

SLOVAK REPUBLIC

Executive Summary

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom and, in practice, the government generally respected religious freedom. The government did not demonstrate a trend toward either improvement or deterioration in respect for and protection of the right to religious freedom. The state launched a dialogue with religious representatives on changes to the funding of churches and religious groups, which would extend the separation of church and state.

There were few reports of societal abuse and discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. Periodic acts of anti-Semitism persisted among some elements of the population.

The U.S. embassy continued to promote religious freedom through direct interactions with government officials, religious leaders, and civil society representatives.

Section I. Religious Demography

According to the census conducted during the year, Roman Catholics constitute 62 percent of the population, Augsburg Lutherans, 5.9 percent, and Greek Catholics, 3.8 percent. Smaller religious groups include the Reformed Christian Church, Orthodox Christianity, Jehovah's Witnesses, various Protestant groups, Judaism, the Baha'i Faith, and Islam. Of the population, 13.4 percent do not claim a religious affiliation.

There is some correlation between religious differences and political or ethnic differences. Greek Catholics are generally ethnic Slovaks and Ruthenians (Ukrainians), although some Ruthenians follow the Orthodox faith. Followers of the Orthodox Church live predominantly in the eastern part of the country. The Reformed Christian Church is found primarily in the south, near the border with Hungary, where many ethnic Hungarians live. Other religious groups tend to be spread evenly throughout the country.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom. However, the religious registration law often disadvantages smaller religious groups.

The law defines the status of religious groups that are registered with the government. To register as a religious organization, 20,000 adult members who are either citizens or permanent residents must submit an “honest declaration” attesting to their membership, knowledge of the articles of faith and basic tenets of the religion, personal identity numbers and home addresses, and support for the group’s registration. Currently, 18 churches and religious groups are registered, receiving more than 30 million euros (\$40.1 million) in state subsidies. In addition, the act governing registration of citizen associations specifically excludes religious organizations and churches. The law does not prohibit nontraditional religious groups. It allows the government to enter into agreements with smaller religious communities.

No official state religion exists, but because of the number of its adherents, Roman Catholicism is considered the dominant religion. A 2001 concordat with the Vatican provides the legal framework for relations between the Catholic Church in the country, the government, and the Vatican. Two corollaries address priests serving as military chaplains and religious education. A 2002 agreement between the government and 11 other registered religious groups attempts to counterbalance the Vatican agreement and provide equal status to the remaining registered religious groups. A corollary agreement on religious education, identical versions of which were signed with the 11 other registered religious groups, mandates that all public elementary schools require children to take either a religion class or an ethics class, depending on their (or their parents’) preferences. Despite some concerns, smaller religious groups stated that they were generally pleased with the system.

In addition to the original law on restitution from 1993, the 2005 restitution law permits religious organizations to claim agricultural land and forests as well as other nonreligious property (community halls, schools, etc.) confiscated between May 8, 1945 (November 2, 1938, for the Jewish community) and January 1, 1990; it established April 30, 2006, as the filing deadline.

The government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: Epiphany, Easter, the Day of the Virgin Mary of the Seven Sorrows, All Saints Day, Christmas, and Saint Stephen’s Day. An agreement with the Vatican

prohibits the removal or alteration of existing religious holidays considered state holidays.

Government Practices

There were no reports of abuses of religious freedom. The government initiated discussions regarding changes in the funding of churches and religious groups.

Human rights organizations reported that the requirement that religious groups have at least 20,000 adult adherents to be eligible to register with the government disadvantaged smaller groups. Although smaller groups were able to function, they stated they were in legal limbo which at times could create difficulty gaining access to their clergy and other resources. For example, clergy from unregistered religious groups could not minister to their members in prisons or government hospitals, and religious weddings by these groups needed to be accompanied by a civil ceremony to be legally valid. Occasionally, members of these groups were prevented from burying their relatives in municipal cemeteries; however, limitations on burial practices also affected registered groups at times.

Unregistered groups were not represented in official educational materials for religion classes. However, other small groups who managed to register prior to the new regulations also lacked representation in these classes. Unregistered groups could not establish religious schools but were able to circumvent this limitation by setting up private schools. The government required public broadcasters to allocate airtime for registered religious groups, but not for unregistered groups.

In February the Ministry of Culture launched a series of working group meetings with religious representatives and created an “Expert Commission” to produce a new model of funding for registered religious groups. The change was seen as moving toward greater separation between church and state in terms of funding, which if adopted would give taxpayers the choice of dedicating a portion of their taxes to a religious group instead of the ministry allocating funding directly, as is currently the case.

