

Between Ethnic and Cultural Identity: The Effect of Turkish Religious Literature on the Lifestyle of the Lithuanian Muslim Community

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Abstract: This paper examines the increasing presence of Turkish religious literature in Kaunas, Lithuania, home to the only brick mosque in the Baltic States and an active Muslim community with a Turkish imam conducting services. In the globalised context, spiritual texts play a key role in shaping identity and communal lifestyle, and Turkish authors' literature, due to accessibility in local languages, may be relevant for Lithuanian Muslims. By focusing on two Muslim groups, Lithuanian Tatars and converts, the research investigates how religious translations are transmitted, adapted and integrated into the local community. The analysis focuses on the Islamic religion and communal expressions and explores whether translations influence the identity of Lithuanian Muslims, their spiritual practices, linguistic preferences, historical consciousness or socio-political approaches. Additionally, it provides insights into how Turkish literature serves as both a cultural artefact and an element for identity formation for these two Muslim minority groups.

Keywords: converts, identity, lifestyle, Lithuanian Tatars, Muslim community, translations, Turkish religious literature.

Introduction

The dissemination of Turkish¹ culture abroad began to attract interest in the Republic of Turkey in the first half of the 20th century, alongside other reforms that were taking place at the time. The translation of Turkish literature into other languages, including European languages, was supported by Turkey's cultural diplomacy efforts, and expanded from the mid-20th century (Gürçağlar 2008: 101; Dickinson 2015: 7). The increase in the distribution of religious publications, such as books, newspapers, advertising materials, reflected shifting political situations and was observed from the late 20th and beginning of the 21st centuries (Şahin 2023: 385-386).

Compared to other European languages, translations of Turkish literature into Lithuanian started relatively late. The process became more systematic only after Lithuania's independence was restored in 1990, although there is still no history of Islamic terminology in the country (Račius 2023: 452). Meanwhile, at the beginning of the 20th century, such translations were not scientifically accurate, and texts were mainly translated from other languages, such as French and German. Nevertheless, there is now a growing interest in Turkish literature and its translations among academics and scholars. Vilnius University (VU) in Lithuania has provided a Bachelor's degree programme in Lithuanian Philology and Foreign (Turkish) Language since 2000 (Miškinienė 2020: 285). Additionally, at the VU Centre of Oriental Studies, the Middle Eastern Studies programme offers a specialisation in Turkology, indicating an academic interest in Turkish language and literature. Studies include courses on Turkish history, literature, syntax, translations from Turkish into Lithuanian and vice versa (*ibid.*). On top of this the Baltic Academy of Turkish Culture, or Balturka, based in Vilnius, offers Turkish courses and introduces the culture. This has created and continues to create favourable conditions for the translation of Turkish literary works.

Regarding the translation and promotion of religious literature in Lithuania, which is the subject of this study, the Turkish authorities and the Turkish Embassy in Vilnius play a significant role in this process. At the beginning of the 21st century, one of Turkey's policy intentions was to focus on translating Turkish literature, with funding from the Turkish Ministry of Culture and Tourism (Hürriyet Daily News 2016). The Turkish state's institution, the Presidency

of Religious Affairs (Tur. Türkiye Cumhuriyeti Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı or Diyanet), supports the Muslim community in Lithuania in acquiring religious textbooks and contributes to their smooth translation into Lithuanian, Russian and English. The Yunus Emre Institute (Tur. Yunus Emre Enstitüsü) also contributes to the dissemination of Turkish culture and literature in Lithuania through its cooperation with VU (Litvanyda Türk Tarihi ve Kültürü Sempozyumu 2012).

In 1997, the Turkish Embassy assisted in opening the Turkish Language Office at VU, later renamed the Turkish Language Centre (Miškinienė 2014), which collects material transmitted by Turkey about the country and the Turkish language. The head of the Centre, the orientalist and turkologist Galina Miškinienė (Tautinių bendrijų namai 2023), has established close personal and institutional ties with Turkish academic institutions and scholars. In 2011, she contributed to the organisation of the Turkish Culture Days in Vilnius, in collaboration with TURKSOY, the International Organisation of Turkic Culture (Tur. Uluslararası Türk Kültürü Teşkilatı or TÜRKSOY) (TÜRKSOY 2011). The Turkish Embassy also provided funds for the opening of the Islamic Culture and Education Centre in Vilnius (Islamo kultūros ir švietimo centras 2016). Academic, literary, and cultural initiatives, as well as links with Lithuania through the dissemination of cultural events and the promotion of the Turkish language and literature, demonstrate the activity of cultural exchanges.

The current translations of Turkish literary texts that reach Muslims in Lithuania primarily relate to the Islamic religion. Nevertheless, their audience, the readers, have been socialised in a Catholic Christian or agnostic and atheist environment (Račius 2023: 453). This will be discussed further in this study.

This article is based on participant observation in a mosque in Kaunas and interviews collected in Kaunas and Vilnius from March to July 2024 and from February to March 2025. It analyses two primary groups within the country's Muslims, both permanent residents of Lithuania, Tatars and converts. The literature selected for the study consists of Turkish authors' religious texts translated into Lithuanian, which are available at the Kaunas Mosque and on the Lithuanian Muslim community's internet platform.

The aim of this paper is to investigate the effect of translations of Turkish religious literature on the ethnic and cultural identity of the Lithuanian Muslim community. To achieve this goal, the following objectives were set: 1) to present the theoretical framework, research overview and methodology;

2) to introduce the historicity, structure, ethnicity and cultural features of the Lithuanian Muslim community; 3) to find out whether Turkish literary texts influence the ethnic identity of Lithuanian Muslims; 4) to determine whether Turkish literature shapes the cultural identity of the community members, for example, their worldview, values or traditions.

Theoretical framework and research overview

The concept of identity is not static but constantly changing and can be influenced by different social, cultural, economic, and political contexts. It is essential to underline that a significant contribution to the study of ethnic and cultural identity on a global scale has been made by scholars such as Benedict Anderson (1983), who examined the formation of ethnic and national identity and memory; Anthony David Stephen Smith, who researched ethnic origins and national identity; Clifford Geertz, who revealed insights into cultural identity with the thick description method (relevant in this paper) and also researched Islam (1971, 1973). The anthropologist Thomas Hylland Eriksen's research on ethnicity, identity and the globalisation of culture is key to understanding contemporary identity formation. The majority of these scholars' works are published in English, with a limited number available in Lithuanian.

