

SLOVAK REPUBLIC 2017 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for freedom of religious belief and affiliation and states the country is not bound to any particular faith. In March the requirement for registering a new religious group rose to 50,000 adherents from 20,000 following a parliamentary vote overturning a previous presidential veto of the new membership requirement. The 50,000-member requirement prevented some groups from attaining official status as religious groups. Some of these groups were able to utilize the registration procedures for civic associations to obtain the legal status to perform economic and public functions. Unregistered groups, especially Muslims, continued to report difficulties in ministering to their adherents and in obtaining permits to build places of worship. Members of parliament, especially from opposition parties, continued to make anti-Muslim statements. At several times during the year, police filed charges against members of the People's Party Our Slovakia (LSNS) for producing materials defaming minority religious beliefs and for Holocaust denial.

Muslim community members continued to report anti-Muslim hate speech on social media. Christian groups and other organizations described in the press as far-right continued to organize gatherings and commemorations of the World War II fascist state and to praise its leaders, although without statements formally denying the Holocaust. The Central Union of Jewish Religious Communities in Slovakia (UZZNO) and the minister of culture criticized a video produced by the Matica Slovenska cultural heritage organization about the founding of the fascist World War II Slovak state for downplaying its crimes against Jews. According to human rights nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), the legal requirements for registration of religious groups continued to make it difficult for unregistered groups to alter negative public attitudes toward minority religious groups.

The U.S. Ambassador and other embassy officers met with government officials to continue discussions of the treatment of minority religious groups, including the new law requiring 50,000 members for a religious group to qualify for registration, as well as the increase in public expressions of anti-Muslim sentiment. Embassy officials continued to meet regularly with registered and unregistered religious organizations and NGOs to discuss hate speech directed against Muslims and the impact of the new membership requirement for registration of religious groups.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the population at 5.4 million (July 2017 estimate). According to the 2011 census, the most recent available, Roman Catholics constitute 62 percent of the population, Augsburg Lutherans 5.9 percent, and Greek Catholics 3.8 percent; 13.4 percent did 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, Bahais, and Muslims. During the 2011 census, approximately 1,200 individuals self-identified as followers of Islam, while representatives of the Muslim community estimate the number to be approximately 5,000. According to the census, there are approximately 2,000 Jews.

Greek Catholics are generally ethnic Slovaks and Ruthenians, although some Ruthenians belong to the Orthodox Church. Most Orthodox Christians live in the eastern part of the country. Members of the Reformed Christian Church live 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 refrain from religious affiliation. The constitution states the country is not bound to any particular faith and religious groups shall manage their affairs independently from the state, including in providing religious education and establishing clerical institutions. The constitution guarantees the right to practice one's faith privately or publicly, either alone or in association with others. It states the exercise of religious rights may be restricted only by measures "necessary in a democratic society for the protection of public order, health, and morals or for the protection of the rights and freedoms of others."

The law prohibits establishing, supporting, and promoting groups dedicated to the suppression of fundamental rights and freedoms as well as "demonstrating sympathy" with such groups. These crimes are punishable by up to five years' imprisonment.

The law requires religious groups to register with the Department of Church Affairs in the Ministry of Culture in order to employ spiritual leaders to perform officially recognized functions. Clergy from unregistered religious groups do not officially have the right to perform weddings or to minister to their members in prisons or government hospitals. Unregistered groups may not establish religious schools or receive government funding.

In January the parliament voted to override a presidential veto of legislation originally passed in 2016 to raise the registration requirement for new organizations seeking to register as religious groups to 50,000 adherents from the 20,000 previously required. The new 50,000 requirement entered into force in March. The 50,000 must be adults, either citizens or permanent residents, and 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 to the Ministry of Culture. All groups registered before these requirements came into effect were grandfathered in as officially recognized religions; no new religious groups attained recognition since then. The law makes no distinction between churches and registered religious groups but recognizes as “churches” those registered groups calling themselves churches.

Registration confers the legal status necessary to perform economic functions such as opening a bank account or renting property, and civil functions such as presiding at burial ceremonies. The 18 registered churches and religious groups are: the Apostolic Church, the Bahai Community, The Brotherhood Unity of Baptists, Seventh-day Adventists, Brotherhood Church, Czechoslovak Hussite Church, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession, Evangelical Methodist Church, Greek Catholic Church, Christian Congregations (Krestanske zbory), Jehovah’s Witnesses, New Apostolic Church, Orthodox Church, Reformed Christian Church, Roman Catholic Church, Old Catholic Church, and Central Union of Jewish Religious Communities. Registered groups and churches receive annual state subsidies. All but the Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession, Greek Catholic Church, Orthodox Church, Reformed Christian Church, and Roman Catholic Church have fewer than 50,000 members, as they registered before this requirement came into effect.

The Department of Church Affairs of 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 may not legally intervene in the internal affairs of religious groups or direct their activities.

