

SLOVAK REPUBLIC 2013 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom and, in practice, the government generally respected religious freedom. The government continued its dialogue with religious representatives on changes to government funding for churches and religious groups, which would extend the separation of church and state and help resolve remaining restitution issues.

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

The U.S. embassy promoted religious freedom through interactions with government officials, religious leaders, and civil society representatives.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the population at 5.49 million (July 2013 estimate). According to the 2011 census, Roman Catholics constitute 62 percent of the population, Augsburg Lutherans 5.9 percent, and Greek Catholics 3.8 percent; 13.4 percent do not state a religious affiliation. Other religious groups present in small numbers include the Reformed Christian Church, other Protestant groups, Jehovah's Witnesses, Orthodox Christians, Jews, and Bahais. Recent research by nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) noted likely underreporting of unregistered religious groups. During the 2011 census, 1,213 individuals self-identified as followers of Islam, while representatives of the Islamic community estimate the number to be approximately 5,000. There are approximately 2,000 Jews.

There is some correlation between religion and ethnicity. Greek Catholics are generally ethnic Slovaks and Ruthenians (of Ukrainian origin), although some Ruthenians belong to the Orthodox Church. Most Orthodox Christians live 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

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Legal/Policy Framework

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

The law defines the status of religious groups that are registered with the government and the requirements for registration. To register as a religious group, 20,000 adult members who are either citizens or permanent residents must submit to the Ministry of Culture 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. The 18 registered churches and religious groups receive more than 30 million euros (\$41.3 million) in annual state subsidies. While the constitution guarantees the right to practice one’s faith regardless of whether as part of a registered or unregistered group, registration confers the legal status necessary to perform economic functions such as opening a bank account or renting property, and public religious functions such as presiding at burial ceremonies or gaining access to hospitalized patients or prisoners.

Religious groups that do not have at least 20,000 adult adherents can register as civic associations to carry out some activities requiring a legal status. Although the law governing registration of citizen associations specifically excludes religious groups, the law also states that such registration is in effect recognition by the state of the group’s status, and that the group is beneficial for society. Clergy from unregistered religious groups cannot, however, minister to their members in prisons or government hospitals, and weddings conducted by unregistered religious groups are not legally valid.

A concordat with the Vatican provides the legal framework for relations among the Catholic Church, the government, and the Vatican. Two corollaries address religious education and priests serving as military chaplains. An agreement between the government and 11 other registered religious groups attempts to provide equal status to those groups. All public elementary school students must take a religion class or ethics class, depending on personal or parental preferences. Religion class curricula do not mention unregistered groups or some of the smaller registered groups, and unregistered groups are not allowed to teach their faith at schools.

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The Ministry of Culture's Department of Church Affairs oversees relations between religious groups and the state and manages the distribution of state subsidies to religious groups and associations. The ministry cannot legally intervene in the internal affairs of religious groups nor direct their activities. The ministry administers a cultural grant program allocating money for the upkeep of cultural and religious monuments.

The government requires public broadcasters to allocate airtime for registered religious groups but not for unregistered groups.

The law does not allow burial earlier than 48 hours following death, affecting religious groups whose traditions mandate an earlier burial.

Government Practices

Restrictions imposed by the government affected members of minority religious groups.

NGOs stated the qualitative requirements defined in the law were sufficient to prevent registering groups whose activities are unconstitutional or contradict human rights principles and that the additional 20,000-member requirement for registration should be removed. The government continued to disagree with this suggestion.

The government continued discussions with stakeholders about property restitution and changes in the funding of churches and religious groups and convened two sessions of the so-called Expert Commission to address these issues during the year. The group continued to discuss challenges associated with identifying property ownership and maintenance costs associated with older properties and problems with alternative models for funding religious groups, but failed to progress towards greater fiscal separation of church and state. According to the culture ministry, it was difficult to estimate the number of confiscated properties not yet returned because the cases involved a large number of legal entities, including thousands of parishes or religious orders. The Slovak Bishops' Conference estimated the state had returned approximately 35 percent of Catholic Church property.

The Ministry of Culture supplemented its expert opinion, which it used to deny the 2007 application for registration by the Christian Fellowship. In 2012, the Supreme Court overturned for a second time the ministry's decision to deny

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registration on the grounds that the expert opinion used by the ministry to deny registration had been incomplete. The ministry said it would continue to seek additional facts before again issuing its decision. In previously denying the application, the culture ministry had stated the group “promoted hateful ideas toward other religious groups.”

In January when confronted by journalists, several members of parliament from the governing Smer-SD party refused to condemn the president of the World War II fascist Slovak state, Jozef Tiso, and highlighted what they said were the benefits of his regime. In August presidential candidate and former Christian Democratic Movement Chairman Jan Carnogursky stated in an interview that actions of the World War II-era Slovak state against Jews were criminal. At the same time, however, he asserted that a 1942 law passed when Tiso was president gave Tiso better opportunities to exempt Jews from deportations than under previous legislation. Carnogursky also stated that, in terms of culture, Slovakia prospered greatly during the fascist Slovak regime.

The Nation’s Memory Institute (UPN) provided access to previously undisclosed records of the regimes ruling the country from 1939 to 1989. Jewish community leaders, however, criticized the institute for paying too much attention to the persecution of prominent figures of the fascist Slovak state during World War II and playing down their role in supporting anti-Semitic policies.

In March Prime Minister Robert Fico emphasized the importance of preserving historical Jewish sites, including synagogues and cemeteries, stating they were “an integral part of our community’s heritage.”

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

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

Organized neo-Nazi groups continued to espouse anti-Semitism to harass and to attack other minorities. Vandalism of Jewish cemeteries continued to occur. In October an unidentified group poured tar over commemorative metal tiles embedded in pavement in the southern border town of Komarno. The stones were installed in July to commemorate a local Jewish family that perished during the Holocaust. At the beginning of the year, an unknown group painted swastikas on several gravestones in a recently-restored Jewish cemetery in the central town of Ziar nad Hronom.

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In March the People's Party-Our Slovakia (LS-NS), as well as other far-right groups, commemorated the founding of the Slovak fascist state and the execution of Tiso. While direct Holocaust denial was not common, neo-Nazi groups organized gatherings throughout the year, including LS-NS, which expressed support for and used the symbols of the World War II-era fascist state.

Funeral operators occasionally prevented representatives from unregistered religious groups from performing burial ceremonies.

Jewish community officials continued to criticize the Union of Anti-Communist Resistance's newsletter *Svedectvo (Testimony)* for downplaying anti-Jewish crimes occurring during World War II.

The Center for the Research of Ethnicity and Culture recorded cases of representatives from the larger Christian groups, including the Catholic Church, exerting influence over local populations and schools to prevent small, unregistered groups from carrying out youth activities in schools.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

Embassy representatives continued to discuss with Ministry of Culture officials developments regarding the religious registration law and proposed changes to the funding of churches and religious groups. Embassy officials met with religious figures and civil society groups to discuss religious freedom issues throughout the year.