In Lithuanian historiography, Vida Savoniakaitė, an ethnologist and cultural historian, has explored issues of nationalism, ethnicity and culture. Her article "Jono Basanavičiaus požiūris į lietuvių tautos tyrimus, 1879–1927" (2019) (Jonas Basanavičius' View on the Research into the Lithuanian Nation, 1879–1927) examines Basanavičius' ideas about leading the nation through language and encouraging historical research as well as the collection of manuscripts and books. According to Savoniakaitė, such studies influenced the Lithuanian national revival and development of ethnicity and culture. In her research, the ethnologist also emphasises the definition of identity: "By defining one's own identity, one distinguishes oneself from others and, at the same time, defines those of one's own traits that bind one to a group, community, nation or institution" (Savoniakaitė 2011: 389).

The anthropologist Vytis Čiubrinskas has also conducted studies on identity (2008, 2011), using the Lithuanian term *identitetas*², focusing more on migration. Ethnologist Auksuolė Čepaitienė (2001) employed the Lithuanian

term *tapatumas* to describe identity in her research. Recent historiography includes Savoniakaitė's monograph *Imperija ir tauta: Eduardo Volterio etnografija 1882–1941* (2023) (*Empire and Nation: The Ethnography of Eduard Voltaire, 1882–1941*), which analyses ethnicity as constructed and Voltaire's (the person in the book) interest in human identity, religion, belief, superstition, and linguistic features. Thus, these studies reveal how identities are constructed in changing social, cultural and political environments.

Moreover, to define 'ethnic' and 'cultural identity', one can refer to the anthropologist Eriksen, who initially stressed that ethnic identity is based on socially accepted ideas of cultural differences and notions of shared ancestry, while cultural identity involves shared norms and practices (Eriksen 2001: 43). In later years, he added that there is no simple or unambiguous link between cultural and ethnic identity, as ethnic groups can have significant internal cultural differences or unclear cultural boundaries (Eriksen 2017: 154–155). Eriksen defines ethnicity as not due to cultural differences but to the ideology of cultural difference: "Ethnicity consists in making cultural differences comparable ..." (Eriksen 2021: 6). According to him, the term ethnic identity started to be used in anthropology in the middle of the 20th century, and new identities – ethnic, religious, post-ethnic – are constantly emerging (*ibid.*; Eriksen 2017: 154).

The historical memory and expression of identity of Lithuanian Tatars have been studied by a number of Lithuanian scholars, including Jonas Mardosa (2024), Lina Leparskienė (2022), Inga Zemblienė (2018), Gintarė Lukoševičiūtė (2015), Mindaugas Peleckis (2010), and others. Research on identity is also conducted by Tatars such as Tamara Bairašauskaitė, Galina Miškinienė, Adas Jakubauskas, Galim Sitdykov, Stanislav Dumin and others. Moreover, an English article by Mehmet Aça (2023), a Turkish researcher, examines the identity challenges faced by Lithuanian Tatars and the significance of collective memory. The only Lithuanian Tatar newspaper, *Lietuvos totoriai*, also devotes several articles to ethnic identity and relations with Turkey. Meanwhile, very few academic texts are available on the identity of Lithuanian converts, except for studies by a Lithuanian researcher on Muslim communities Egdūnas Račius (2013, 2018) and Vytautas Magnus University's student Dalia Markevičiūtė (2009).

There are no specific studies analysing the effect of translations of Turkish religious literature on foreign or Lithuanian Muslims. One of the most

significant papers is an English article by Račius. In a study (2023), the author examines religious terminology in Islamic literature translated into Lithuanian. Although the investigation focuses on analogies of the use of Lithuanian concepts in translated texts, there appears to be minimal mention of Turkish literature. It is noteworthy that, at the time the researcher was conducting the investigation, an increase in such literature had recently emerged. However, although these publications were not abundant a few years ago, Račius drew attention to the fact that the existing texts represented official Turkish Islam and were supported by Turkish institutions such as Diyanet.

Articles in Lithuanian (2010, 2014) and insights in Turkish (2020) by Miškinienė, are also relevant to this research as they provide knowledge about the written heritage of the Lithuanian Tatars, and cultural ties between Lithuania and Turkey.

This paper does not aim to provide a comprehensive definition of 'lifestyle', therefore, the term is defined through the concept of 'life', using Čepaitienė's framework (2013: 5–6, 15) and will focus mainly on the aspects of community, social structure and organisation, environment, economy, politics, religion, rituals and lifestyle shifts in examining the effect of Turkish literature on the Lithuanian Muslim community.

Methods and Methodology

In the context of globalisation, religious literature is becoming a significant element in shaping the identity and lifestyle of communities, and translations of Turkish religious texts, due to their accessibility in local languages, may also be relevant for Muslims in Lithuania. Although Muslims are a minority in Lithuania, there is a rising fear of extremism or radicalism in society today, which is often linked to religious identity. The scarcity of research of this kind makes this study academically valuable.

The selection of topic was influenced by several factors. After the 2016 coup attempt in Turkey, Turkish interest in Lithuania's Muslim community increased. Additionally, the author's earlier historical research on the development, inter-relations and migration of Vilnius' and Kaunas' Muslim communities provided a useful background for this study.

This research employs a qualitative approach, using content analysis of published and unpublished sources to explore the Muslim lifestyle and history. Unpublished sources related to Turkey, and translations of Turkish religious literature were examined in the Lithuanian Central State Archives, unfortunately without success. The Kaunas Muslim religious community granted access to the mosque archive, although it contained no information relevant to this study. The mosque holds birth and marriage records from 2000 to 2014, but no correspondence with Turkish officials regarding religious literature. Such information was best revealed by the material collected through interviews.

The paper provides a descriptive-interpretative analysis as well as a historical-comparative approach to reveal the development of Islam and ethnic dynamics in Lithuania. The study is based on ethnographic field research methods in the form of an ethnographic questionnaire, semi-structured and in-depth interviews, participant observation, and visual material collection.

The location is Kaunas city, the location of the only brick mosque in Lithuania and the Baltic states, and the imam of the Muslim community is from Turkey. The mosque is rich in Turkish religious literature with translations into Lithuanian, English and Russian. Several interviews were also conducted in Vilnius, as some Lithuanian Tatars currently reside there.

Semi-structured and in-depth interviews were collected from experts (Muftis, imams, community leaders) and female ordinary members. All have a university education and were selected randomly. Separate questionnaires were prepared for experts and other respondents, comprising approximately 30 questions, along with additional questions in specific cases. Interviews lasted one to four hours and participants ranged in age from 32 to 85. Respondents consisted of six men and four women. A female expert preferred to be identified only as Tatar, rather than Lithuanian Tatar, stating that there was no point identifying her with a specific location. To define the historical context and some events, three interviews were collected in 2011 and 2012, and the remaining seven in 2024 and 2025.

