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Is There Room for New Mosques in Belgian Cities? An Actor–Network Theory Approach

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Abstract

This article examines whether, and under what conditions, there is room for new mosques in Belgian cities by analyzing how media controversies around mosque projects are assembled. We study a corpus of press articles (2014–2024) using a two-step approach: First, keyword mapping identifies dominant discursive patterns across six themes (mobility, legality, size and visibility, social cohesion and integration, security and extremism, financing). Second, argument coding links lexical signals to public modes of judgment through actor–network theory (ANT) and controversy registers. Applied to five case studies across Flanders, Wallonia, and the Brussels-Capital Region, this framework offers comparative depth. The results show that identity and security controversies frequently outweigh strict urban planning controversies; neutral planning criteria (e.g., traffic congestion, permit compliance) are often recoded as symbolic markers of alterity. Regional contrasts provide nuance to this pattern: in Flanders, politicization through security/identity is salient; in Wallonia, debates emphasize size, form, and spatial integration; in Brussels-Capital, technico-legal compliance intertwines with aesthetic visibility. Media operate as boundary objects that hierarchize registers and amplify controversies. We conclude that mosques are treated less as ordinary urban infrastructure than as contested symbols of belonging and visibility. Moving toward negotiated pluralism requires institutional mechanisms that ensure transparency, equal treatment, local anchoring, and symbolic requalification.

Keywords: mosque project; mosque in Belgium; controversy registers; media discourse; urban planning; actor–network theory; Islam in Europe; racialization; symbolic visibility

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1. Introduction

The creation of mosques in Europe reflects the complex relationships between migration dynamics, social integration, and cultural diversity. As both places of worship and community hubs, mosques symbolize the Muslim presence and contribute to the redefinition of public space and representations of national identity [1,2]. Since the 1960s, their development has accompanied the permanent settlement of Muslim populations resulting from postcolonial migration and labor migration. From a historical perspective, the establishment of mosques in Europe was initially characterized by spatial discretion. The first Muslim places of worship were established in existing buildings—such as warehouses, garages, commercial premises, or anonymous ground floors—based on strictly functional

considerations rather than explicit architectural recognition [3–5]. This configuration reflected a form of conditional tolerance, in which religious practice was accepted as long as it remained inconspicuous in the urban space.

With the residential stabilization of Muslim populations and the emergence of generations raised in Europe, these spaces have gradually evolved into facilities with a broader purpose. Mosques are now becoming multifunctional community facilities, incorporating educational, social, and cultural uses, and creating new demands in terms of space, capacity, and urban visibility [6,7]. This evolution is accompanied by specific architectural challenges: in the absence of a stable reference point for a so-called "European" mosque, the built environment becomes a place of symbolic negotiation, oscillating between discretion and visibility [8]. Architecture thus appears as a medium through which issues of recognition, territorial legitimacy, and urban governance crystallize. This transformation has taken place in a political and media context marked by several major attacks in Europe (Madrid in 2004, London in 2005, Paris in 2015, and Brussels in 2016), which have contributed to reconfiguring public debates around Islam. Without being directly determinative, these events have reinforced the discursive associations between religion, security, and social cohesion, making mosque projects objects of controversy that go far beyond urban planning considerations alone. As a result, their location and visibility raise major political, cultural, and symbolic issues, revealing, in many European contexts, latent tensions around dominant aesthetic, religious, and identity norms [9,10].

Opposition to mosque projects is part of a climate of widespread suspicion of Islam, often perceived as foreign, homogeneous, and incompatible with European values [11,12]. The sometimes-virulent controversies mobilize a variety of arguments that may conceal deeper fears linked to the symbolic transformation of territories—inadequate infrastructure, risks of radicalization, and heritage preservation [13]. The 2009 Swiss referendum against minarets and the German notion of "Überfremdung" (foreign invasion) illustrate this logic of defending national public spaces perceived as threatened [14]. Mosques, including the oldest ones that have long been part of the urban landscape, are not spared. As Allen [15] demonstrates, controversies are not confined to new projects; long-established mosques within the urban fabric are also targets of hostilities, in the form of graffiti, arson, administrative pressure, or neighborhood mobilizations. These attacks, often exacerbated in post-attack periods, form part of structural and normalized Islamophobia. Jonker [16] describes these situations as "trigger events", insofar as they act as emotional catalysts, symbolically linking all Muslims to violent acts and transforming the mosque into an ideological support for collective fears. Allievi [17] points out that these tensions go beyond the religious framework to become rooted in territorial and symbolic struggles linked to recognition in the public space.

Chris Allen [18] deepens this reading by conceiving Islamophobia as a phenomenon structurally linked to racism. He shows that it is not based solely on physical characteristics but also on social processes that assign Islam to an identity perceived as fixed, foreign, and incompatible with dominant norms. The controversies surrounding mosques illustrate this mechanism: minarets, domes, and Islamic architecture become objects of rejection as markers of "Islamicness", regardless of the reality of the projects. Allen identifies three dimensions common to racism and Islamophobia: a different ideology, social prejudice, and exclusionary practices. The refusal to build new mosques, often justified by technical considerations, reveals a desire to contain Muslim visibility in urban space.

In Belgium, the official recognition of Islam in 1974 was a major institutional milestone. Nevertheless, this recognition has not led to the immediate or harmonious integration of Muslim places of worship into the urban landscape. For several decades, most mosques were established in existing buildings (former warehouses, mansions, or industrial

premises), often located on the margins of urban areas and characterized by low visibility in the public space [19]. From the 2000s onwards, the proliferation of projects aimed at transforming these places or constructing more visible and architectural mosques gradually reignited the controversy. These projects have sparked recurring opposition, particularly in dense or politically sensitive urban contexts, where issues of religious visibility, land use planning, and social cohesion intersect [20].

These dynamics are part of a complex institutional and political framework, marked by the close link between local urban planning powers, electoral issues, and national debates on Islam and immigration. Although Islam has enjoyed official recognition for several decades, new mosque construction projects continue to face various forms of resistance.

Public discourse frequently contrasts an integrated, institutionalized "Islam of Belgium" with an "Islam of origins" perceived as communitarian or radical [21,22]. This dichotomy fuels a conditional tolerance of Muslim visibility: acceptable as long as it remains discreet; controversial as soon as it is displayed or claims a place in urban space. Local authorities, caught between security requirements, electoral pressures, and bureaucratic inertia, sometimes play an active or passive role in marginalizing these initiatives [23]. In this context, the mosque must be thought of as a "border object", where religious, political, and territorial issues are articulated. Following the actor–network theory [24,25], we consider mosques not just as buildings of worship, but as products of interactions between human and non-human actors: elected politicians, local residents, associations, the media, urban planning regulations, planning permits, zoning regulations, and building materials. These elements, far from being neutral, steer controversies, shape margins of action, and reflect power relationships. The non-human actors are themselves produced, chosen, or imposed by human beings according to social, cultural, or political agendas. Planning permits, for example, act as an instrument of legitimization or exclusion, materializing tensions between dominant norms and community aspirations.

The media play a central role in this interplay. Through their framing power, they select events and discourses and contribute to the social amplification of controversies [26–30]. While the literature on media representations of Islam is abundant [31–35], few studies have looked specifically at the media coverage of planning application projects for mosques. Yet, these moments surround a revealing tension in the relationship between institutions, minorities, and public space.

The main objective of this research is to analyze how Belgian media coverage contributes to the construction of controversies surrounding mosque construction projects, particularly in the context of planning permission applications. By putting these places of worship at the center of the analysis, this study pursues three complementary objectives: (1) to identify the dominant discursive registers mobilized by the press in its coverage of mosque projects; (2) to analyze how these arguments are embedded in broader interpretative frameworks related to identity, security, and religious otherness; and (3) to compare these discursive dynamics between the different regions of Belgium (Flanders, Wallonia, and the Brussels-Capital Region) to highlight territorial variations in the controversy. On this basis, the article focuses on the following research questions: how do the Belgian media frame mosque projects in the context of urban planning permit procedures; what types of arguments and registers of controversy are used to legitimize or delegitimize these projects in the media; and how do these frames and registers vary according to regional and institutional contexts in Belgium?

