

SLOVAK REPUBLIC 2016 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. A legal requirement to have a minimum of 20,000 adherents for registration as a religious group prevented some smaller groups from attaining official status as religious groups. Some of these groups relied on the registration procedures for civic associations to obtain the legal status to perform economic and public functions. Although nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and religious minority groups advocated removal of the 20,000-person requirement, in November parliament approved a law to increase the registration requirement to 50,000 adherents in 2017. President Andrej Kiska vetoed the law in December, but parliament planned a vote in early 2017 to override the veto. Unregistered groups, especially Muslims, reported difficulties in ministering to their adherents and in obtaining permits to build places of worship. Observers reported an increase in anti-Muslim rhetoric by members of the government and opposition members of parliament, with some government officials, including the prime minister, portraying Muslims as a potential threat to the country's security and society. Government leaders called for an end to online hate speech and attended commemorations and the opening of the country's first museum dedicated to the Holocaust.

Muslim community members reported physical and verbal attacks against Muslims and an increase in online anti-Muslim hate speech. Close to 1,000 people attended an anti-Muslim and anti-refugee protest. While direct Holocaust denial remained uncommon, neo-Nazi groups continued to organize gatherings and commemorations of the World War II fascist state and praise its leaders. According to human rights NGOs, the legal requirements for registration of religious groups made it difficult for unregistered groups to alter negative public attitudes toward religious minority groups.

The U.S. Ambassador and other embassy officers continued to meet with government officials to discuss the treatment of minority religious groups and anti-Muslim sentiment as well as the legal requirements for registration of religious groups. The Ambassador expressed concern over the restrictive nature of the 50,000-person registration requirement supported by the parliament. In January a visiting Deputy Assistant Secretary of State raised U.S. concerns over the government's "use of divisive political rhetoric on refugees and Muslims."

Embassy officials discussed hate speech directed against Muslims and the effect of the registration requirements with members of registered and unregistered religious communities.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the population at 5.4 million (July 2016 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 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, 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 (of Ukrainian origin), 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 diffused 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 only be restricted 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 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.

To register as a religious group or church, the law as of the end of the year requires 20,000 adult members, either citizens or permanent residents, to 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. The law makes no distinction between churches and religious groups, but recognizes as churches those 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; some of these groups have less than 20,000 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 20,000 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 as 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, addresses, the name and goal of the organization, the organizational structure, executive bodies, and budgetary rules.

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.

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 religious teachers in public 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.

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

Government Practices

In November parliament approved legislation, initiated by the Slovak National Party (SNS), to increase the registration requirement for new organizations seeking registration as religious groups to 50,000 adherents, beginning in 2017. On December 20, President Kiska vetoed the law, stating its supporters had failed to demonstrate an increased risk of fraudulent attempts to register religious groups,

which the SNS had cited as the main justification for the bill. He also said its supporters had not explained why the existing 20,000-member requirement was insufficient. Kiska further stated most currently registered religious organizations in the country, which would keep their registered status under the new law, would not meet the new 50,000 person criteria. In addition, he said the 50,000 requirement was disproportionate when compared to registration requirements in other European Union member states. Parliament planned a vote for early 2017 to seek to override the president's veto.

Most political parties supported the new law out of explicit concern over Islam, including the largest party represented in parliament, Direction – Social Democracy (Smer), which campaigned on an avowedly anti-Muslim platform for the March parliamentary elections. In January Smer Prime Minister Robert Fico stated the only way to minimize the risks of events similar to the attacks by Muslims in Paris and Germany was to “prevent the creation of a unified Muslim community” in the country. In May Fico told the media Islam had “no place” in the country and he did not want “several tens of thousands of Muslims here who could push through their things.” Smer's coalition partners also supported the new law. In September SNS Chair Andrej Danko stated support for the increase in the registration requirement was justified because “demographic developments cannot be guessed” and conflicts around the construction of mosques “needed to be prevented.”