In line with research ethics, the names of the interviewees were coded (Expert Lithuanian Tatar 1, Convert 1, etc.). All participants requested confidentiality and anonymity, and some asked that their positions not be disclosed to maintain community peace, especially regarding sensitive political topics. Respondents were also assured of the study's purpose, voluntary participation and data usage being only for scientific reasons.

Five participatory observations were conducted at Kaunas Muslim community events: three consecutive Fridays during Ramadan (March–April 2024), one Friday in March 2025, and one Sunday during the Open Day event in July 2024. Each lasted two to six hours. During observations, notes were taken on a mobile phone, and were directly expanded afterwards into detailed descriptions. Visual material (photographs, videos) was also collected and archived.

The study has limitations, as its geographical focus is on one city and only includes interviews from Vilnius and Kaunas, which may not accurately reflect the entire country's Muslim community. It was also carried out over a short period of time (March–July 2024 and February–March 2025), limiting its ability to show long-term trends.

Between Ethnic and Cultural Identity: The History, Ethnicity and Cultural Traits of the Lithuanian Muslim Community

The first Muslims in Lithuania were Tatars, and the origins of the community date back to the late Middle Ages, specifically the 14th and 15th centuries, when they settled in the then Grand Duchy of Lithuania (GDL) (Kričinskis 1993: 15, 17–18). The first arrivals were mainly political emigrants from the Golden Horde and later from the Crimean Khanate. They were soon joined by mercenary soldiers of the Grand Dukes of Lithuania, refugees and prisoners of war who afterwards decided to remain and settle in the region (ibid.: 19–25).

The Tatars, descendants of the Turkic and Mongol tribes, differed from Lithuanians not only in their ethnic identity but also in their religious affiliation, as they practiced Sunni Islam. They identified themselves as belonging to the Hanafi school of the Muslim scholar and theologian Abu Ḥanifah, like Muslims in Turkey. The predecessor of the Turkish Republic, the Ottoman Empire, was one of the migration destinations for Muslim Tatars living in Lithuania during various historical periods (Kričinskis 1993: 39, 43, 50, 197; Bairašauskaitė 2021: 58–62, 111–113). It was a multicultural state, and the cultural features of the Turks were remarkably like those of the Tatars: religion, and similar traditions, observances and customs. Moreover, the Lithuanian Tatars lost their mother tongue as early as the 16th century, while Turkish, a

Turkic language, was closely related to Tatar (Makaveckas 2003: 7). Thus, the common religious identity and linguistic closeness facilitated the conditions of adaptation in a foreign immigration state.

In 1922, the Constitution of the State of Lithuania confirmed the religious and cultural existence of national minorities (*Lietuvos valstybės konstitucija* 1922: Articles 73, 74). Islam and other confessions were officially recognised, then the first brick mosque in Lithuania was built and opened in Kaunas city in 1933 (Expert Lithuanian Tatar 2 2011; Kaunomecete.lt), thus the Tatars had the favourable conditions necessary to preserve ethnic identity and cultivate religion. However, during the Soviet occupation, religious freedom was restricted, leading to the repression, emigration or assimilation of some Tatars into the Lithuanian population and, therefore, loss of religious identity (Expert Lithuanian Tatar 1 & 3 2012; Expert Lithuanian Tatar 2 2011).

In the late 20th century, the Lithuanian national revival was accompanied by a Tatar ethnic revival, although some Lithuanian Tatars began to focus only on ethnicity rather than religion (Expert Lithuanian Tatar 1 & 3 2012). During this period, transformations in the composition of the Muslim community were also observed as the Muslim community in Lithuania became multinational. Currently, this community consists not only of Tatars but also of migrants who arrived during the Soviet era and after the restoration of Lithuania's independence in 1990, as well as Lithuanians who converted to Islam and people who arrived during the 21st century (Tamelytė 2019a). However, this paper focuses only on the two groups of permanent residents: Lithuanian Tatars, and converts.

At the end of 2023, Lithuania's Migration Department published the latest immigration data, which shows that more than 1,500 Turkish citizens were living in Lithuania in that year, while in 2024 there were 2,403 Turkish citizens who had valid residence permits (Migracijos departamentas 2023, 2024). However, these data include not only permanent residents but also temporary migrants and could, therefore, be inaccurate. The primary source of demographic information on Muslims in Lithuania is the decennial official population census, which includes a religious dimension. The 2021 census shows that in Lithuania 2,165 Sunni Muslims participated in the latest register, of whom the most numerous ethnic groups were Tatars (1,128), ethnic Lithuanians (451), and other converts. Fifty-two-point-seven percent of Lithuanian Tatars identified as Sunni Muslims (Lietuvos statistikos departamentas 2021). Most Muslims

live in Kaunas, Vilnius and the surroundings of the capital, while the rest are scattered in other parts of Lithuania.

In 1998, the Lithuanian Sunni Muslim Spiritual Centre-Muftiate (hereafter LMSDC-Muftiate) was opened, uniting Muslims in the country. However, in 2019, another Muslim administrative entity, the Council of Muslim Religious Communities of Lithuania-Muftiate (CMRCL-Muftiate), was also established. Its founding saw the beginning of ongoing disagreements within the Muslim community and the division of the community into at least two factions. Several articles suggest that the split within the community could be linked to Turkey's policies and the coup trial of July 2016 (Račius 2019; Tamelytė 2019a).

Furthermore, the newly established Muftiate, which comprised the Muslim religious communities of Vilnius, Švenčionys and Kaunas, also took over the Kaunas Mosque and welcomed imams from Turkey into mosques and *musallas*³ in these cities. Meanwhile, the LMSDC-Muftiate includes the Hikma Vilnius Muslim religious community and religious communities in Raižiai and Keturiusdešimt Totorių kaimas ('Forty Tatars village'). Both spiritual centres are made up of Tatars, converts and migrants, although the CMRCL-Muftiate involves a significant number of Muslims from Central Asia (Expert Lithuanian Tatar 5 2025; Tamelytė 2019b).