To achieve these objectives, this study relies on a qualitative analysis of a corpus of press articles on several emblematic cases. The approach combines a textometric analysis of keywords, in-depth argumentative coding, and an interpretive reading based on actor–network theory and controversy registers. This approach makes it possible to examine the

mechanisms of event selection, media framing, and the legitimization or delegitimization of mosque projects, highlighting the logic of conflictual visibility that structures their media coverage.

2. Materials and Methods

To analyze the media coverage of planning permit applications for the construction or conversion of mosques in Belgium, we adopt a qualitative approach based on content analysis of press articles. This methodology makes it possible to identify the main themes addressed, the arguments put forward, and the discursive strategies implemented by the written press, to structure them into analytical categories.

Press articles were collected using the Europresse database [36], which provides access to the archives of numerous Belgian newspapers, both French- and Dutch-speaking. The study covered all articles published between 2014 and 2024 corresponding to the selected keywords, without prior sampling. The articles identified thus constitute an exhaustive corpus for this period. The choice of a ten-year time frame addresses an analytical objective aimed at observing the continuities and transformations in the media coverage of mosque construction or renovation projects over the medium term. This period includes several significant socio-political events, notably, the attacks in Paris (2015) and Brussels (2016), as well as various electoral cycles in Belgium (federal, regional, and European elections in 2014, 2019, and 2024, and local elections in 2018 and 2024). These events are considered contextual factors likely to intensify media coverage and the politicization of debates relating to Islam, public space, and Muslim places of worship. However, they do not constitute selection criteria, but rather enable an analysis of possible shifts, continuities, or recompositions in the discursive registers mobilized by the press. The search on Europresse was carried out using the following keywords: '*mosque*' or '*mosque construction*' or '*mosque transformation*' or '*planning permission*' or '*permit refusal*' or '*permit acceptance*'. The research was carried out in French and Dutch to guarantee the representativeness of the country's two main linguistic communities.

Based on these articles, the mosques were initially classified according to their location using the El Boujjoufi et al. [37] database. The classification was based on the urban fabric: dense or peri-urban. An area was considered dense when the population ratio exceeded 50 inhabitants per hectare, and peri-urban when it was below this figure. The data on the population and surface area of the statistical areas came from Statbel [38].

The analysis was based on a two-part complementary approach, combining keyword textometry and argumentative coding. In the first part, we quantified the dominant concepts based on a systematic reading of press articles, in accordance with textometric approaches and discursive regularity detection [31,39], recommended for objectifying recurring patterns [40]. This approach is based on lexical regularities observed in the corpus and their recurrence across the cases studied. The list of concepts thus compiled is not intended to be exhaustive, but rather constitutes an analytical tool designed to capture the main dimensions around which the controversies revolve. Keyword analysis is a first exploratory step in identifying discursive regularities and points of crystallization in the controversies. On this basis, the keywords were grouped into coherent thematic categories corresponding to sets of recurring issues in the media debates. This thematic framework is based on an inductive, qualitative content analysis. The categories emerged from systematic and iterative readings of the press corpus, and were then gradually stabilized and applied consistently to the entire dataset [41]. This process of thematic structuring led to the definition of six thematic categories, reflecting the main argumentative registers observed in the corpus: (1) mobility, (2) legality, (3) size and visibility, (4) social cohesion and integration, (5) security and extremism, and (6) financing. For each mosque, we counted

the occurrences of the selected terms (actual presence only) and then aggregated the results by region (Flanders, Wallonia, Brussels-Capital).

To avoid lexical overrepresentation related to the study's subject matter, strictly religious lexemes (e.g., Islam, prayer, mosque, imam, Ramadan, prayer space, believer) were excluded from the textometric analysis. Their high frequency, which was to be expected in a corpus focused on mosque projects, risked obscuring the legal, urban, political, and social dimensions raised in media controversies [42]. However, this exclusion only concerns the exploratory lexical phase. Religious and identity dimensions are fully integrated into subsequent analyses, where associations between Islam, security, visibility, and extremism are examined based on the discursive context and the arguments put forward. The aim is therefore not to neutralize the religious dimension, but to analyze its effects through registers of justification and controversy, rather than solely through the frequency of religious terms.

The second part of the analysis consists of a detailed argumentative coding of the articles, aimed at structuring the information and drawing conclusions from the categories identified during the textometric phase (mobility, legality, size and visibility, cohesion and integration, security and extremism, financing). Each article was systematically examined to identify the arguments used in media controversies, taking into account their formulation, context of utterance, discursive function, and recurrence within the corpus. The coding was carried out by a single author, in accordance with qualitative interpretative approaches where analytical consistency takes precedence over standardization between coders [43]. To enhance the reliability of the process, the coding scheme was developed iteratively, through systematic back-and-forth between the corpus, the analytical categories, and the cases studied. Cross-checks were carried out at different stages of the analysis within the team of authors, focusing on the consistency of interpretations, the application of classification criteria, and the stability of results.

The corpus includes articles from the French- and Dutch-language press. All translations, analytical reading, and coding operations were carried out by the same author. In order to preserve semantic and discursive nuances, the articles were analyzed in their original language throughout the coding process. Translation was only used for analytical synthesis and presentation of results, and not as the main basis for analysis. Particular attention was paid to polysemous terms, idiomatic expressions, and discursive registers specific to each language. When potential ambiguities arose, the original formulations were retained and interpreted in their specific media and political context. No cases of loss of meaning likely to affect the analytical interpretation were identified.

This analytical framework guided the selection of five case studies, constituting the third part of the methodological approach. This selection extends a cross-sectional analysis of 25 media-covered projects (2014–2024) through targeted qualitative research. The selection was not based on statistical representativeness, but rather on a cross-sectional analysis of the arguments used in Belgian mosque projects reported in the press. This analysis identified situations that were particularly rich in terms of discourse, characterized by the simultaneous use of several types of arguments (urban planning, environmental, social, political, financial, and legal). The choice of cases thus aims to ensure analytical variation at several levels. Territorially, it covers the three regions of the country (Wallonia, Brussels-Capital Region, and Flanders); urbanistically, it includes contrasting contexts, ranging from dense urban centers to peri-urban areas; and finally, socio-communally, it takes into account the diversity of the origins of the Muslim communities concerned, mainly Moroccan and Turkish. The cases selected were chosen to cover all the areas identified, while illustrating different urban, administrative, and legal trajectories (permits granted, refused, or subject to appeal; new construction or conversion). The regional distribution of the case studies reflects the empirical distribution of the projects covered by the me-

dia, with a higher concentration in Wallonia and Flanders than in the Brussels-Capital Region. Despite a smaller number of projects identified, the latter has specific urban and regulatory characteristics linked to its high density, justifying the targeted selection of a case that summarizes the main discursive registers observed. Thus, the five case studies selected constitute a set of analytically relevant contrasting cases, allowing for an in-depth examination of the diversity of media controversies surrounding mosque projects and their articulation in different territorial and institutional contexts.

In terms of interpretation, we used Heinich's [44] grid of controversy registers to link the arguments put forward for established modes of judgment in the public sphere. Of the sixteen registers proposed by Heinich, ten were selected—functional, legal, aesthetic, aesthesic, civic, domestic, ethical, epistemic, reputational, and hermeneutic—because they cover all arguments observed in the corpus and constitute an established and operational toolkit. These registers were matched with the six themes (mobility, legality, size and visibility, cohesion and integration, security and extremism, financing). Each theme activates a main register, supported by one or more secondary supports that specify the nature of the evidence mobilized. This grid (1) operationalizes the transition from simple word and argument counting to the analysis of evidence (conformity, utility, form, morality, proof) that structures controversies; (2) makes it possible to compare regional profiles without moralizing them, by showing how combinations of registers vary; and (3) is linked to the actor–network theory [24,25], which makes it possible to track the materialization of evidence in intermediate objects (mobility plans, urban planning notices, facade images, petitions, budgets, procedural documents) and to analyze the sequences (problematization, interest, enrollment, stabilization). The articulation of these two frameworks ensures the transition from lexical/argumentative signals to public justifications and socio-technical processes, making the continuities between discursive controversies and action mechanisms traceable.

