes interreligious cooperation without a rigid formal framework, emphasizing cultural integration while maintaining religious identity.

In Germany, the Muslim community makes up almost 7% of the country's population (Widy-Behiesse 2023, 240) and is an excellent place to implement Pope Francis's policy towards Islam. His postulates were reflected in the activities of German organizations working for Christian-Muslim dialogue. This cooperation refers directly to the teaching of Francis, and therefore the need to conduct a lively dialogue with Islam on various levels: theological, institutional and everyday. Activities must go beyond the traditional approach to religious tolerance, proposing a model of partnership in building a civil society. In such a dialogue, the fundamental theological differences between Christianity and Islam should be acknowledged, while avoiding relativism, and at the same time, platforms for cooperation in areas of common values should be sought. An important aspect of cooperation is also the perception of secularization, on the one hand, as a challenge facing contemporary religious communities, and at the same time, as an opportunity for religious communities, because it encourages cooperation in defending the place of religion in the public sphere. This cooperation can be read as an important voice in the discussion not only about Christian-Muslim relations, but also about the shape of pluralistic European societies in the 21st century. This activity resulted in the practical implementation of the program "Weißt du, wer ich bin?" (2016) (Do you know who I am?) jointly implemented by Christian and Muslim organizations. Its aim is to combat prejudices and build mutual understanding.

The complexity of the reception of papal teaching on the relationship between Christianity and Islam is shown by Poland, a country with a strong Catholic tradition with a small 0.7% Muslim community, present in the country for over 600 years, and significant political polarization. In Polish society, there is a significant discrepancy between the declared attachment to papal teaching and the attitude towards Muslims and refugees. It should be emphasized, however, that in Poland there are nu-

merous dialogue initiatives initiated by both the Catholic and Muslim communities. An unprecedented example is the Joint Council of Catholics and Muslims, established in 1997, implementing the postulates of dialogue with Islam, of successive popes: John Paul II, Benedict XVI and Francis. Moreover, since 2001, the Day of Islam has been organized in the Catholic Church in Poland, which is an opportunity for interfaith meetings, the main goal of which is to get to know each other, looking for what unites us and remembering the differences and our own identity (Piwko 2015, 315-344).

6. Conclusions

Pope Francis's policy towards Islam, based on the concept of diplomacy of dialogue, has been a significant factor in shaping the relationship between politics and religion in the European Union, especially in countries with a strong Catholic tradition. This significance is manifested both at the level of public discourse and specific institutional and grassroots initiatives contributing to building a platform for cooperation between religious communities. The effectiveness of the pope's policy of dialogue is diverse and strongly dependent on national and regional contexts resulting from historical, social and political conditions. It has achieved the greatest successes in inspiring specific initiatives of civil society and in broadening the conceptual framework of the debate on the future of Europe. The main challenges to the implementation of the vision of dialogue on the level of politics and religion promoted by Pope Francis are secularization, political polarization and the diversity of Islam in Europe, as well as the internal divisions of the Catholic Church. They cause difficulties in implementing the principles proposed by Francis.

Pope Francis's dialogue diplomacy was an important dimension of the Holy See's relations with the European Union. It was characterised by a shift in emphasis from identity issues to social and migration issues. Using both traditional diplomatic instruments and symbolic gestures of great media and social significance, as well as humanitarian initiatives. Thus, Francis's policy went beyond the purely theological, or even religious, dimension, becoming an element of a broader political strategy aimed at counteracting social polarisation. This strategy was based on promoting a model of integration based on the culture of encounter and human fraternity, as an alternative to assimilationism and multiculturalism.

At the same time, it should be stated on the basis of the conducted analysis that there are strong foundations for the development of inter-religious relations in the European Union in the context of the policy of Pope Francis. It is possible to further strengthen institutional forms of Christian-Muslim dialogue, especially in the areas of humanitarian,

educational and cultural cooperation. We should expect greater involvement of the Holy See in mediating religious and cultural conflicts in Europe, using the experience gained in the dialogue with Islam. The key challenge is to translate general declarations and documents into specific actions in local communities, which is inextricably linked to the significant involvement of church structures at the level of dioceses and parishes. Finally, an important element of developing dialogue will be to take into account the specificity of different traditions and trends of Islam present in Europe. Such action will require a differentiated approach.

In the context of politics-religion relations in the European Union countries, it is important to use the experience of religious organizations in migrant integration programs. Research projects on interreligious relations and their impact on social cohesion can be helpful in this. Interreligious education should also be supported and promoted, which will be a tool to counter extremism and radicalization.

The end of Pope Francis' pontificate on April 21, 2025, set further directions for research on his achievements in the field of politics-religion in the context of Catholicism-Islam relations. This research should focus on the empirical analysis of the impact of papal initiatives on social attitudes towards Muslims in various European Union countries and on the comparative analysis of the effectiveness of religious diplomacy of other international actors.

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