Despite their religious identity being linked to Islam, the majority of Lithuanian Tatars and converts do not speak Arabic, considered theologically the most important language in the religion: the Qur'an, the sacred scripture of Muslims, is the only original publication that is written and read in Arabic. All other language editions of the holy book have the status of translations of the Qur'an's meanings. The two Lithuanian Muslim groups have only been exposed to the religion through local teachings in *musallas* and mosques, weekend schools, and gatherings, and the Islam they practice does not always follow the standard canonical forms. The Tatars have a unique form of religion that is a mixture of both multicultural and multi-confessional faith traditions (Bairišauskaitė 2021: 224, 269). Interview data and literature indicate that Lithuanian converts and some (possibly non-Muslim) Tatars also celebrate Christian festivals such as Christmas and Easter (Converts 1 & 2 2024; Miśkiewicz 1990: 150). However, Muslim Tatars have explicitly denied this, claiming that they only observe Islamic feast days. The fundamental principles of Islam include profession of the Islamic faith, the five daily prayers, almsgiving, fasting during Ramadan and religious pilgrimage. The major Islamic holidays are Eid

al-Fitr (in Arabic) or Ramadan Bayram (in Turkish), which marks the end of fasting. Eid al-Adha or Kurban Bayram involves the sacrifice of an animal (usually a sheep or a goat) to mark the end of the pilgrimage, the hajj ceremony. The community commemorates Mawlid, the birthday of the Prophet Muhammad and gathers on the Night of Power (Laylat al-Qadr) when the Qur'an was revealed to the Prophet.

While most Tatars are traditionally born into a Muslim family or a family that follows Tatar-Turkic traditions, Lithuanian converts are born and raised in families with Catholic Christian backgrounds and values. This suggests that converts need to make more effort to understand and accept their new identity. A separate study could be carried out on this issue, but in the meantime we can conclude that Tatars and converts living in Lithuania are influenced by both ethnic and cultural traditions deriving from both external, such as Turkish, and internal local Lithuanian cultures.

Thus, the ethnic identity of Lithuanian Muslims is revealed by membership in an ethnic group. However, self-perception, self-identification as belonging to a particular ethnic group, and a sense of commonality among individuals of the same ethnic set are also important aspects of ethnic identity. Cultural identity, on the other hand, involves people from different ethnic groups sharing similar values, moral norms, traditions, practices, etc. The Muslim community in Lithuania is made up of people from various ethnicities who are united by the religion of Islam and, at the same time, have a cultural influence related to the country they live in and its society. Nevertheless, there are also noticed external attempts by another country to introduce cultural elements into the life of the Lithuanian Muslim community.

Turkish Religious Literature and its Effect on the Lifestyle of the Lithuanian Muslim Community

On the first visits to the Kaunas Mosque in March and April 2024, during Ramadan, it was clear that on the first and second floors of the mosque⁴ there are bookshelves with neatly arranged religious literature in various languages. Meanwhile, several brown cardboard boxes contained translations of Turkish religious literature, mainly in Lithuanian but also in English and Russian. Some books were funded by the Turkish Diyanet (Presidency of Religious Affairs),

and all were free for visitors. In the cartons was literature related to Islam, the basics of religious knowledge, and the status of women and their rights.

The first page of one of the records, entitled *Religinių žinių pagrindai* (The Basics of Religious Knowledge), mentions that the Diyanet has 1,390 publications and 152 professional books. It is not apparent whether this is the number of translations and printed units in Lithuanian or whether the figures refer to foreign language translations or to originals. Contact information in Turkey is also provided for foreigners, although the author of this paper has not received a reply from the e-mail address given.

Other texts are *The Final Divine Religion Islam* by the Turkish author Murat Kaya and a Lithuanian version translated as *Paskutinė dieviškoji religija islamas*. Both are dated 2022. Other publications include Osman Nuri Topbaş' *Contemplation in Islam*, translated as *Pamąstymas apie Kūrėją, visatą ir žmogų* in Lithuanian. The English translation was published in 2022, with the Islamic year, 1443, also given (Islamic Hijri calendar). The Lithuanian edition was published a year later in 2023 (1444).

The Diyanet helped to purchase the Lithuanian translation of the Turkish religious textbook series Benim Güzel Dinim (Lith. Mano puikioji religija, Eng. My Beautiful Religion), published first by the LMSDC-Muftiate in 2013 and edited by Mufti Romas Jakubauskas. Meanwhile, Mufti Aleksandras Beganskas, of the CMRCL-Muftiate, translated the Turkish cleric and scholar Osman Er-san's book *Moteris islame. Jos teisės ir orumas* (Woman in Islam: Her Rights and Dignity), which is available on the Muftiate's website (CMRCL-Muftiate 2023). In fact, this book is translated from Russian, not Turkish.

During subsequent participant observation in 2024, three more translations of Diyanet religious publications from Turkish into Lithuanian were recorded: *Korano skaitymo pagrindinės taisyklės* (Basic Rules for Reading the Qur'an), 1st edition, Ankara, 2022; *Mokymės skaityti Koraną* (Learning to Read the Qur'an), Istanbul, 2023; *Korano kursų praktinių užduočių knyga 1* (Qur'an Course Practice Book 1), Istanbul, 2023 (see Fig. 1). Printed in Lithuanian on the last page is *Religinių reikalų ministerijos dovana. Neskirta parduoti* (Gift of the Ministry of Religious Affairs. Not for sale).



Figure 1. Translations of Turkish religious literature in cardboard boxes in Kaunas Mosque. Photo by Gintarė Lukoševičiūtė, 14 July 2024, Kaunas.

Račius mentioned that earlier translations of Islamic literature lacked *real* people behind them and, therefore, authority (2023: 464). However, most of the current translations refer to Mufti Beganskas of the CMRCL-Muftiate as the author and/or editor, though the last two publications mentioned above list Turkish citizens in these positions (see Fig. 2).

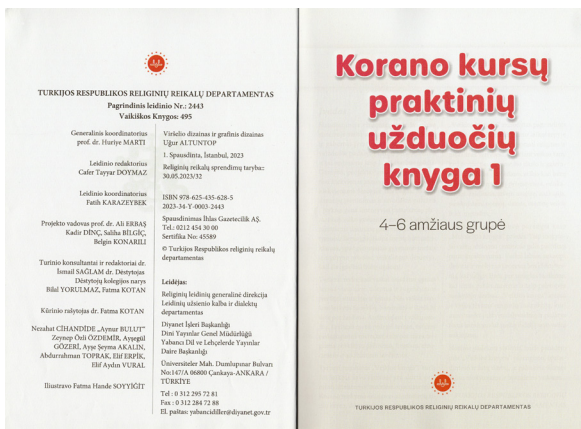


Figure 2. Translation of the Qur'an Course Practice Book 1 into Lithuanian. Photo by Gintarė Lukoševičiūtė, 14 July 2024, Kaunas.