3. Results

The final corpus includes 387 articles, 192 from the Dutch language press and 195 from the French language press. This relatively balanced distribution allows for a comparative analysis of media discourse according to linguistic and regional context. The examination of the distribution of publications, according to the orientations proposed by Billoud [45], Cools [46], and Lentzen [47], as illustrated in Table 1, reveals a predominance of newspapers classified as center and center-right, which represent more than 75% of the total. This distribution does not result from a prior methodological choice but reflects the effective structure of the press that covered mosque projects during the period studied. The most represented press groups are Mediahuis (28.7%), with newspapers such as *De Standaard*, *Het Nieuwsblad*, *Gazet van Antwerpen*, and *Het Belang van Limburg*, as well as *Sudpresse* (27.9%), including *La Capitale*, *La Meuse*, and *La Nouvelle Gazette*. DPG Media (*Het Laatste Nieuws*, 18.1%) and IPM Group (*La Dernière Heure*, *La Libre Belgique*, 15.8%) are also significant groups. Finally, Rossel (*Le Soir*, 5.9%) and titles such as De Morgen and *Le Vif/L'Express* provide a diversity of perspectives. This diversity of sources makes it possible to analyze how the issue of building permits for mosques is treated in different media, editorial, and regional contexts. This asymmetry is an empirical finding in its own right, revealing the media arenas in which controversies surrounding mosque projects are mainly constructed, relayed, and amplified. From this perspective, press articles are considered as empirical material used to analyze the controversy justification, dominant framings, and discursive power relations at work in the media coverage of mosque projects. The predominance of certain types of media thus contributes to structuring the nature of the controversies observed.

Table 1. Press article classification by press group and editorial orientation.

Newspaper	No. of Articles	Press Group	No. of Articles	%	Editorial Orientations
Belga News Agency	5	Belga Press	5	1.3	Neutral
La Dernière Heure	35	IPM Group	61	15.8	Centre-right
L'Avenir	18				Centre
La Libre Belgique	8				Centre-right
La Capitale	26	Sudpresse	108	27.9	Centre
La Meuse	27				Centre
La Nouvelle Gazette	25				Centre
La Province	4				Centre
Nord Éclair	3				Centre
Sud Presse	7				Centre
Sudinfo.be	16				Centre
Het Laatste Nieuw	67	DPG Media	70	18.1	Centre-right
De Morgen	3				Centre-left
De Standaard	15	Mediahuis	111	28.7	Centre-right
Gazet van Antwerpen	7				Centre-right
Het Belang van Limburg	16				Centre-right
Het Nieuwsblad	73				Centre
Le Soir	21	Rossel	23	5.9	Centre-left
Metro	2				Neutral
Le Vif/L'Express	3	Roularta	9	2.3	Centre-left
Krant van West Vlaanderen	6				Centre-right
			387		

These articles were selected with 25 mosque projects spread across the three regions: 4 in Brussels, 10 in Flanders, and 11 in Wallonia. The articles were distributed as follows: 52 in Brussels, 191 in Flanders, and 144 in Wallonia, as detailed in Table 2.

The analysis of the 25 cases covered by the press shows that 8 are related to projects located in dense urban areas, versus 17 in peri-urban areas. The examination of these cases, according to the type of urban fabric (dense or peri-urban) and cross-referenced with several key variables (Table 3), highlights a predominance of refusals in dense areas (5 out of 8 projects) compared to peri-urban areas (7 out of 17 projects). Of all applications, 13 permits were approved, and 12 were refused. The regional distribution reveals a more marked concentration of projects in Wallonia (11) and Flanders (10), and a more limited number of applications (4) in Brussels-Capital. Of the 25 cases involving mosques, 18 concern changes in location for existing mosque structures, including 4 located in dense urban areas and 14 in peri-urban areas. In terms of the project type, conversions of existing buildings (12) are more common than new constructions (10) and extensions (3). Applications to build new mosques in new areas are in the majority (20), unlike the renovation of existing mosques (5). Of the 25 cases, Moroccan mosques (15) outnumber Turkish mosques (9) or mosques from other communities (1), reflecting the demographic composition of Muslim communities in Belgium [48].

Table 2. Number of articles per mosque and location.

Region	Mosque Location	No. of Articles per Mosque Project	No. of Articles per Region	% per Region	% per Total
Brussels Capital	Jette	20	52	38	5
	Haren (Brussels)	19		37	5
	Ganshoren	8		15	2
	Berchem-Sainte-Agathe	5		10	1
Wallonia	Court-Saint-Étienne	28	144	19	7
	La Louvière	24		17	6
	Charleroi	17		12	4
	Liège	17		12	4
	Namur	16		11	4
	Fléron	11		8	3
	Nivelles	8		6	2
	Hensies	7		5	2
	Liège	6		4	2
	Namur	5		3	1
	Malmedy	5		3	1
Flanders	Hasselt	28	191	15	7
	Denderleeuw	28		15	7
	Kortrijk	28		15	7
	Halle	20		10	5
	Aalst	19		10	5
	Zelzate	18		9	5
	Ghent	16		8	4
	Lokeren	14		7	4
	Pelt	13		7	3
	Antwerp	7		4	2

Table 3. Mosques analyzed by urban fabric.

	Urban Fabric		Total
	Dense Urban	Peri-Urban	
Brussels-Capital	2	2	4
Flanders	5	5	10
Wallonia	1	10	11
New construction	3	7	10
Transformation of ex. building	3	9	12
Extension of ex. building	2	1	3
Creation of a new mosque	4	16	20
Renovation of existing mosque	4	1	5
Transfer of existing mosque	4	14	18
Approved	3	10	13
Refused	5	7	12
Moroccan	5	10	15
Turkish	3	6	9
Other	1	0	1

This description of the empirical distribution of projects and decisions according to several contextual dimensions should not be interpreted as a causal analysis.

1. **Keyword analysis**

The analysis of keyword occurrences in media coverage of mosque projects grouped them into six thematic categories: mobility, legality, size and visibility, social cohesion and integration, security and extremism, and financing (see Table 4). Nationally, the hierarchy is clear: social cohesion and integration dominates (40.0%), followed by legality (27.4%), mobility (12.2%), and size and visibility (10.9%), while security and extremism (5.4%) and financing (4.1%) remain marginal. This structure is reflected in the most prominent frequencies: the theme of social cohesion and integration is based on "*community*" (339 occurrences), "*neighbors*" (333), and "*Muslims*" (302); legality crystallizes around "*appeals*" (271), "*building permits*" (192), "*refusal*" (163), and "*opposition*" (114). The mobility and size and visibility registers were selected with, respectively, "*mobility*" (199) and "*traffic*" (86), as well as with "*large mosque*" (99), "*minaret*" (55), and "*megaproject*" (29).

Table 4. Classification of keywords by category and by region.

