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## U.S. Department of State

### The Slovak Republic Country Report on Human Rights Practices for 1996

Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, January 30, 1997.

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#### THE SLOVAK REPUBLIC

The Slovak Republic became an independent state in 1993, following the dissolution of the Czech and Slovak Federal Republic (CSFR). Its Constitution provides for a multiparty, multiethnic parliamentary democracy, including separation of powers and an independent judiciary. Slovakia chose to carry over the entire body of CSFR domestic legislation and international treaty obligations, which gradually are being renewed or updated.

The national police, which fall under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Interior, are the primary law enforcement agency. In addition to domestic law enforcement, they also have responsibility for border security. The Slovak Information Service (SIS), an independent organization reporting directly to the Prime Minister, is responsible for all civilian security and intelligence activities. A six-member parliamentary commission, which includes no meaningful opposition participation, oversees the SIS. Civilian authorities maintain effective control of the security forces. Police have committed some human rights abuses.

Slovakia made significant but intermittent progress in moving from a command-based to a market-based economy, with almost 79 percent of gross domestic product (GDP) now generated by the private sector. However, the Government is reluctant to relinquish control over certain "strategic" sectors, e.g., transportation, telecommunications, and energy. GDP growth was strong at around 7 percent, inflation was under 7 percent, and the National Bank of Slovakia, in concert with the Government, continued a disciplined monetary and fiscal policy. The privatization process, while moving at a rapid rate, lacked transparency and largely excluded foreign investors. The economy is industrially based, with just 7

percent of GDP derived from agricultural production. Major exports are iron and steel, machinery and transport equipment, audio and video equipment, plastic materials, chemicals and fuels, paper, and paper products. GDP per capita is approximately \$2,650, providing most of the population with an adequate standard of living. Unemployment was high, though declining, at 12.4 percent, with some areas of the country reaching levels as high as 28 percent. A disproportionate number of unemployed are Roma, who face exceptional difficulties in finding and holding jobs as a result of discrimination.

While the Government generally respected most of the human rights of its citizens, disturbing trends away from democratic principles continued. Human rights monitors reported police brutality against Roma, and there were credible allegations that the SIS conducted surveillance of senior political figures and their spouses. There were also credible allegations of politically motivated dismissals of public officials, intimidation of opponents of government policy, and interference with the electronic media. An atmosphere of intimidation restricted freedom of expression in certain areas. A new law infringed on academic freedom. The Government's failure to seriously investigate the issue of possible SIS involvement in the 1995 abduction and torture of the President's son undermines its commitment to the rule of law. Discrimination and violence against women are serious problems. Roma faced societal discrimination, and the police failed to provide adequate protection against continued attacks on Roma by skinheads.

## **RESPECT FOR HUMAN RIGHTS**

### **Section 1 Respect for the Integrity of the Person, Including Freedom from:**

#### **a. Political and Other Extrajudicial Killing**

There were no confirmed reports of political or other extrajudicial killings by government officials.

However, press speculation is widespread that elements of the security services were involved in the death of Robert Remias. Remias was a friend and intermediary of Oskar Fegyveres (a former member of the SIS and a self-proclaimed witness to the kidnaping of the President's son in August 1995--see Section 1.c.). Remias died when his car exploded on April 29 in Bratislava.

A few hours after the incident, the Ministry of Interior released a statement saying that the blast had been caused by a defect in the propane/butane fuel burning system. The importer of the system claimed that there were no instances worldwide of such an accident. In September the authorities investigating the incident officially concluded that a bomb was the cause of the explosion. To date there are no suspects.

Other bombs that caused property damage but no deaths were placed in front of the homes of ethnic Hungarian Member of Parliament Bela Bugar in May and breakaway founding member of the ruling Movement for a Democratic Slovakia Frantisek Gaulieder in December. While the investigation into the Bugar bombing remained open at year's end, both Bugar and the police believe the attack was criminal and not political in nature. A police investigation into the Gaulieder bombing was in progress at year's end.

Skinhead violence against Roma led to three deaths (see Section 5).

#### **b. Disappearance**

There were no reports of politically motivated disappearances.

### c. Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment

The Constitution prohibits such practices. However, certain events have raised questions about the observance of these prohibitions by government agents.

The 1995 case of the violent abduction of the President's son, Michael Kovac Jr., to Austria, during which he was tortured, remained unsolved. SIS personnel are alleged to be implicated. The SIS refused to permit its personnel to be questioned and has accused police investigators of wrongdoing. One lead police investigator resigned under pressure; another was removed from the case, as was their supervisor. The third investigator closed the case due to "insufficient evidence" and noted that the incident may have been staged to embarrass the Government. The Government's failure to seriously investigate the torture and kidnaping case undermines its commitment to the rule of law.

Human rights monitors reported cases of police brutality against Roma. In one case a Rom alleged he was beaten by police and forced to sign a confession that he had committed a murder. He was sentenced to 18 months' imprisonment but later released.

In May Dr. Vasilij Demidov was involved in an altercation at a department store in Martin. Police intervened, and he was arrested, taken to a police station, and allegedly beaten. The police denied the charges, saying that the man was drunk and hurt himself in his aggressive state. While doctors did not give official statements, one was quoted anonymously as saying that Demidov's injuries did not appear to be self-inflicted. In August police investigators dismissed charges against the policemen involved. At year's end, prosecutors were still considering charges against Demidov for interfering with the duties of a police officer and filing a false report.