Turkish religious literature is also applied at the Minaretas weekend school at Kaunas Mosque. However, textbooks are more often used because of their colourful design, which stimulates children's interest. Nevertheless, these books are sometimes employed for specific tasks, such as learning the Arabic alphabet.

Although the LMSDC-Muftiate's approved translation of the Qur'an into Lithuanian was published in 2010 (and in 2023), the CMRCL-Muftiate's version was in preparation until 2024. Firstly, the Turkish Diyanet announced its intention to produce its own translation of the Qur'an as early as 2016 (Expert Tatar 1 2024; Expert Lithuanian Tatar 4 2024; *Yeni Asya* 2016). Then, after quite an extended period, the CMRCL-Muftiate's translation of the Qur'an appeared in 2024, first in an online version at Koranas.lt and then in print at the end of the year (see Fig. 3). The first printed edition in Lithuanian reached Lithuanian Muslims in early 2025.

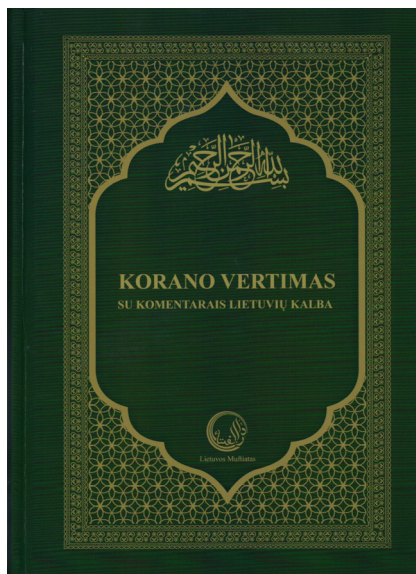


Figure 3. CMRCL-Muftiate's translation of the Qur'an with commentaries in Lithuanian. Photo by Gintarė Lukoševičiūtė, 19 March 2025, Kaunas.

In addition, more books by Turkish authors were published in Lithuanian in 2024. For instance, Osman Ersan's previously mentioned text on women's rights and dignity, which until 2024 had only been available online, was published in 2024 by Erkam Printhouse in Istanbul, Turkey. The publisher is, in

fact, the CMRCL-Muftiate, as stated on the first page of the book, the translation still coming from Russian, as well as the edition by Mufti Beganskas. The first printed version (light cover) of *Korano skaitymo pagrindinės taisyklės* (mentioned above) appeared in 2022 and the updated version (dark cover) in 2023. The first edition features Diyanet logotype, while the new one has the CMRCL-Muftiate logo (see Fig. 4).

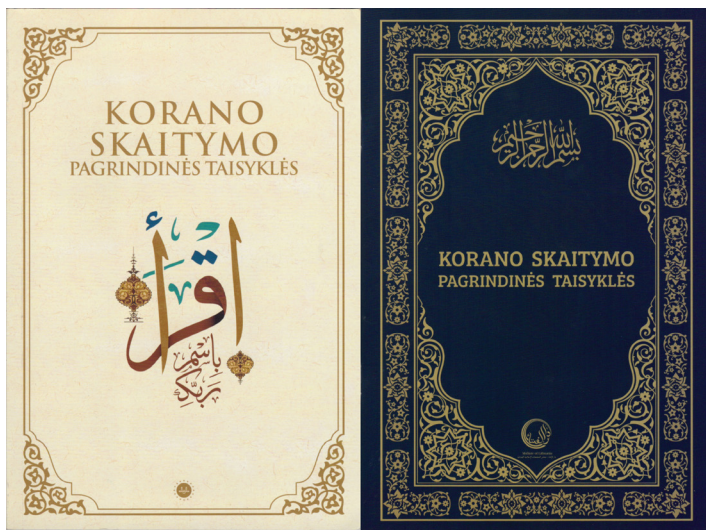


Figure 4. Translations of *Basic Rules for Reading the Qur'an* into Lithuanian. On the left is the 1st edition of 2022 with the Diyanet logo at the bottom, and on the right is the new edition of 2023, already with the CMRCL-Muftiate logo. Photo by Gintarė Lukoševičiūtė, 14 July 2024 and 19 March 2025, Kaunas.

At least 10 different religious books by Turkish authors translated into Lithuanian, as well as other languages of interest to the community, are currently available at the mosque and the number of translations is increasing every year. Some are also available on the internet (Muftiate.lt). Therefore, it is no coincidence that the question of whether Turkish writing shapes the worldview, values, and traditions of the Lithuanian Muslim community arises. The next question is how does this writing affect the daily lives of Lithuanian Muslims and influence the ethnic and cultural identity of the community? The dimensions of potential impact selected for further analysis here are: a) religious or spiritual; b) linguistic; c) historical; d) cultural or identity related; e) economic and political.

a) The religious or spiritual dimension

We can assume that Turkish religious literature help to strengthen the spiritual life of the community. Lithuanian Muslims often read religious texts not only in Lithuanian, Russian and English but also in other languages, including Turkish. Services in mosques and *musallas* are usually held in several languages, including Turkish (Islamavisiems.lt). The Friday talk, or sermon, by the imam, known as the *khutbah*, is provided by the Diyanet and adapted to the Lithuanian community by the imam. Later, translations into Lithuanian are publicly posted on the mosque's social media platforms. In addition, Turkish literature serves as a valuable resource in religious education, as the above-mentioned texts, translated by Turks, are mainly related to the teaching of Islam and are commonly utilised in weekend (Sunday) schools and read by both children and converts.

The Lithuanian Tatar community has preserved its cultural heritage, including ancient manuscripts and prayer books, which, although aesthetically modest, reflect Islamic and Ottoman elements in their visual layout and calligraphy. The *chamails*, prayer books, consist of religious texts written in Arabic and Turkish and their explanations in Polish and Belarusian (ELTA 2005). These manuscripts not only convey spiritual information but also encourage Tatars to delve deeper into their history and into Islamic theology.

However, during participant observation at the Kaunas Mosque, when interacting with Lithuanian female converts, they pointed out that they are not interested in the information in the translated publications they read, whether it is Arabic literature translated into Lithuanian, or Turkish. New converts are attracted to any kind of knowledge about Islam, be it literature, material available digitally or spoken information heard in a mosque. New members of the community who have recently converted to Islam ask other converts all sorts of questions about the religion, even their opinion on Islam's prohibition of celebrating Christian festivals or attending friends' weddings in a Catholic church, and regard their answers as absolute, unquestionable and authoritative. However, the same cannot be applied to Turkish imams, the clerics who have been sent from Turkey to Lithuania since the beginning of the 21st century to lead prayers in various languages. During one participant observation, converts were asked who the imam currently was at the Kaunas Mosque. One member of the community gave an abrupt verbal answer: "The imam, and that's it."