		Flanders				Wallonia				Brussels-Capital	
Category	**Nationwide %**	**%**	**Keyword**	**Freq.**	**%**	**Keyword**	**Freq.**	**%**	**Keyword**	**Freq.**
Mobility	12.2	13.3	mobility	111	10.1	mobility	74	14.1	mobility	14
			traffic	75		parking	25		parking	8
			parking space	18		traffic	10		car	4
			noise	18		car	8		parking	2
			noise pollution	13		congestion	5		flow	2
			car	9		noise pollution	6		traffic	1
			parking	8		noise	4		noise	7
			flow	8					noise pollution	4
			traffic jam	6						
Legality	27.4	22.2	appeal	169	34.5	refusal	134	30.9	urban planning	48
			opposition	95		urban planning	121		planning permit	11
			building permit	43		appeal	99		refusal	9
			planning permit	39		planning permission	39		negative opinion	7
			urban planning	23		opposition	16		architecture	3
			refusal	20		negative opinion	11		waterproofing	3
			negative opinion	15		construction project	10		appeal	3
			opposition	13		refusal of permit	6		opposition	3
			criticism	12		permit granted	5		opposition to project	3
			professional procedure	7		criticism	5		easement	2
			construction project	6		risk of flooding	4			
			residential neighborhood	2		water management	2			
			appeal procedure	1						

Table 4. *Cont.*

		Flanders			Wallonia			Brussels-Capital		
Category	**Nationwide %**	**%**	**Keyword**	**Freq.**	**%**	**Keyword**	**Freq.**	**%**	**Keyword**	**Freq.**
Size & Visibility	10.9	9.7	big	95	9.3	big mosque	95	25.5	large	34
			minaret	55		inappropriate	6		large mosque	14
			mega-mosque	15		mega-mosque	6		facade	10
			inappropriate	12		building height	6		mega-mosque	8
			facade	9		big project	4		strange	4
			big mosque	4		unusual	3		building height	4
			mega-project	3		curious	1		bulky	2
			building height	2		noise	1			
Social cohesion & integration	40	44.5	neighbor	284	38.1	community	132	18.5	muslim	24
			community	205		muslim	130		faithful	20
			turkish	176		faithful	79		morocco	5
			muslim	148		morocco	61		neighbor	3
			muslim community	53		neighbor	46		community	2
			faithful	13		muslim community	25		turkish	1
			community center	9		turkish	20			
			morocco	4		foreign	3			
			turkey	2		turkey	3			
Security & Extremism	5.4	5.2	risk	20	6.3	pressure	20	3.0	police	4
			extreme	19		police	18		pressure	2
			radical	15		attack	10		radical	2
			danger	12		security	10		danger	1
			security	12		absolute	7			
			police	9		radicalism	6			
			attack	6		assassination attempt	4			
			radicalism	4		danger	4			
			fundamentalism	3		risk	3			
			defence	3						
			assassination attempt	2						
Funding	4.1	5.1	euros	37	1.8	costs	6	8.1	euros	15
			finance	15		sales	5		finance	4
			funds	14		budget	4		funds	4
			budget	12		financing	3		acquisition	1
			cost	9		acquisition	3			
			finance	8		euros	3			
			acquisition	4						
			kitty	3						

Regional profiles reveal marked differences. In Flanders, social cohesion and integration (44.5%) ranks ahead of legality (22.2%) and mobility (13.3%); the lexicon emphasizes social proximity (neighbor, community) and ethnocultural designations (Turkish, Moroccan, Muslim), while legality refers to ordinary procedures (appeal, opposition, planning/building permit). In Wallonia, the hierarchy is more balanced with social cohesion and integration at 38.1% and legality at 34.5%), followed by mobility (10.1%) and size and visibility (9.3%); legality is highly decision-oriented (refusal, appeal, urban planning, planning permission), and the security and extremism register reaches its highest relative level (6.3%). The Brussels-Capital Region stands out for its technical–administrative and morphological framework: legality (30.9%) comes out on top, ahead of size and visibility

(25.5%), social cohesion and integration (18.5%), and mobility (14.1%). The legal vocabulary relates to regulatory engineering (urban planning, planning permit, easement, waterproofing), emphasizing the built environment (large/large mosque, facade, bulky, strange). Financing is more prominent (8.1%), while security and extremism remain minimal (3.0%).

This highlights three regional orientations, following Heinich's categories. In Flanders, the civic register is backed by the functional and legal procedural register; in Wallonia, by the legal decision-making and civic register; and in Brussels-Capital, by the technical–legal and aesthetic register, with an increased presence of the economic register. These regional differences are not solely a matter of lexical or thematic variations but may reflect different institutional, political, and urban configurations. Local governance regimes, regional political cultures, the demographic position of Muslim populations, and the regulatory and urban planning frameworks specific to each region all contribute to structuring the controversy registers mobilized in the press. From this perspective, it seems essential to analyze the underlying arguments put forward in the press, beyond simply looking at the frequency of keywords. The following section focuses on recurring reasons for opposition to mosque projects explicitly reported in the press. The explanatory factors associated with these regional dynamics will be explored in greater depth in Section 4, based in particular on a detailed analysis of five case studies based on verbatim excerpts from media coverage.

2. Arguments against mosque projects cited in the press

The analysis of the arguments observed in the press concerning the 25 mosque projects reveals concerns that vary according to the territorial context. These arguments can be understood through Heinich's evaluation registers, which structure forms of public justification, and are mobilized within the framework of actor–network theory, where they function as devices for the problematization, enlistment, and mobilization of heterogeneous allies (local residents, elected officials, parties, project leaders, media).

The most recurrent argument concerns mobility and parking problems, invoked in 21 cases. Although it is mainly functional in nature, the argument is often associated with traffic jams (17 cases), objectifying measurable technical challenges (traffic flow, capacity). This argument frames the project as a source of congestion, enlisting non-human actors (traffic plans, counts) to stabilize a "neutral" and socially acceptable opposition.

Resistance from local residents emerges in 19 cases, particularly in Wallonia (9) and Flanders (7), reflecting a domestic register (local attachment to "our backyard") coupled with a civic one (collective balance). This argument enlists local networks, where the mosque building is perceived as disrupting urban homogeneity. Similarly, the size and visibility of the project are mentioned in 15 cases, with an emphasis on the visual impact being more pronounced in Wallonia (8) than in Flanders (3) or Brussels (1). Falling within the aesthetic and aesthesic register, these concerns problematize morphological compatibility, mobilizing intermediate objects (images, plans, architectural sections) to challenge Islamic visibility in public space.

Incompatibility with the residential fabric appears in 11 cases, especially in Wallonia (6), mobilizing the domestic and civic register. Suspicions about the financing and autonomy of the project arise in nine cases, mainly in Wallonia (6), activating a domestic register (local vs. external anchoring) and a civic register (transparency, acceptability in public space), backed by the economic register (amounts, collection phases). Finally, in eight cases, the controversies turn explicitly political, particularly in Flanders (5), where right-wing nationalist and far-right parties mobilize civic and reputational registers to denounce the projects.

These dynamics illustrate regional variations rooted in local networks. In Flanders, politicization marks the debates: functional and legal arguments serve as vectors for a deeper identity-based opposition, where actors such as nationalist and identity-based

parties enlist allies through petitions or security-based rhetoric, portraying the mosque as a threat. In Wallonia, the emphasis on urban form (aesthetic and aesthesic registers) reflects symbolic regulation, where material objections mask implicit rejection, mobilizing networks to defuse tensions. In Brussels, controversies are more moderate, with a balance between functional and aesthesic considerations, favored by a demographic diversity that facilitates the inclusive recruitment and institutional recognition of pluralism.

These controversies concern not only mosques as religious infrastructures but also what they embody in the collective imagination: markers of Muslim visibility, objects of urban regulation, and surfaces onto which tensions related to otherness are projected. They crystallize forms of negotiation (explicit or implicit) around the place of Islam in the city. Thus, the mosque cannot be reduced to a simple religious building; it constitutes a border object enlisting heterogeneous networks (human and non-human actors) to negotiate contemporary conflicts related to the use, symbolism, and control of urban space. These general dynamics are explored in greater depth in the following case studies, which examine the arguments for rejection reported in the media and their verbatim transcripts to reveal the discursive strategies and alliances specific to each project.