A group without the 50,000 adult adherents required to obtain status as an official religious group may seek registration as a civic association, which provides the legal status necessary to carry out activities such as operating a bank account or entering into a contract. In doing so, however, the group may not call itself a church or identify itself officially as a religious group, since the law governing registration of citizen associations specifically excludes religious groups from obtaining this status. In order to register a civic association, three citizens are required to provide their names and addresses and the name, goal organizational structure, executive bodies, and budgetary rules of the group.

A concordat with the Holy See provides the legal framework for relations between the government and the domestic Catholic Church and the Holy See. Two corollaries cover the operation of Catholic religious schools, the teaching of Catholic religious education as a subject, and Catholic 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. The unanimous approval of the existing parties to the agreement is required for other religious groups to obtain similar benefits.

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

All public elementary school students must take a religion or an ethics class, depending on personal or parental preferences. Individual schools and teachers decide what material to teach in each religion class. Although the content of the courses in most schools is Catholicism, parents may ask a school to include teachings of different faiths. Private and religious schools define their own content for religion courses. In both public and private schools, religion class curricula do not mention unregistered groups or some of the smaller registered groups, and unregistered groups may not teach their faiths at schools. Teachers from a registered religious group normally teach about the tenants of their own faith, although they may teach about other faiths as well. The government pays the salaries of religion teachers in public schools.

The law criminalizes issuance, possession, and dissemination of extremist materials, including those defending, supporting, or instigating hatred, violence, or

unlawful discrimination against a group of persons on the basis of their religion. Such criminal activity is punishable by up to eight years' imprisonment.

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

The law prohibits the defamation of a person or group's belief as a criminal offense punishable by up to five years' imprisonment.

The law prohibits Holocaust denial, including questioning, endorsing, or excusing the Holocaust. Violators face sentences of up to three years in prison. The law also prohibits denial of crimes committed by the prior fascist and communist regimes.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Government Practices

Political parties, including the largest party represented in parliament, Direction – Social Democracy (Smer), stated they supported the new law increasing the number of members of religious groups required for registration. They also stated they had overridden the presidential veto due to explicit concern over Islam. In January Prime Minister Fico stated a “unified Muslim community” within the country's territory would be a “constant source of security risk,” which justified a refusal to accept migrants under the European Commission's refugee resettlement program.

Opposition parties continued to express anti-Muslim views. In a February print interview, Richard Sulik, the leader of Freedom and Solidarity, the second largest political party in parliament and the largest opposition party, stated Christianity was “better” than Islam; Islam was an “aggressive religion,” it was not compatible with Slovak culture, and “we are not all equal.”

In February LSNS Member of Parliament (MP) Milan Mazurek stated in parliament that Islam was “nothing other than the work of the devil” and claimed Islam allowed pedophilia, zoophilia, and necrophilia.

In April during a parliamentary debate on a proposed ban on mosques, Sme Rodina MP Milan Krajniak stated most European Muslims wanted to change the political system in Europe into “something totalitarian,” or an Islamic theocracy. He said

practicing Muslims who visited mosques condoned terrorist attacks significantly more than nonpracticing Muslims. During the same parliamentary debate, LSNS Chairman and MP Marian Kotleba said the real problem was “Zionist” politicians, “many of them raised in synagogues,” who he said had brought the Muslims into the country.

During November regional elections, the LSNS won two of 416 seats in regional assemblies, and Kotleba lost his reelection campaign for the Banska Bystrica governorship. Kotleba and other LSNS candidates received more than 100,000 votes in total and retained 14 of 150 seats in the national parliament. In May prosecutors took steps to ban the party as a threat to the country’s democratic system. At year’s end, the Supreme Court was addressing the prosecutor general’s move to dissolve the LSNS for violation of the constitution and other laws.

There continued to be no resolution to the registration application of the Christian Fellowship as of the end of the year. The Ministry of Culture reportedly continued its consideration of additional expert opinions over whether it should reverse its 2007 rejection of the original application, which was based on expert opinion saying the group promoted hatred toward other religious groups.

The government again allocated approximately 40 million euros (\$48 million) in annual state subsidies to the 18 registered religious groups. The basis for each allocation was the number of clergy each group had, and a large portion of each group’s subsidy continued to be used for payment of the group’s clergy. The Expert Commission on Financing of Religious Groups and Societies, an advisory body within the Ministry of Culture, continued discussions with representatives of registered religious groups about changes in the model to be used for their future funding, with the stated aim of developing a new financing model based on the principles of “justice, transparency, solidarity, and independence.”

NGOs and unregistered religious groups reported they continued to have difficulties altering negative public attitudes towards smaller, unregistered religious organizations, because of the social stigma associated with not having the same legal benefits accorded to registered religions.

Members of registered Christian churches said stringent registration requirements limited religious freedom by preventing dissent within churches. Dissenting members stymied in attempts to reform official theological positions might normally split off to form their own church, but the difficulty in registering a new religion prevented such an action.

The Muslim community reported the lack of registration meant it continued to be unable to employ an imam formally. Muslim community leaders stated prisons and detention facilities continued to prevent their spiritual representatives from gaining access to their adherents. Members of the Muslim community also continued to report the lack of official registration made obtaining the necessary construction permits for prayer rooms and religious sites more difficult, although there was no law prohibiting unregistered groups from obtaining such permits.