They were then asked about his nationality. One of them replied that “there were always only Turks”⁵, but nobody knew their names. This shows that it is irrelevant for Lithuanian converts who lead the prayers because it is likely that they do not have any other way of communicating with the imam other than the standard prayers in the community. They do not ask what information or message was delivered today, what knowledge was conveyed by the Muslim cleric, what lesson they took away or whether they understood it.

Moreover, the converts pointed out that during the observations at the mosque in Kaunas during Friday prayers, no Tatars had been spotted, although during the open day event around five Tatars were present. They also noted that the interest of Tatars in the free donation of translated literature was lower than that of converts and other guests. A Tatar expert (2024) also revealed that she is not very fond of reading Turkish religious literature: “Personally, I don’t like to read Turkish literature, especially if it’s more Sufi-related. It’s a complete empty-headedness for me. I like that kind of classical, standard stuff, especially in a religious sense.” As to whether the translations of Turkish religious literature have an effect on the lifestyle of Lithuanian Muslims or other ethnic groups, the same respondent replied that it depends on the knowledge and viewpoint of each individual: “... how a person becomes aware and understands, and the perception – it’s individual whether they accept it or not, I don’t know. It is purely their experience” (Expert Tatar 1 2024). Furthermore, on Friday, after the *iftar*⁶, one of the converts went separately to read the English translation of the Qur’an, taking it from the cardboard box on the second floor of the Kaunas Mosque that also contained other translated literature by Turkish authors.

In 2025, at least 15 boxes each containing 20 Lithuanian translations of the Holy Qur’an reached the mosque, totalling over 300 copies. The leader of CMRCL-Muftiate revealed that the translation of the Qur’an took 2.5 years. The sacred text with commentaries was interpreted from various languages – the original Arabic, and translations from English, Russian and Turkish. According to the leader, Turkish representatives of the Diyanet did not contribute to the translation, although the CMRCL-Muftiate had paid them for the layout and printing in Turkey. Unfortunately, it was not specified who had done this. In the boxes that are currently at Kaunas Mosque, books with inscriptions in Turkish such as *Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı. Kur’an-i Kerim Orta Boy. Hediye Kuran Olsun* (Turkish Diyanet Foundation. Qur’an Middle Size. Let My Gift Be the Qur’an) are visible. The boxes also include contact details for Erkam

Yayınları, a publishing house in Turkey, known for printing Islamic literature in various languages.

Meanwhile, another convert was reviewing the new literature in the boxes and selected several books to take home. This convert noted that some were in English, others in Lithuanian. Therefore, new converts are interested in the variety of religious literature available. They are still in the process of gathering knowledge in all accessible forms and are trying to shape their identity through knowledge acquisition.

Thus, Lithuanian female converts do not currently record or reflect on the nationality of the authors of the religious literature they read. The views and opinions of other Muslim converts have so far had a more significant impact on their identity formation and religious life. Nevertheless, it is likely that regular reading, and the increasing availability of Turkish literature in the mosque, will have a more substantial influence on them, their spiritual development, worldview, and value systems in the future, albeit unconsciously.

b) The linguistic aspect

Observation has demonstrated that religious literature in the mother tongue can be used to attract people to convert to the faith described in the texts. A Lithuanian convert, a woman approximately 30–35 years old, travelled from Vilnius because, as she explained, in the capital, only men gather in the *musalla* on Fridays, and women attend on Saturdays when there are fewer men. Her husband is a Christian who does not seek to change his religion to Islam, although she tries to persuade him by offering some translated literature that she brings from the mosque to read. Another woman shared a similar story regarding attempts to convert her sister to Islam. This shows that such efforts are common among converts' their inner circles and that translating texts into Lithuanian and publishing them can facilitate or encourage conversion, although this is not necessarily the case, as demonstrated in the situations presented.

Although a translation of the Qur'an into Lithuanian was first published in 2008, it has been criticised for misinterpretation (Vireliūnaitė 2016). For this reason, a second revised version of the literary translation appeared a few years later, translated from Arabic by the head of the LMSDC-Muftiate, Mufti Jakubauskas, and re-released in 2023 (Expert Lithuanian Tatar 4 2024; Converts 1 & 2 2024). Also, at the beginning of 2024, a new Lithuanian edition

of the meanings of the *Qur'an* was published by the Islamic Centre⁷. However, based on collected verbal material, it has not been approved by a spiritual centre, the Muftiate in Lithuania. Thus, this translation is not officially recognised by Muslims who belong to the CMRCL-Muftiate (Expert Tatar 1). However, one convert mentioned that she had received a translation of the meanings of the *Qur'an* as a gift at the Vilnius Book Fair in 2024, while two stated that they gained it by mail from the publisher himself (Converts 1 & 2 & 3 2024). Thus, Lithuanian female converts do not avoid this religious translation, they appreciate and tend to read it. Meanwhile, one interview indicates that such a publication cannot be preserved or distributed at Kaunas Mosque:

We do not keep the translation made by [personal name omitted, Islamic centre] in Kaunas because it has not been coordinated with the Muftiate.... to bring this book to the Kaunas Mosque, it must be patented, it must be recommended, because all the literature that comes here must be verified. It is not possible for anyone to bring literature and distribute it here. So, if this is the way the community speaks, then we do not accept this translation (Expert Tatar 1 2024).

In contrast, the Muslim community in Kaunas was exceptionally proud to receive a new translation of the *Qur'an* in Lithuanian from the CMRCL-Muftiate in March 2025.

Of course, Turkish literature can contribute to language learning, primarily through religious terms. Part of the Muslim community in Lithuania is composed of Tatars, whose historical linguistic identity is rooted in the Kipchak-based Turkic tradition, which is distinct from modern Turkish (Kulwicka-Kamińska, 2018: 99). Nevertheless, some of the religious terms used in the Lithuanian Muslim community have their origins in Arabic and Turkic languages, including Ottoman Turkish, and therefore became the part of the community through Islamic practices and written traditions. Terminology associated with spiritual observances and ceremonies, such as *Bayram* (feast), *Ramazān* (month of fasting), *kurban* (sacrifice), *namaz* (prayer), *camī* (mosque), *hoca* (religious teacher) and others, clearly reveal the cultural influence. These words are prevalent in the Islamic world, particularly in Turkish contexts, and were adopted over time and included in the religious and everyday language of

Lithuanian Tatars, who historically spoke several languages, including Polish, Lithuanian and Russian (Łapicz 1986: 88; Račius 2023: 455).