3. Case studies: media coverage of arguments against the projects and verbatim excerpts

The analysis of five projects involving construction permits for mosques in Belgium, in the cities of Jette, Denderleeuw, Kortrijk, La Louvière, and Court-Saint-Étienne, provides insight into the discourse used in the press when covering local controversies. These cases illustrate both the recurrence of certain arguments and the variations specific to each territorial context. They were selected for their ability to highlight the diversity of local configurations, while offering concrete examples of media discourse. Examining verbatim excerpts from press articles provides a better understanding of the tone, linguistic registers, and argumentative strategies that structure these debates.

To account for these logics, we continue to apply Heinich's evaluation registers to the six recurring themes of media controversy: mobility (mainly functional register with aesthesic support), legality (legal with epistemic and functional support), size and visibility (aesthetic and aesthesic with hermeneutic support), cohesion and integration (civic and domestic with reputational and ethical support), security and extremism (civic, ethical, domestic, and epistemic), and financing (domestic, civic, and economic with epistemic, reputational, and legal support). These registers function as frameworks of legibility that structure public reception of projects and guide the admissibility of controversies in the public sphere.

Not all registers have the same scope or effectiveness. Functional (mobility) and legal (legality) frameworks are presented as "neutral" and socially acceptable. They bring together diverse allies around shared challenges (counts, plans, opinions, deadlines). Other frameworks based on aesthetic and aesthesic values (size, scale, signs), civic/domestic values ("living together in our community"), or ethical and epistemic values (security) tend to be more polarizing: their effectiveness depends less on the number of supporters than on the intensity of convictions and the cohesion of the mobilized core. In all cases, the arguments are not used in isolation. They are linked together and translated from one register to another to build a credible opposition.

Here, the press is considered both an empirical source (access to published statements) and a framing device. By prioritizing themes and selecting images, figures, and keywords, it amplifies certain registers, renders others invisible, and redefines the positions of enunciation (space given to developers, elected officials, residents). Registers are never mono-oriented. They can be appropriated, reformulated, or reversed by actors. Finally, the activation of registers varies according to urban configuration, social composition, and local migration histories, hence the value of a case study approach combining verbatim quotes

and register mapping. This dynamic reminds us that arguments are never used in isolation: they are part of a collective process of building controversy. Alone, we are never right, and we remain weak. It is by articulating common registers that opponents develop a real network. From this perspective, the mosque project itself becomes a player in the debate, on par with the press, which plays a central role here. This complex interaction between registers, actors, and media coverage highlights the importance of a detailed analysis of local controversies. Each of these registers can be activated in different ways depending on local dynamics, urban configuration, sociological composition, or even the specific migration history of a municipality. The analysis of specific cases, therefore, provides an understanding of how these registers combine, are prioritized, or compete with each other in particular situations. It also reveals how the press contributes to amplifying certain arguments, rendering others invisible, or sometimes giving more space to one actor at the expense of another. The five selected projects thus offer an excellent opportunity to understand how controversies arise and unfold in different regional contexts. Each case highlights a unique combination of discursive registers, while providing verbatim excerpts that offer a close-up view of the concrete forms taken by media debates on mosques.

The following section breaks down these six themes by showing how the arguments presented in the media are problematized, used for specific purposes, enlisted (by both opponents and supporters), and then mobilized, as well as how the verbatim excerpts contribute to stabilizing or reconfiguring alliances around the projects.

i. **Mobility**

Mobility is an important functional register, with which the acceptability of projects is framed by specific indicators (arrival and departure flows, parking, traffic, noise, accessibility by public transport) that can easily be converted into administrative grounds. The recurring argumentative sequence begins with a problematization that formulates an operational uncertainty and establishes it as a decisive criterion: "*lack of visibility on the management of mobility and parking spaces*" [49]. This problematization is based on the everyday experience of local residents, "*It's already very difficult to find a parking space. Where are we going to put the cars of the people who come?*" [50], and on capacity metrics that objectify the argument, "*134 spaces are not enough for the 500 or so worshippers, especially during Friday prayers*" [51]. In some sequences, the anticipation of a cumulative effect explicitly links parking, traffic, and nuisances: "*pressure on parking, traffic, and noise pollution will increase, even though these problems already exist*" [52].

Project leaders counter this framing by enlisting technical and administrative allies: "*I don't think this will cause any mobility problems*", specifying the temporality of use ("*occasional meetings, especially in the evening after school, to help children with their homework*"), off-street capacity ("*we have our own parking lot*"), and modal shift ("*many spaces [are] already available near the train station*", "*public transportation*", "*bicycles*"). This counter-framing can also be formalized with procedural evidence: "*A clear mobility study has been carried out. We are close to the train station, activities take place after 5 p.m., and visitors will be local residents*" [53,54]. At the same time, programmatic requalification aims to smooth out peaks and dilute the impact on the road network: facilities "*open to all*" (support from the civic register); "*We have organized numerous meetings to respond to the needs of young and old*". Meanwhile, they acknowledge a basis for concern: "*I expected this kind of reaction. Some are legitimate. [. . .] But the project is entirely appropriate*" [50]. Opposing groups say they have "*mobilized massively in opposition to the project*", sometimes linking mobility to considerations of local cohesion (support from civic and domestic registers) [55]. Conversely, other developers emphasize the mix of uses and a local breathing space, "*There is, of course room for prayer, but we also want to provide [. . .] a little breathing space*", highlighting spaces for homework assistance and activities for young people [52].

These materials highlight the structural reversibility of the functional register: the same variables (parking capacity, distance to a transport hub, weekly timing of peaks, and noise intensity) support opposing conclusions depending on the framing adopted. When the triptych (parking, traffic, and noise) links mobility to the aesthesic (for size and visibility) and civic/ethical (for safety) registers, the controversy widens, and mobilization goes beyond the technical dispute. Conversely, when the counter-framework is based on formalized evidence (studies, peak scenarios, modal shift strategies, clarification of schedules, and users), mobility becomes a vehicle for enlistment, stabilizing alliances around intermediate objects (counts, plans, thresholds). Even when participation in public consultations remains low, the "*impact [. . .] on local mobility*" is systematically reported [56]. Because it is simultaneously measurable (objectifying plausibility) and situated (embedded in everyday uses), mobility functions, overall, as a device of contested objectification: it problematizes (insufficiency, saturation, noise), enlists via technical solutions (studies, proximity to networks, schedules, dedicated parking), and then mobilizes when linked to aesthesic and civic/ethical registers, which explains its recurring weight in administrative outcomes.

ii. **Legality**

Legality is primarily a matter for the legal register. Projects are evaluated through the prism of urban planning law, procedures (applications, permits, notices), and appeals (administrative appeals, litigation). This register problematizes the object as a "question of law" and then serves as an instrument of action capable of slowing down or blocking implementation, even when the judicial outcome ultimately confirms the permit. In practice, it constitutes a strategic resource mobilized by local residents, politicians, and sometimes by the developers themselves, shifting the controversy to the judicial arena while exposing it to the public sphere.

The first case illustrates the procedural duration and symbolic burden of repeated refusals. After several negative decisions, a mosque project coordinator denounced indirect discrimination, referring to "*relentless persecution*": "*In this situation, any permit applicant would wonder whether they were the victim of a relentless campaign to deny them the desired permit. (. . .) This community has lived here for decades and will remain here, because this is where it is at home*" [57]. An appeal followed; despite objections from residents, the permit was confirmed the following year [58]. However, opponents continued their actions, further delaying the project until a final appeal was rejected by the competent court. The coordinator then insisted on compliance with procedures: "*It seemed to take a very long time, after years of field research and six years of legal proceedings. But we wanted to follow all the steps scrupulously, with respect and dialogue*". Final recognition was granted: "*It seems legitimate to me that a community that has been established in our municipality for a long time should ask for a decent place of worship*" [59]. Here, the legal aspect dominates, with epistemic support (procedural evidence).