The Department of Church Affairs at the Ministry of Culture oversees relations between religious groups and the state and manages the distribution of state subsidies to religious groups and associations. The ministry cannot intervene in the internal affairs of religious groups and does not direct their activities. The ministry administers a cultural grant program that allocates money for the upkeep of cultural and religious monuments.

The Ministry of Culture rejected the Christian Fellowship's application for registration in 2007. In 2009 the Supreme Court overturned this decision and the ministry renewed the registration process. The ministry rejected the application again in May, but the Fellowship appealed to the Supreme Court once again. The main reason listed by the Ministry of Culture for refusing the application was that the group contradicted the country's legislation by promoting religious intolerance and by infringing on the rights of others. The group was said to promote intolerance towards other religious groups. The Christian Fellowship appealed to the Supreme Court, and the case was pending at the end of the year.

In February the Church of Faith applied for registration, fulfilling the new rules by submitting 21,500 signed declarations. Following an extensive investigation, the ministry concluded that the vast majority of the declarations were forged, and that the Church of Faith was likely a front for the Christian Fellowship. The ministry rejected the application in October and launched a criminal investigation. The Church of Faith has appealed the decision at the Supreme Court. The ministry stated that a religious group with 20,000 adherents should be well known in the community, which it stated the Church of Faith was not.

Some property restitution cases remained unresolved. Religious organizations applied for the return of their property confiscated by the former communist government under the 1993 law on the restitution of communal property, which specified a filing deadline of December 31, 1994. The government, municipalities, state legal entities, and under certain conditions private persons, returned property in its existing condition. Some of the churches, synagogues, and cemeteries that were returned were in poor condition. The law did not provide compensation for the damage done to these properties under the communists, and religious groups often lacked the funds to restore these properties to a usable state.

Some restitution cases remained pending with various courts, but the Ministry of Culture stated it was difficult even for the Roman Catholic Church to estimate the exact number of confiscated properties because the cases involved a large number of legal entities, including, for example, thousands of parishes or religious orders. The Slovak Bishops' Conference estimated the state had returned approximately 35 percent of Catholic Church property. The Catholic Church is not eligible to reacquire lands originally registered to church foundations that no longer exist or operate in the country, including groups such as the Benedictines.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were few reports of societal abuse and discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

Organized neo-Nazi groups, estimated to have 500 active members and several thousand additional sympathizers, promoted anti-Semitism and harassed and attacked other minorities, including Roma. Vandalism in cemeteries occurred sporadically throughout the year. In September an unidentified group toppled and destroyed gravestones at a Jewish cemetery in the town of Banska Stiavnica. This was the fourth act of vandalism at the cemetery during the year.

While direct denial of the Holocaust was not common, supporters of the World War II-era fascist state, which deported tens of thousands of Jews, Roma, and others to their deaths in Nazi concentration camps, carried out public activities during the year. The People's Party-Our Slovakia (LS-NS) group, which expressed support for and used the symbols of the World War II-era fascist state, organized marches and gatherings throughout the year. In March approximately 250 people gathered in front of the presidential palace in Bratislava to commemorate the 72nd anniversary of the founding of the wartime fascist state in 1939 and to pay respect to its then-president, Jozef Tiso, who was executed for treason after the war.

At the beginning of the year, the Rajec local council reapproved the placement of a statue of Ferdinand Durcansky in the town square. Durcansky was a controversial figure who played a key role during the initial phases of the World War II collaborationist state. Durcansky was behind numerous pieces of anti-Semitic legislation which introduced Aryanization and the exclusion of Jews from economic and social life. The placing of the statue was subject to extensive criticism, suggesting that council members lacked sufficient information about Durcansky's anti-Semitic activities. The Rajec local council justified its decision on the grounds that Durcansky was primarily a champion of the country's independence and not directly responsible for the deportation of Jews in 1942.

The Nation's Memory Institute (UPN) provided access to previously undisclosed records of the regimes in power from 1939-89, and in past years there were efforts to abolish it. The Union of Anti-Communist Resistance (ZPKO) publishes the newsletter *Svedectvo* (Testimony), which Jewish community officials criticized for advocating the wartime fascist state and downplaying its anti-Jewish crimes.

The Ecumenical Council of Churches brought together 11 religious groups which recognize "Jesus Christ as The Savior and the Head of the Church." Its mission

was to promote the role of churches in civil society through volunteering and development aid, as well as to overcome differences between churches.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. embassy continued to follow developments regarding the religious registration law and the proposed changes to the funding of churches and religious groups. Embassy officials met with religious figures and civil society to discuss religious freedom issues throughout the year.