It is worth mentioning that during the open day observation at Kaunas Mosque, the current imam, the Diyanet's religious official, also read Turkish poetry. He recited poems in Turkish, but the participants were provided with printed translations in Lithuanian. On the same day, a Lithuanian Tatar woman read her poetry in Tatar and revealed both her yearning for her long-forgotten homeland, and her devotion to her new homeland, Lithuania. The organisers of the event were keen to interest and involve people from different ethnic groups and to present diverse poetic traditions and cultures.

c) The historical aspect

The influence of Turkish literature and culture on the Lithuanian Muslim community is relevant not only through the dissemination of Islamic scriptures but also through the historical prism of the settlement of the first Muslims in Lithuania, the Tatars, and the historical development of their community. The literature often mentions how, throughout the ages, the Tatars have eagerly preferred Turkey as a destination for emigration. Meanwhile, the texts translated into various languages by Turkish authors, discussed earlier, although mainly related to religious topics can remind the Tatars of their cultural identity and historical roots, and can contribute to the preservation of their ethnic identity. Turkish researcher Aça stresses that collective memory is one of the fundamental processes of identity formation at the group level (2023: 95). Through language, history, ritual and ceremony, groups maintain a shared past and a living collective memory.

It is important to emphasise that the manuscripts of Lithuanian Tatar heritage, written in Slavic, Arabic and old Ottoman languages, to the graphic, textual and thematic analysis of which the turkologist Miškinienė has made a significant contribution, reveal the cultural links between Tatars and Turks (Miškinienė 2010: 199). She has also touched upon the historical context and the similarity between the Tatar and Turkish languages, giving examples of the use and translation of terms. According to Miškinienė, a valuable Lithuanian Tatar manuscript, a semi-kitab of Poltožickis, dates to the beginning of the 19th century and contains a four-part text, *The Journey of a Turk to the East* (Miškinienė 2002: 165-172, 2010: 207). A local Lithuanian Tatar transcribed

the text in Arabic and included it in one of the *Kitabs*. Therefore, it is better perceived as a locally situated historical narrative influenced by the Ottoman Empire rather than a straightforward translation of a Turkish literary work.

Meanwhile, alumnus of VU the orientalist and philologist Anton Muchlinski was one of the first to publish transliterated *Kitab* passages in his study, *Issledovaniye o proiskhozhdenii i sostoyanii litovskikh tatar* (An Investigation of the Origin and Situation of the Lithuanian Tatars) (Muchlinski 1857; Jonušas 2022: 7). In the mid-19th century Muchlinski published a translation (albeit in Polish) of a 16th century Turkish manuscript that he claimed to have purchased from sellers in Istanbul (Miškinienė 2010: 200). However, it turned out to be a work of local tradition, containing elements of Ottoman Turkish religious terminology but not an original text by a Turkish author (Miškinienė 2010: 200; Bairašauskaitė 2021: 368–369). However, if the work is a forgery from the 19th century, this indicates that Muchlinski sought to highlight historical kinship and similarity between the Lithuanian Tatars and the Ottoman Empire of the time.

Thus, historicity is manifested through the narration of the Lithuanian Tatars, their settlement, written heritage and its research. In this case, Lithuanian converts, born and raised in a Lithuanian cultural environment, cannot be automatically included in the historical influence of Turkish literature because, unlike Lithuanian Tatars, they do not have a centuries-old history of Turkic origins and writing.

d) The cultural – or identity – related aspect

Over the past decade, Turkey has been actively involved in the life of the Muslim community in Lithuania, supporting cultural and religious projects, financing the renovation of Lithuanian mosques and opening an Islamic culture and education centre (Tamelytė 2019a). We can assume that this has strengthened ties and brought Turkish culture closer to Lithuanian Muslims, allowing for the introduction of more Turkish elements in the internal life of the Lithuanian community.

VU organises Turkish Culture Days, presenting Turkish culture and study opportunities in various forms, from cuisine to traditional arts. The event was supported by TİKA (in 2011), and this year by the Yunus Emre Institute and the Turkish Embassy in Lithuania (Filosofijos fakultetas 2025).

Balturka, an NGO in Vilnius, also contributes to the formation of the cultural identity of Lithuania's Muslim community through traditional Turkish cultural forms such as cooking and knitting lessons and runs various education projects. Its members organise Turkish language courses, with culture and the religion of Islam serving as integral components.

The Turkish language can serve as a social link and have a cultural dimension. Texts written in Turkish can refer to Turkish traditions and customs that could affect the daily life, celebrations and rituals of members of the Muslim community in Lithuania. However, this requires additional exploration.

Turkish students also study at various Lithuanian universities, both in degree programmes and on short-term exchanges, such as the Erasmus mobility program for studies and internships. Although they are usually temporary immigrants and leave Lithuania after finishing their education, some students participate in festivals and prayers and have the opportunity to meet other country's Muslims, bring Turkish culture to the community and influence their identity through communication. However, observations revealed that Turkish religious literature does not encourage community members to interact with Turkish Muslims to strengthen mutual understanding and cooperation. For example, during one of the observations, two Turkish women visited the mosque. All the women entering the mosque greeted each other with the Arabic phrase *As-salamu alaykum* (peace be upon you), regardless of their country of origin, thus the Turkish females, as usual, greeted them with this phrase when they entered. Nevertheless, during and after the *iftar*, the Turkish women were talking to each other and not paying any attention to the Lithuanians. One Turkish female was sitting with her head completely uncovered (the scarf was pulled down around her neck), wearing a mottled blouse with a rather open neck, and the other was dressed in totally the opposite manner, modestly in a dark shirt and wearing a *hijab* covering her hair and neck. They both went out together after dinner, but they were also the subject of gossip among the converts. As Lithuanian female converts dress very modestly in the mosque, with dominant dark clothing and head (hair), neck, arms, legs and chest covered, one of the Turkish women reminded them of a frivolously dressed young girl. However, the topic of the converts' conversations changes quickly, and after a minute, the Turkish women are forgotten and talk turns to other matters.