Opposition parties also expressed anti-Muslim views. In July Richard Sulik, the leader of Freedom and Solidarity (SaS) – the second largest political party in parliament and the largest opposition party – placed a post on Facebook saying Islam was “in contradiction with our culture” and “a direct threat to our civilization.” During the election campaign, Marian Kotleba, governor of the Banska Bystrica region and leader of the People's Party Our Slovakia (LSNS) – which described itself as a party based on national, Christian, and social principles in opposition to the “criminal ‘democratic’ system” – criticized Prime Minister Fico for not “taking a harder line” against Muslims and refugees. In the November parliamentary debate over the new law, two LSNS parliamentarians labelled Islam a “pedophilic system” and said stricter registration requirements were needed to prevent the infiltration of non-Christian religious groups.

Up until the parliamentary vote in November, local NGOs, including the Center for Research on Ethnicity and Culture (CVEK), continued to advocate for removal of the previous 20,000-member requirement for registration of religious groups, saying the other legal requirements for registration were sufficient to prevent the

registration of groups whose activities were unconstitutional. The NGOs stated the religious groups most disadvantaged by the registration requirements were those associated with new immigrant communities, such as the Muslim community, which remained unregistered due to an inability to meet the 20,000-member requirement.

The registration application of the Christian Fellowship remained unresolved as of the end of the year. The Ministry of Culture continued to consider additional expert opinion over whether to reverse its 2007 rejection of the original application. The rejection had been based on expert opinion saying the group promoted hatred toward other religious groups and was therefore ineligible for registration.

The government provided approximately 40 million euros (\$42.1 million) in annual state subsidies to the 18 registered religious groups. A large portion of the government subsidy to the registered religious groups continued to be used to pay clergy and was allocated to the groups based on the number of their clergy. Government discussions with stakeholders about changes in the model to be used for the funding of religious groups continued throughout the year.

NGOs and unregistered religious groups continued to report the existing legal provisions for registration made it difficult for unregistered groups to enter the public discourse, and continued to limit their ability to alter negative public attitudes toward smaller religious organizations.

In the absence of registration, the Muslim community remained unable to employ an imam formally. Muslim community leaders continued to report prisons and detention facilities frequently prevented their spiritual representatives from gaining access to their adherents. Members of the Muslim community also reported 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 continued its cultural grant program allocating money for the upkeep of religious monuments.

The Islamic Foundation in Slovakia reported a continued increase in anti-Muslim rhetoric by members of the ruling coalition and opposition members of parliament throughout the year. Some government officials continued to portray Muslims, particularly migrants, as potential threats to national security, culture, and society.

LSNS party members openly campaigned against Muslims in the election and praised the fascist-era government, which had deported tens of thousands of Slovak Jews to Nazi death camps. LSNS candidates also vowed to promote “Christian values” and obtained the support of three Catholic priests during the elections. In September during a parliamentary debate on climate change, a parliamentarian from the LSNS party stated he disagreed with the terms “economic and climate migration,” saying the European migration crisis was instead “an organized Muslim invasion.”

In August the director of the Nation’s Memory Institute (UPN) dismissed its historian, Martin Lacko, who had openly supported the LSNS party and participated in events celebrating the World War II-era fascist state. The UPN, a public institution established by the government, continued to provide access to previously undisclosed records of the regimes ruling the country from 1939 to 1989, but Jewish community leaders continued to criticize the organization for reportedly downplaying the role of prominent World War II-era figures in supporting anti-Semitic policies.

In March the media reported Milan Mazurek, an LSNS member elected to parliament, had written a social media post in 2015 saying the Holocaust was a “fairy tale” and praising Hitler.

In June the Ministry of Interior published a statement, adopted by the Committee for the Elimination of Racism, Xenophobia, Anti-Semitism, and Other Forms of Intolerance, calling for an end to online hate speech. The committee – a part of the Government Council on Human Rights and National Minorities, an advisory body to the government made up of civil society and government representatives – said online hate speech often resulted in physical violence.