A second case highlights the reversibility of the legal register: after the local granting of a permit, opponents supported by local residents file a provincial appeal [60]. The rhetoric combines functional grievances (urban planning compliance) and civic arguments (local interest). At the end of the litigation cycle, the specialized court rejects the complaint and definitively validates the project [61]. The same instrument (the appeal) is thus used, depending on the moment, to problematize (create uncertainty about the validity of the permit) or to stabilize (confirm its legitimacy).

A third case shows the procedural politicization of legality: after a favorable decision by a higher authority on an Islamic cultural center, the municipal authority immediately announced an appeal ("*The municipal council will appeal against the provincial decision*"). Within the coalition, a left-wing party denounces "*a pointless legal battle*" and accuses another actor of "*spreading fear with false stories*", while a nationalist right-wing party

justifies the appeal by fearing a "*pull effect*" and reclassifies the project as "*more a mosque than a cultural center*". At the same time, a far-right party, backed by thousands of signatures, wants the appeal to "*not be merely a formality*", while the promoting association considers the decision "*particularly regrettable*" and attributes it to Islamophobia promoted by the far right [62]. In this context, the legal system acts as a lever for mobilization by relying on civic (public cause) and reputational (reputation of the actors) support, with functional references to urban planning standards.

The dual function of appeals is clear. On the one hand, they constitute a legitimate tool for contestation, frequently backed by functional (urban planning compliance) and civic (general interest) arguments; on the other hand, they become an instrument of mobilization capable of delaying (or even discouraging) projects, regardless of their outcome. This duality can be explained by the place occupied by the legal register in the chain of argumentation: it raises issues (creating uncertainty about the validity of a permit), enlists (aligning actors around procedural objects: opinions, deadlines, decisions, rulings), and then mobilizes (when the cause is backed by civic, reputational, and functional support). Because it is both formalizable (files, decisions, case law) and situated (schedules, power relations), legality functions as a contested objectification mechanism whose impact is temporal (delays) and symbolic (publicization of controversies).

iii. **Size and visibility**

The controversy surrounding the size, scale, and visibility of mosque projects is primarily an aesthetic and sensory issue. The object is evaluated by its perceptual impact (volume, dome, minaret, skyline) and its compatibility with the local image of the building. When presented as technical considerations, these arguments occasionally activate functional support when "size" is read as capacity (surface area, number of spaces), hermeneutic arguments when it comes to interpreting signs (meaning of the dome/minaret), domestic arguments when "*living together*" in "*our community*" is invoked, and legal arguments when appeals are lodged.

The problem is typically framed in terms of disproportion and visual impact: a project is said to be "*disproportionate*" and asked to "*adapt [. . .] to the site*"; an elected official judged a mosque to be "*much too large for the land in question*" [50]; political authorities believe that there is "no longer any reason for this architectural element (reference to the minaret)" [63]. The perceptual experience of local residents is explicit: "*This project scares me. I no longer feel at home. I feel invaded. I completely reject this mosque and its minaret*". Conversely, others point to an immediate urban benefit: "*I don't see any problem with it. . . I'm delighted to see the old supermarket, which was an eyesore, disappear*" [64]. In a more controversial version, a far-right party describes the facility as a "*mega-mosque*" and a "*megalomaniac project*", quantifies its surface area ("*5201 square meters*") to attest to its disproportionate size, and denounces the "*visual pollution caused by the Islamic dome*", which it considers incompatible with the local landscape: "*[. . .] a city with a belfry and churches, but not a city of minarets and mosques*" [52]. Elsewhere, the argument of scale sums up the fear of a morphological mismatch: the center "*exceeds the local scale*" and is too "*ambitious*" [65].

These "*against*" frames are countered by a "*for*" counter-framing on two complementary levels. On the one hand, at the hermeneutic level, equating the signs "*It's symbolic, like church steeples!*" re-situates the dome/minaret within a grammar of urban landmarks. On the other hand, at the functional/urban level, programmatic reclassification can make size a capacity for use rather than pure volume: "*We have organized numerous meetings to respond to the needs of young and old*", "*the project has its place*" [50]; "*There is of course room for prayer, but we also want to give [. . .] a little space to breathe*", with spaces for homework assistance and activities for young people [52]. Reclassification is sometimes accompanied by morphological and heritage guarantees ("*there will be no extension either*"; "*The building, which is*

currently in ruins, would be renovated on the outside. That's a good thing, isn't it?") as well as a positioning of hospitality (domestic support): "*a place where people can meet, not just Muslims, but everyone*" [53]. In the same vein, supporters value the removal of a wasteland: "*I am delighted to see the disappearance of that eyesore that was the old supermarket*" [64]. Moreover, developers advocate for a cultural and educational center for all residents [66]. When the vertical sign is explicitly contested, the response emphasizes its symbolic legitimacy ("*like church steeples*") and the social utility of the spaces ("*It will prevent young people from hanging out on the streets*") [53].

This confrontation reveals a structuring reversibility of the aesthetic and aesthesic register: markers of disproportion ("*much too big*", "*5201 m²*", "*mega*", "*visual pollution*") and signs of rejection ("*no longer any reason to exist*") are countered with hermeneutic equivalence ("*like church steeples*"), urban redevelopment (replacement of a brownfield site, no extension, renovation of a dilapidated building), and mixed use. When visibility is linked to legal issues and leads to appeals ("*threat to the neighborhood*", proceedings to challenge the permit) [67], the aesthesic register prolongs the mobilization in the procedural arena. Conversely, enlistment is supported by translating size into useful capacity (socio-educational uses) and interpreting visibility as urban legibility (rehabilitation, continuity of footprint).

iv. **Social cohesion and integration**

The social cohesion and integration argument is mainly drawn on the civic and domestic registers. They invoke general interest and living together (cohesion, integration) and draw boundaries of proximity/anchoring between "*us*" and "*them*". Reputational (image of the neighborhood/association) and ethical (what is considered acceptable) arguments are also considered, with occasional legal (petitions, appeals, litigation) and aesthetic links (when cohesion is argued with signs perceived as identity markers).

The problematization of the opposing side is formulated as a risk of closure and a supposed threat to integration. Thus, a right-wing party denounces "community withdrawal" and describes the mosque project as "*the high point of the city*" [51]; it warns against "*a site totally dedicated to one community*" that could "*harm the integration*" of Muslims, claiming that the problems "*will only get worse*" [68]. In more maximalist rhetoric, a far-right party is waging a "*legal and political battle*", judging the project to be "*megalomaniacal*" and "*without popular support*". They draw a line of refusal, "*Yesterday there was no mosque, today there is no mosque, and tomorrow there must be no mosque*", and put forward more than 800 objections [67]. Elsewhere, cohesion is linked to markers of identity and the dreaded ghettoization. Mobilization takes the form of petitions (more than 1700 signatures), the distribution of petition forms, and local demonstrations, with a commitment to "*keep up the pressure*" and use "*all political and legal means*"; the line was reaffirmed in 2022: "*Such infrastructure would only encourage the Islamization and Frenchification of our community*" [53,69,70]. In this context, community leaders denounce decisions influenced by the far right and guided by its "*Islamophobia*" [54].

Project leaders used some arguments to enlist support in the name of openness and collective utility. One association insists, "*For three years, we have taken comments into account. This project has been designed in a true spirit of openness*", pointing out that "*in thirty years, we have never had the slightest problem with the neighborhood*". This highlights the urban and social benefits: the redevelopment of a commercial wasteland considered an "*eyesore*" and creation of "*beautiful buildings*", with "*three units [. . .] open to all for cultural activities*" [51,68]. In another case, the message is "*It's not just a mosque. We want to create a multipurpose venue, with spaces for prayer, but also for tutoring, youth activities, and premises open to neighborhood associations*", neighborhood concerns are acknowledged: "*The majority of neighbors are constructive and positive. We fully understand the concerns about parking and*

noise" [67]. On the civic side, an environmentalist party warns that the accumulation of obstacles can exacerbate "*misunderstanding, disappointment, feelings of injustice, and rejection*". The coordinator then reaffirms the integrative function of the facility, "*The mosque will revitalize the neighborhood, I'm sure of it!*", and the method, "*We have always advocated dialogue and transparency, and this seems to be paying off*" [71].