Thus, the effect of Turkish literature can also take external forms, such as support for Turkish cultural activities. The formation of cultural identity is also

influenced by Turkish organisations in Lithuania and their events, manifested in one way or another in the lives of Muslims in the country through language and various workshops, the promotion of religion, and other cultural elements.

e) The economic and political dimension

Since its establishment in 2019, the CMRCL-Muftiate has been open about its connections with Turkey. Its religious activities have led to inter-ethnic cooperation with the Diyanet and the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (Tur. *Türk İşbirliği ve Koordinasyon Ajansı Başkanlığı* or *TİKA*). The Mufti of the CMRCL-Muftiate was educated in Turkey and trained under a Turkish imam (Expert Lithuanian Tatar 5; Muftiate.lt). Moreover, at the entrance to the Kaunas Mosque, there is a *TİKA* sign, a Turkish symbol on the wall, to express gratitude for the renovation of the mosque (Expert Tatar 1 2024). Thus, the aforementioned aspects facilitate the establishment of contacts and create conditions for closer cooperation with Turkey.

According to Expert Tatar 1 (2024), a Mufti is also responsible for providing translations of religious publications from Turkish to Lithuanian. “The Mufti maintains contact with the Diyanet, and we [the most active members of the Muslim community in Kaunas and Vilnius] even had an excursion to Diyanet”, says the expert. The Tatar revealed that during the tour they ordered several Turkish religious publications to be translated into Lithuanian, such as *Mokinamės skaityti Koraną* and *Korano kursų praktinių užduočių knyga* (both mentioned above), which were published in 2023 and reached Kaunas Mosque in 2024.

The CMRCL-Muftiate communication with Turkey was probably strengthened by the renovation of Lithuanian mosques and *musallas*, as the country’s Muslims needed financial support. This led to cooperation and support through various projects (Expert Tatar 1 2024; Expert Lithuanian Tatar 5 2025). But do they have any effect on the customs and religious life of Lithuanian Muslims? The Tatar expert (2024) argues that projects promote cultural dialogue and union. As this person stated, Turks had previously mentioned the importance of unity and communication (ibid.). Does this strengthen religious life? According to the collected interview material, it promotes knowledge, tolerance and appreciation of Turkey as a country and the combination of the Muslim

community not on the basis of nationality or race but on the basis of religious background (Expert Tatar 1 2024; Converts 2 & 3 2024).

Another part of the Lithuanian Muslim community and those of its members who belong to the LMSDC-Muftiate hold controversial views on such activities, indicating that the Lithuanian Muslim network is divided (Lithuanian Tatar Expert 4, 2024; Lithuanian Tatar Expert 6, 2025). At the same time, the CMRCL-Muftiate is not supported by some indigenous Tatars and converts due to its close relations with Turkey and certain expressions of support for its current policy.

Although the translation and distribution of Turkish religious literature in various foreign languages is one of the political tendencies in Turkey, the content of those texts does not contain any information about Turkey itself, its history, or its political developments. This article is not intended to address the content and internal structure of the translated books; however, it is important to mention that the texts focus on religious matters such as the correct performance of prayers, rituals before prayer, etc. Thus, although the translation of Turkish religious literature is one of Turkey's foreign policy strategies, it does not publicly declare its political ambitions in the content of religious publications. Although, of course, usually on the front and back pages of each book, the name Diyanet can be mentioned several times.

Most of the interviewed Lithuanian Muslims emphasised that they are not interested in politics and, therefore, expressed indifference toward any political views or ideologies the Turkish side might disseminate through the translation of religious publications (Converts 1 & 2 2024; Expert Lithuanian Tatar 4 2024; Expert Tatar 1 2024).

Conclusions

The ethnic and cultural identity of the Lithuanian Muslim community is multifaceted and complex, with overlapping elements. The country's permanent Muslims, the Tatars and converts, are partially influenced by, or may be influenced by, translations of Turkish religious literature in various aspects. For Lithuanian Tatars, the most relevant forms of effect are through the historical as well as linguistic dimensions. Meanwhile, the religious or spiritual factor

is more applicable to converts. However, Turkish cultural elements can affect both Muslim groups, some members consciously and others not.

It turned out that most ordinary members of the Muslim community are not interested in political trends and, therefore, do not find it significant that translations of religious literature can be one of the strategies of Turkish politics. Although the two highest religious institutions, Muftiates, operating in Lithuania have disagreements, do not communicate and assess each other's activities in a controversial manner, the CMRCL-Muftiate publicly announces its cooperation with Turkey, and is often supported either financially or through works and items such as religious publications and their translations. Thus, despite ignoring the political aspect, the economic basis of the community (if not the whole, then certainly at least part of it) is obviously dependent on Turkey.

To summarise, Turkish literature has thus far made only a marginal contribution to the religious life and formation of the cultural identity of the Lithuanian Muslim community. Converts, especially those who are newly converted, are drawn to various available religious texts, as they are still in the process of shaping their worldview and identity. Therefore, their values and approaches can be affected by such literature as is distributed in the mosque.

Nevertheless, the increasing presence of Turkish elements in the country is gradually shaping positive attitudes towards Turks and Turkey, assigning them a role as supporters, particularly in financial matters. This affects both the Muslim groups investigated in this study, with some individuals being aware and recognising the effect and others not or experiencing it unconsciously. Moreover, this investigation revealed that translations of Islam-related Turkish texts into Lithuanian contribute to strengthening the religious lives of individual Muslim community members, but does not currently play a significant role in those religious lives.

Notes

¹ In this article, the term Turkish is deliberately used when referring specifically to the Republic of Turkey, its citizens or cultural elements directly related to it. In cases where broader ethno-linguistic or historical connections are implied, the word Turkic is considered a more accurate term. Both concepts used in the text also reflect the terminology found in academic research, interviews and community discourse.

² In his studies, conducted in Lithuanian, Vytis Čiubrinskas has mainly used the concept of *identitetas*. There is a difference in expressing the same concept in another word in Lithuanian, as Savoniakaitė uses the term *tapatybė*. *Identitetas* is classified as an international word, while *tapatybė* and *tapatumas* are Lithuanian equivalents.

³ Spaces that are mainly used for prayer in Islam.

⁴ In Kaunas Mosque, men pray on the ground floor and women on the upper floor.

⁵ Although this is not true. Initially, the functions of the imam were performed only by Lithuanian Tatars, but after the restoration of Lithuania's independence and the establishment of the Turkish Embassy, these functions were sometimes performed by immigrants, including Turks.

⁶ Iftar is a dinner eaten during the month of Ramadan, a common custom in Islamic culture.

⁷ Please note that the Islamic Centre and the Islamic Culture and Education Centre are separate public institutions in Lithuania. The head of the Islamic Culture and Education Centre is Aleksandras Beganskas, the new Islamic Centre is led by Paulius Bergaudas.

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