

SLOVAK REPUBLIC 2014 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution guarantees freedom of religious belief and affiliation and states the country is not bound to any particular faith. Registration with the government conferred the legal status necessary to perform economic functions and public religious functions such as gaining access to prisoners. While the government did not interfere in the religious activities of unregistered groups, it deprived them of the ability to perform certain economic functions and limited their ability to carry out public religious functions. The government continued its dialogue with religious representatives on changes to government funding for religious groups and on the resolution of remaining restitution cases.

Acts of anti-Semitism persisted among far-right organizations. Various groups in society continued to commemorate the World War II fascist Slovak state and praise its leaders. The Center for Research on Ethnicity and Culture (CVEK), a nongovernmental organization (NGO), said the religious registration law limited the ability of smaller unregistered religious groups to counter negative stereotyping. NGOs reported unregistered groups closely affiliated with immigrant communities were particularly vulnerable to negative stereotyping.

The U.S. embassy discussed the religious registration law and funding change proposals with Ministry of Culture officials. The embassy discussed with NGO representatives the Ministry of Culture's decision to oppose the registration of the Christian Fellowship religious group. The Ambassador expressed concerns about anti-Semitism to Catholic Church officials.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the population at 5.4 million (July 2014 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 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

Legal Framework

The constitution guarantees freedom of religious belief and affiliation, as well as the right to change religious faith or to be without religious beliefs. The constitution states the country is not bound to any particular faith and religious groups shall manage their affairs independently. The law requires religious groups to register in order to perform certain economic and public religious functions.

The law defines the status of religious groups 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 approximately 38 million euros (\$46 million) in annual state subsidies. The constitution guarantees the right to practice one’s faith as part of a registered or unregistered group, but 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. There are groups among the 18 officially registered religious groups with fewer than 20,000 members, but these groups registered before this requirement came into effect.

Religious groups without 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 such registration is in effect recognition by the state of the group's status and the group is beneficial for society. Clergy from unregistered religious groups cannot minister to their members in prisons or government hospitals, and weddings conducted by unregistered religious groups are not legally valid. Additionally, unregistered groups cannot establish religious schools.

A concordat with the Holy See provides the legal framework for relations among the Catholic Church, the government, and the Holy See. Two corollaries address religious education and priests serving as military chaplains. An agreement between the government and 11 of the 17 other registered religious groups provides similar status to those groups. Not all registered religious groups are party to this agreement, however, and the unanimous approval of the existing parties to the agreement is required for other registered religious groups to join.

All public elementary school students must take a religion class or an 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.

The law 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, even for religious groups whose traditions mandate an earlier burial.

Government Practices

Local NGOs, including CVEK, urged the removal of the 20,000-member requirement for registration of religious groups, saying the qualitative requirements defined in the law were sufficient to prevent registering groups whose activities were unconstitutional or contradicted human rights principles. The government did not respond to these requests and took no actions to amend the law.

NGOs reported that religious groups not yet party to the existing agreement between the state and 11 registered groups viewed the need for unanimous approval from all signatories in order to add a group to the agreement as a difficult obstacle to overcome.

The Department of Church Affairs of the Ministry of Culture oversaw relations between religious groups and the state and managed the distribution of state subsidies to religious groups and associations. The ministry could not legally intervene in the internal affairs of religious groups or direct their activities. The ministry administered a cultural grant program allocating money for the upkeep of cultural and religious monuments. A large portion of the government subsidy to registered religious groups was used to pay clergy and was allocated to groups based on the number of their clergy.

The government continued discussions with stakeholders about changes in the funding of churches and religious groups and convened two sessions of an expert commission to address this and other issues. During the June session, the Ministry of Culture discussed with stakeholders possible new models of government funding for registered religious organizations. These options included allowing individuals to allocate a certain percentage of their taxes to a particular registered religious group or providing government contributions to registered religious groups based on the number of adherents rather than the number of clergy.

The expert commission continued discussions with stakeholders about property restitution. The group discussed challenges associated with identifying property ownership and maintenance costs associated with older properties. 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 solicited a new expert opinion to re-evaluate the registration application by the Christian Fellowship, which the ministry had rejected in 2007. The ministry's original expert had concluded the group promoted hate toward other religious groups and was therefore ineligible for registration. The Christian Fellowship disagreed with the ministry's expert and submitted its own expert opinion. The ministry approached a third, independent expert to try to resolve the disagreement, and the registration application remained pending.

The Nation's Memory Institute provided access to previously undisclosed records of the regimes ruling the country from 1939 to 1989. Jewish community leaders, however, continued to criticize 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 September Prime Minister Robert Fico commemorated Holocaust victims and emphasized the importance of future generations continuing to learn about their suffering.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Far-right and some Christian conservative groups continued to praise the World War II-era fascist Slovak State, which deported thousands of Jews to Nazi death camps.

During a September sermon in Cadca, a Catholic priest suggested Jews themselves were to blame for inciting anti-Semitism, and the World War II-era fascist Slovak state was helpless to prevent the mass deportation of Jews from the country. The leadership of the Catholic Church in the country called the statements inappropriate, but continued its refusal to clearly condemn Jozef Tiso, a Catholic priest who served as the President of the World War II-era fascist Slovak state and permitted the deportations.

While direct Holocaust denial was not common, neo-Nazi groups throughout the year organized gatherings expressing support for and used the symbols of the World War II-era fascist state. On March 15, the far-right People's Party Our Slovakia, led by Banska Bystrica regional governor Marian Kotleba, staged a public celebration of the 75th anniversary of the founding of the WWII-era fascist Slovak state. On October 12, members of the far-right group Slovenska Pospolitost laid wreaths at the grave of Jozef Tiso to commemorate his birth, while on April 18, another group commemorated Tiso's execution in 1947.

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

Human rights NGOs reported the registration law made it difficult for unregistered groups to enter the public discourse and therefore limited their ability to alter negative public attitudes toward smaller religious organizations. In particular, religious organizations which lacked registration were sometimes stigmatized as "cults." According to research by CVEK, Muslims, who were often labeled as fundamentalists, faced the most intense levels of generalization and stereotyping.

According to NGOs, religious groups associated with new immigrant communities were particularly disadvantaged by the registration law.

The Ecumenical Council of Churches was the only formal association for interreligious dialogue and only assembled groups that followed the Bible. The “new religiosity” section of its website focused exclusively on the study of cults. According to a report by CVEK, this linking of smaller religious groups to cults contributed to negative public perceptions of unregistered groups.

CVEK recorded cases of representatives from the larger Christian groups, including the Catholic Church, exerting influence over local populations and schools to prevent small religious groups, both registered and unregistered, from carrying out youth activities in schools. In one case a small religious group secured the initial support of a school to launch youth activities there, but this decision was revised after a local Catholic priest informed the community during his sermons that a group was trying to introduce “bad forces” into the school and exerted pressure on the school director.

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. The Ambassador and other embassy officials regularly talked with religious leaders. Embassy officials discussed with NGO representatives their concerns regarding the Ministry of Culture’s decision to oppose the registration of the Christian Fellowship religious group. Embassy officials met with figures from registered and unregistered religious organizations and civil society groups to discuss religious freedom issues throughout the year.

After the Catholic priest in Cadca made anti-Semitic remarks in his September sermon, the Ambassador immediately raised concerns with the Catholic bishop in Zilina, which oversees the Cadca parish, as well as with the Catholic archbishop in Bratislava. The Ambassador said the priest’s remarks trivialized the suffering of Jews during the Holocaust and promoted false stereotypes and intolerance.