On September 9, Prime Minister Fico, Speaker of Parliament Andrej Danko, and other senior-level leaders commemorated the Day of the Victims of the Holocaust and of Racial Violence at the Holocaust Memorial in Bratislava.

On January 26, Prime Minister Fico attended the opening of the country’s first museum dedicated to the Holocaust, built on the grounds of a former concentration camp in Sered. The government provided 2.5 million euros (\$2.63 million) to support the museum’s construction.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

NGOs reported increased levels of violence and online hate speech towards Muslims and refugees. Members of the Muslim community reported greater levels of fear compared with previous years. In order not to inflame public opinion, Muslim community leaders said they kept their prayer rooms low-key and did not widely publicize their locations.

One Somali refugee reported being physically and verbally attacked on six separate occasions in different locations of Bratislava. On at least two occasions, the attackers forcibly attempted to remove the refugee's hijab while shouting anti-refugee and anti-Muslim slurs. The refugee's child was present during two of the incidents. In September the Ministry of Interior published a statement condemning the attacks and racial and religious hatred in general.

In June groups characterized in the press as far-right organized an anti-Muslim and anti-refugee protest, attended by close to 1,000 people.

The Islamic Foundation in Slovakia reported a continued increase in anti-Muslim rhetoric by what it described as "extremist" groups and politicians. The foundation catalogued instances of online anti-Muslim hate speech, which in many cases promoted the use of deadly violence against Muslims and refugees. The foundation reported in August a video was posted on YouTube entitled "A visit to the Islamic family successfully assimilated into Europe." In the staged video, Jurij Martynov, who previously had run for deputy of the local council of the Bratislava district of Karlova Ves, was seen wearing a ski mask and holding a handgun. He talked about bestiality, mutilation, being married to a six-year-old girl, beating another child every hour, and praising a young boy for shouting "I'll kill you all, you infidel dogs."

In another example, the foundation reported in January a Facebook page entitled "The Slovak Caliphate" triggered a large number of anti-Muslim comments. One comment read, "Start building a mosque and its foundations will drown in pig's blood." Another comment offered to take the Muslim founders of the page "to visit Auschwitz to teach them about religion there."

Some Christian groups and other organizations, described as far-right groups by the press, continued to issue statements praising the World War II-era fascist government, which had deported thousands of Jews to Nazi death camps. While there were no press reports of direct Holocaust denial, groups described in the press as far-right continued to organize gatherings throughout the year where

participants displayed symbols of the World War II-era fascist state. In their online posts promoting these events, the organizers often included photos showing World War II symbols. On March 14, for example, the LSNS used such symbols in its online postings about a commemoration it organized for the founding of the World War II fascist state. A Catholic priest participated in the commemoration along with LSNS members of parliament.

The Ecumenical Council of Churches remained the only formal association for interreligious dialogue and continued to include only Christian groups.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Ambassador and other embassy officers continued to meet with government officials to discuss the treatment of religious minority groups and anti-Muslim sentiment. The Ambassador expressed U.S. government concern over the restrictive nature of the 50,000-person registration requirement supported by parliament. Embassy officers also continued discussions with Ministry of Culture officials about developments regarding the sections of the law addressing the registration of religious groups and proposed changes to the funding of churches and religious groups. The Ambassador and another embassy official participated in the annual Holocaust observation ceremony in Bratislava.

In January a visiting Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor raised U.S. concerns over the government's "use of divisive political rhetoric on refugees and Muslims." He also met with members of the Muslim community and NGO representatives to discuss the issues Muslim refugees faced integrating into the society.

Embassy officers met regularly with registered and unregistered religious organizations and civil society groups to discuss violence and hate speech directed against Muslims as well as the continued negative impact of the legal requirements for registration of religious groups on religious minorities.