Taken together, these materials show a reversibility of the civic/domestic registers: the expressions of closure and distancing ("*community withdrawal*", "*totally dedicated site*", "*tomorrow there must be no mosque*", "*Islamization*", "*ghettoization*") are counterbalanced by statements of openness, local roots, and co-presence ("*true spirit of openness*", "*open to all*", academic support, activities for young people, community centers, redevelopment of a degraded site, dialogue, and transparency). When cohesion is linked to legal issues (petitions, appeals, litigation), it becomes a lever for mobilization, and when linked to concrete measures (multipurpose spaces, educational services, urban improvement), it supports enlistment. Overall, social cohesion functions as a disputed objectification mechanism: because it is both normative (civic values) and pragmatic (local solutions), it legitimizes opposing positions and has a lasting impact on the trajectory of projects.

v. **Security and extremism**

The arguments relating to security and the risk of extremism mainly concern the civic (protection of the community) and ethical (tolerable/intolerable) registers and are based on the domestic (the boundary between "*our backyard*" and the wider "*city outside*") and reputational (anticipated reputation of a place or group) registers. They also draw on the epistemic (rumors vs. evidence), legal (objections, demonstrations), and, when fear is linked to visible markers, aesthetic (perceptual effect of religious symbols) considerations.

The problematization stems from the anticipations of threats formulated in civic and ethical terms: "*It may start with a cultural center, but before we know it, it will be a mosque*". "*I have nothing against believers, but a mosque can also attract extremists*" [72]. It is frequently rooted in domestic narratives of localized insecurity, "*I already didn't dare come here with my children. . . I was attacked when I left a sandwich shop*" [54], which reclassifies the project as an aggravating factor in a context perceived as fragile. On an epistemic level, these suspicions circulate more as rumors than as demonstrations; on a reputational level, they project a pejorative image of the proposed location. The conflict then materializes in the legal sphere: a large number of objections (more than 800 in one case), and public demonstrations [73] reflect the transition from civic alert to formal action. When these concerns are backed up by visible markers (crowds, architectural signs), the aesthetic/aesthesic register intensifies the feeling of threat.

The counter-framing symmetrically mobilizes the same registers to normalize and open. On the epistemic level, an ordinary experience is set up as proof: "*I ran a chip shop here for years and never had any major problems with young people. When we showed them respect, they returned it*" [54]. The association rejects suspicion in the name of ethics and civics: "*We simply wanted a center to continue our cultural and sporting activities, to create links between residents, regardless of their origin*" [72]. Finally, the strategy emphasizes common access mechanisms that aim to build reputational credibility: "*We wanted to be an open center where everyone could enter. The library and meeting rooms were also to be used by residents, not just by the faithful*" [73].

The verbatim quotes reveal a systematic reversibility by register: the civic duty to alert (protect the community) is matched by a civic duty of openness (common spaces, shared access); the ethics of suspicion (risk of "extremism") is counterbalanced with ethics of inclusion (connecting "residents, regardless of their origin"); the domestic aspect of distancing ("our backyard" under threat) is counterbalanced with that of anchoring (neighborhood, local customs); negative reputation (anticipated stigmatization) is countered with

positive reputation (transparency, credibility); weak epistemic (rumors) is countered with well-founded epistemic (verifiable experiences and practices); finally, legal obstruction (objections, demonstrations) is countered with legal compliance (procedures followed, reasoned responses). Because it articulates both normative and situated values, security operates as a disputed objectification mechanism: the same grammar (civic, ethical, domestic, reputational, epistemic, legal, aesthetic) can be activated for or against the same project, as evidenced by the contradictory verbatim quotes in the corpus. Note that our study covers the period 2014–2024, which is marked by major socio-political events (the attacks in Paris and Brussels) that tightened security measures, increased the salience of suspicion and risk in public debate, and created a media environment in which mosques were more easily problematized as security concerns.

vi. **Financing**

The controversy surrounding the origin of funds primarily involves the domestic (local vs. foreign roots) and civic (transparency, admissibility in the public sphere) registers, backed by economic (amounts, collection phases) registers; tested on epistemic (evidence, traceability), engaging reputation (credibility of promoters), and touching on legal issues (statutes, subsidies, compliance); and standardized by ethics (independence, refusal of interference). Although the issue of financing is not one of the urban planning criteria for granting permits, it occupies a central place in the public arena, where it serves either as a guarantee of legitimacy or a vector of suspicion.

Empirically, several cases demonstrate the endogenous anchoring of resources. In one case, the mosque project coordinator insists, "*Not a one euro came from outside, nor from any state. All the money raised came from donations*" [74]. The economic (announced budget of approximately EUR 1.3–1.5 million) and epistemic (traceable declaration) aspects are thus aligned with the domestic (local financing) and civic (collective effort) aspects to stabilize a reputational image of reliability. Elsewhere, the strategy is progressive and explicit, "*We had to buy the land with donations from the faithful. We will now build the mosque in stages*", with an explicit refusal of outside help: "*It would be easy to accept funds from Saudi Arabia, but I don't want to. I am counting on the Muslim community in Belgium, but also on politicians and all Belgians*". This is followed by figures on the progress made ("*500,000 euros had already been collected*") and the expansion of campaigns via social media [50,55]. In a third case, independence was reinforced through an accepted legal/economic constraint: "*We do not receive any foreign funding, either now or in the past. And as long as we are not recognized, we do not even receive public subsidies*". "*Every euro comes from donations, contributions, and activities organized by the community*" [73]. Here, the absence of subsidies, as long as recognition is not achieved, is reclassified as an ethical norm of autonomy.

Analytically, the dynamic is due to reversibility by register. The same categories of value allow opposite conclusions to be drawn depending on the framing adopted: the domestic register can support protection ("*funds from here*") or suspicion ("*funds from elsewhere*"); civic, verifiable transparency or presumed opacity; economic, an indication of influence or proof of collective capacity; epistemic, rumors of "*interference*" or quantified and verifiable statements; reputational, stigma or enhanced credibility; legal, a controversial pretext (recognition, subsidies) or reminder of compliance; ethical, questioning of dependence or display of independence. It is precisely because it articulates these registers, and can change sign without changing grammar that funding functions as a device of contested objectification: even when projects are mainly based on local donations, the argument of "foreign interference" is regularly invoked, relegating the efforts of traceability, progressivity, and openness put forward by associations to the background.

4. Discussion

The analysis of controversies surrounding the development of mosques in Belgium shows that the controversy extends beyond the technical scope of urban planning to public arenas where values, trials, and alliances are being redefined. Each argument activates a main register and draws on support that allows it to move from one arena to another [44]. Mobility primarily falls within the functional register (traffic flow, parking, noise, accessibility), supported by aesthesic (perception of noise) and civic (promise of openness of use) arguments. Legality stems from the legal register (validity of the permit, appeals, litigation) with epistemic (documents, opinions, deadlines) and functional (urban planning compliance) support. Size and visibility mobilize the aesthetic and sensory registers (scale, skyline, signs), linked to the hermeneutic (interpretation of architectural signs) and sometimes domestic arguments. Social cohesion and integration are primarily linked to the civic (living together, access for all) and domestic (local roots) registers, relayed by reputation (project image) and ethics (acceptability standards). Security and extremism combines the civic (protection), ethical (tolerable/intolerable), domestic (neighborhood), and epistemic (rumors vs. evidence) registers, while financing combines the domestic (funds "*from here*"), civic (transparency), economic (amounts, phasing), epistemic (traceability), reputational, legal (statutes, subsidies), and ethical (independence) registers. This grammar sheds light on the shift observed: qualifiers such as "*pharaonic*", "*disproportionate*", and "*mega-mosque*" reflect an aesthesic problematization of size as an indicator of otherness, recoding urban criteria as symbolic markers. This is what Göle [9] and Allen [12,15] describe as the publicization of the visibility of Islam and its discursive racialization.