The Ministry of Culture's cultural grant program continued to allocate money for the upkeep of religious monuments.

Jewish community leaders continued to criticize the Nation's Memory Institute (UPN), a state-chartered institution, for reportedly downplaying the role of prominent World War II-era figures in supporting anti-Semitic policies.

In January LSNS MP Stanislav Mizik issued a statement on LSNS social media criticizing President Andrej Kiska for giving state awards to individuals of Jewish origin. Mizik's statement said important Slovak historical figures had a negative perception of Jews, "because they impoverished the Slovak nation, and because of usury." In April police charged Mizik with producing extremist materials and defamation of nation, race, and belief, in connection with the comments. Criminal proceedings were pending at year's end.

In July police charged LSNS Chair Kotleba with supporting movements that promoted the suppression of rights and freedoms and spread religious hatred, after he made an 1,488 euro (\$1,800) donation from the party in March to a family in need. Experts stated the amount was a symbolic representation of a 14-word white supremacist phrase and the numeric representation of a salute to Hitler.

In August police charged Marian Magat, who ran as an LSNS candidate in the 2016 parliamentary elections and was described by the press as a far-right radical, with Holocaust denial related to online content published between 2013 and 2016, which praised Adolf Hitler and downplayed the Holocaust. Criminal proceedings were pending at year's end.

In September parliament rejected a liberal opposition amendment to reduce the minimum waiting period for burial following death, from 48 hours to 24 hours, specifically designed to accommodate the rights of the Jewish community.

In March President Kiska and Prime Minister Robert Fico participated in a commemoration at the Poprad train station of the 75th anniversary of the first transport of Slovak Jews to the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp. In his speech, Prime Minister Fico said the World War II Slovak state had been a puppet of Hitler's Germany and remained unworthy of admiration today because key representatives of the regime had helped facilitate the deportation of Slovak citizens, including women and children, to Nazi death camps.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

NGOs reported continued online hate speech towards Muslims and refugees. Muslim community leaders continued to report greater levels of fear in the community compared with previous years and said they continued to keep their prayer rooms low-key and not publicize the locations of the prayer rooms so as not to inflame public opinion.

In February the Institute of Leo XIII, a local NGO characterized in the press as conservative, distributed flyers and books to a number of churches that said Islam was a base religion filled with hate and Muhammad was the predecessor of the anti-Christ.

The Islamic Foundation in Slovakia again reported an increase in anti-Muslim rhetoric by what it described as "extremist" groups. In July the foundation reported extensive negative online reaction to an iftar organized by the foundation for Muslim and non-Muslim religious and civic representatives. The foundation catalogued numerous social media posts threatening violence and death to individuals who attended the event.

Some Christian groups and other organizations characterized in the press as far-right continued to issue statements praising the World War II-era fascist government responsible for the deportation of thousands of Jews to Nazi death camps, and they continued to organize gatherings where participants displayed symbols of the World War II fascist state. While there were no press reports of direct Holocaust denial by these groups, the organizers often included photographs showing World War II symbols in online posts promoting their events. On March 14, for example, the LSNS used such symbols in its online postings about an annual commemoration it organized for the founding of the World War II fascist state. A Catholic priest again participated in the commemoration along with LSNS members of parliament.

In April the Roman Catholic Diocese of Nitra and the Faculty of Roman Catholic Theology of Comenius University in Bratislava organized a seminar about the president of the fascist World War II Slovak state, Jozef Tiso, which focused on Tiso's role as a Catholic priest and avoided discussion of his regime's internment of Jews in concentration camps and their later deportation to Nazi death camps. The Jewish community criticized the seminar for praising Tiso and for inviting an individual associated with a far-right group to give a presentation.

In February UZZNO criticized a video produced by the Matica Slovenska cultural heritage organization about the founding of the fascist World War II Slovak state for what UZZNO described as downplaying and attempting to justify the crimes perpetrated by the Slovak state. Jewish organizations said the video implied Slovak Jews would have suffered the same fate even if the fascist Slovak state had not existed. Minister of Culture Marek Madaric also criticized the Matica Slovenska video for "trivializing" the responsibility of the fascist World War II Slovak state for the fate of Slovak Jews.

The Ecumenical Council of Churches continued to be the only association for interreligious dialogue.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The Ambassador and other embassy officers continued to discuss the treatment of religious minority groups and the growth of anti-Muslim sentiment in meetings with government officials. After passage of the new law requiring 50,000 members for a religious group to qualify for registration, the embassy continued to express to government officials its concerns over the new requirement. The Ambassador again participated in the annual Holocaust observation ceremony in Bratislava.

Embassy officers continued to meet with registered and unregistered religious organizations and civil society groups to discuss hate speech directed against Muslims and the negative impact on religious minorities of the new membership requirement as well as of previously existing legal requirements for registration of religious groups. On November 21, the embassy hosted a roundtable lunch and interfaith discussion with representatives of various religious, governmental, and NGO groups. Attendees shared their views on religious freedom and tolerance, including the proper social role of churches and religious communities as advocates for human rights and against the rise of far-right extremism.