Actor–network theory helps unravel these sequences. The problematization identifies points of concern in the controversies (functional saturation; aesthetic/aesthesic visual shock; civic/domestic doubts about cohabitation; epistemic suspicion of interference; ethical risk of extremism). Interest materializes these concerns in intermediate objects: lack of mobility studies, surface and capacity metrics, images, plans and sections, media quotes, petitions and signature lists, budgets and phasing, procedural documents. It is at this stage that symmetry becomes decisive: we observe both an opposing enrollment (technical objections, framed as "*mega*", "*visual pollution*", "*withdrawal*", "*security*", and "*interference*", and the filing of objections, appeals, and litigation) and pro-project mobilization (stabilizing registrations: conclusive studies, brownfield site redevelopment, hermeneutic equivalences of the sign, "*like bell towers*", common access devices, fund traceability, procedural compliance).

When media coverage shifts toward legal issues (objections, appeals, litigation) or public reputation, mobilization tends to intensify; conversely, it stabilizes when technical, economic, or procedural details become sufficiently clear to reduce uncertainty. In this dynamic, the planning permit acts as an actant: it is, alternately, an instrument of legitimization (validation) and a resource for obstruction (delay, suspension), exactly as Callon [24] and Latour [25] have shown for other controversies. Used as an analytical framework, actor–network theory allows us to reconstruct the controversies surrounding mosque projects as chains of interactions involving a plurality of human and non-human actors. Recurring concerns (mobility, size and visibility, social cohabitation and integration, etc.) materialize in intermediate objects (architectural plans, petitions, mobility studies, permit applications) that contribute to the gradual enrollment of actors in coalitions favorable or opposed to the projects. The media, far from being mere relays, act as boundary objects, organizing the circulation of arguments, hierarchizing the registers of controversy, and crystallizing normative conflicts around the place of Islam in urban space.

Two non-exclusive configurations of opposition emerge. "Neutral" urban planning objections (functional and legal registers) easily attract allies, as they are based on evidence that can be addressed by administrations and technical experts (counts, plans, opinions).

Conversely, objections that target the significance of the mosque (aesthetic and aesthesic registers with hermeneutic support, supplemented by civic, domestic, ethical, and reputational registers) tend to polarize: the same visibility can be read either as urban legibility and landmarks, or as a signal of otherness; the same cohesion can be embodied (open spaces) or invoked for exclusion. Empirically, we observe a combined strategy: opening up the controversy through technical registers (functional, legal) and then hardening it through normative registers (civic/ethical, domestic, reputational), which corroborates Göle and Allen's analyses of the centrality of visibility and suspicion in European frameworks.

Regional variations are mainly due to the composition and sequencing of registers, without resorting to other categories. In Flanders, the functional entry point (mobility) frequently serves as a threshold to aesthetic and aesthesic (size, signs) registers, and then to civic and domestic ("*at home*") registers, before being converted into civic/ethical (security) and domestic/epistemic/reputational (suspicion linked to "external" funding) registers, with a legal extension (recourse). This dynamic is mainly driven by right-wing nationalists and far-right groups. In Wallonia, the focus remains more on the aesthetic and aesthesic (size/scale/integration) registers, supported by functional and legal considerations for regulation through the hermeneutic reinterpretation of signs and requalification; "size" is more often translated into capacity (functional) than as a marker of otherness. In Brussels, the configuration is more hybrid: the coexistence of functional (mobility) and aesthetic and aesthesic considerations, stabilized by civic (access for all) and legal (recognition frameworks) considerations, with an increased role for epistemic (figures, documents) and reputational (public credibility) considerations to resolve uncertainty.

The media are not just relays. They hierarchize registers, select objects (images, keywords, figures), and contribute to the publicization of events, in line with Allievi's [10] idea of "border objects", where conflicts of norms and translations of interest crystallize. The mosque appears as an ambivalent object, both a functional infrastructure and an aesthetic/aesthesic sign; it concentrates tensions related to space, pluralistic citizenship, and governance. The stability of trajectories depends less on the isolated theme than on the quality of translations between registers and the density of inscriptions produced. When these inscriptions are strong (epistemic evidence, concrete civic measures, legal clarifications, functional plans, traceable budgets), the controversy tends to close; when they are weak or left to verbal (rumors, uninterpreted images) considerations, it opens and becomes juridical.

5. Conclusions

Through the Belgian case, this article highlights, from a territorial perspective, media controversies surrounding mosque projects in Belgium, using actor–network theory and Heinich's controversy registers, revealing that these debates go beyond the technical framework of urban planning to enter the political, identity, and normative arenas. The arguments put forward (mobility, legality, size and visibility, social cohesion, security and extremism, financing) activate a plurality of registers (functional, legal, aesthetic/esthetic, civic, domestic, ethical, epistemic, reputational, economic) and rely on inter-register translations that allow them to circulate between technical and public spheres. Neutral criteria, such as functional saturation or legal compliance, are often recoded as symbolic markers of otherness, illustrating a discursive racialization of the visibility of Islam. Actor–network theory allows these controversies to be unfolded into phases of problematization, interest, enrollment, and mobilization. Points of concern (saturation of flows, visual shock, doubts about cohabitation, suspicions of interference or extremism) materialize in intermediate objects (architectural plans, petitions, mobility studies) that enlist actors in pro- or anti-project coalitions. The media, far from being mere relays, act as "border objects", hierarchizing

registers, amplifying arguments (images, keywords, figures), and crystallizing normative conflicts around the place of Islam in urban space.

Mosques thus emerge as ambivalent objects. They are functional infrastructures and aesthetic/aesthesic signs, concentrating the tensions of spatial and civic pluralism. Their contestation follows a combined strategy, where technical (functional and legal) objections serve as a threshold for introducing normative (civic, ethical, domestic, reputational) arguments, consolidating opposition based on identity. The stability of trajectories depends on the density of inscriptions (epistemic evidence, civic mechanisms, legal clarifications) that close the door on uncertainty, or, conversely, on their weakness, which paves the way for judicialization and enrollment. This dynamic is part of a broader European trend, where mosques, far from being perceived as ordinary infrastructure, are becoming symbolic anchors of electoral and identity struggles, constantly renegotiating issues of belonging, visibility, and legitimacy in the public sphere.

Rather than constituting a universal typology of controversies related to European mosques, the controversy registers and discursive configurations identified in this study should be understood as analytically grounded patterns emerging from the analysis of a heterogeneous corpus of situated cases. These cases are embedded in diverse urban, political, and media contexts. While such diversity enables the identification of cross-cutting argumentative logics, it also implies that the findings are best interpreted as contextualized analytical conclusions, rather than as models generalizable to all national or cultural settings.

The analytical and practical challenge lies in reclassifying mosques as ordinary components of urban space, while acknowledging their symbolic dimension. This proposal does not stem from a direct normative extrapolation based on media discourse, but rather from an analysis of the empirical conditions under which certain observed controversies tend to stabilize or defuse. This requires institutional mechanisms for transparency (civic/epistemic), equal treatment (legal), local anchoring (domestic), and the requalification of symbols (aesthetic/esthetic and functional), enabling a shift from confrontation to negotiation of pluralism. This refers to a mode of empirical regulation of controversies, observed in cases where technical, legal, and social inscriptions are sufficiently stabilized to reduce uncertainty and limit identity politicization. These conclusions pave the way for comparative research on other European contexts, particularly to explore how these dynamics are evolving in the face of contemporary migratory and security transformations.

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