Prison conditions meet minimum international standards, and the Government permits visits by human rights monitors.

### d. Arbitrary Arrest, Detention, or Exile

The Constitution prohibits arbitrary arrest and detention, and the Government observes this prohibition.

A person accused or suspected of a crime must be given a hearing within 24 hours and either set free or remanded to the court. During this time, the detainee has the right to an attorney. If remanded to a court, the accused is entitled to a hearing within 24 hours, at which the judge will set the accused free or issue a substantive written order placing the accused in custody. Investigative detention may last up to 2 months and may be extended. The total length of pretrial detention may not exceed 1 year, unless the Supreme Court extends it by determining that the person constitutes a serious danger to society. Pretrial detainees constituted roughly 25 percent of the total prison population, and the average pretrial detention period was 7.2 months. The law allows family visits and provides for a court-paid attorney if needed, although human rights monitors point out that this applies only to defendants whose alleged offenses are punishable by more than 5 years in prison. A system of bail exists. Noncitizens may be detained for up to 30 days for the purposes of identification.

The Constitution prohibits exile, and the Government observes this prohibition.

### e. Denial of Fair Public Trial

The Constitution provides for courts that are independent, impartial, and separate from the other branches of government. Some critics allege, however, that the dependence of judges upon the Ministry

of Justice for logistical support, the granting of leave requests, and other services undermines their independent status. Also, the Ministry of Justice can remove presidents and vice presidents of the courts for any reason, although they remain judges; it has done so.

The court system consists of local and regional courts with the Supreme Court as the highest court of appeal except for constitutional questions. There is a separate Constitutional Court--with no ties to the Ministry of Justice--that considers constitutional issues. In addition, there is a separate military court system, the decisions of which may be appealed to the Supreme Court and the Constitutional Court. Under the Constitution, the President appoints and removes Constitutional Court judges based upon parliamentary nominations. Parliament elects other judges, based on recommendations from the Ministry of Justice, and can remove them for misconduct.

Persons charged with criminal offenses are entitled to fair and open public trials. They have the right to be informed of the charges against them and of their legal rights, to retain and consult with counsel sufficiently in advance to prepare a defense, and to confront witnesses. Defendants enjoy a presumption of innocence and have the right to refuse to testify against themselves. They may appeal any judgment against them.

The "lustration" law of the former CSFR, barring from high public office persons who previously collaborated with the Communist-era secret police, expired at year's end. It had not been enforced since independence in 1993.

With respect to the Roma minority, human rights monitors continued to charge that police appear reluctant to take the testimony of witnesses to skinhead attacks on Roma. Further, they reported that police used the device of countercharges to pressure Roma victims of police brutality to drop their complaints, that medical doctors and investigators cooperated with police by refusing to describe accurately the injuries involved, and that lawyers often were reluctant to represent Roma in such situations, for fear this would have a negative effect on their practice.

Several Roma complained to a human rights organization about the reluctance of police in Prievidza to deal with their reports of skinhead violence and threats. Police routinely refused to accept complaints and accused the Roma of abusing public officials. The human rights organization sent a complaint to police headquarters in Banska Bystrica. In this case, the police chief admitted the violation of police basic duties and promised to take disciplinary action against the officers involved. No known action had been taken by year's end.

There were no reports of political prisoners.

#### f. Arbitrary Interference with Privacy, Family, Home, or Correspondence

The Criminal Code requires police to obtain a judicial search warrant in order to enter a home. The court may issue such a warrant only if there is a well-founded suspicion that important evidence or persons accused of criminal activity are present inside or if there is some other important reason. Police must present the warrant before conducting the house search or within 24 hours after the search.

The 1993 Police Law regulates wiretapping and mail surveillance for the purposes of criminal investigation, which may be conducted, on the order of a judge or prosecutor, only in cases of extraordinarily serious premeditated crimes or crimes involving international treaty obligations. However, in June a local radio station in Bratislava acquired and broadcast a tape of a conversation between then-Minister of Interior Hudek and chief of the SIS Ivan Lexa in which they appeared to be

discussing the dismissal of the police investigator of the Kovac kidnaping case. A second tape, allegedly of a conversation between deputy Prime Minister Sergej Kozlik and Lubomir Dobrik (State Secretary of the Justice Ministry) discussing plans to shift control of the state insurance company into the hands of fellow members of the Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (HZDS) party was obtained, but not played due to its poor quality. It is not clear who made the tapes, but the independent media has alleged that SIS or police agents were involved in the former case while the latter may have been a more amateur, yet still illegal, undertaking. There were credible allegations that the SIS conducted routine surveillance of some senior political figures and their spouses. Radio Free Europe (RFE) representatives alleged that SIS agents tailed RFE deputy editor Luba Lesna.

In July 1995, police with a legal warrant searched the diocesan headquarters of Bishop Rudolf Balaz, Chairman of the Conference of Bishops. The search occurred soon after Balaz had led the Conference in a statement of support for President Michal Kovac, who has been the target of criticism by supporters of Prime Minister Vladimir Meciar. Police said Balaz was involved in the illegal sale of art works listed in the register of national treasures. Denying this, Balaz's office director stated that the Government was intent on discrediting Balaz and that police had searched areas clearly inconsistent with their alleged mission. The charges were dropped in March after a newspaper alleged SIS involvement in the case. A high church official said that the police had not returned either the art work or the money that had been seized.

There were no reports of mail tampering.

## **Section 2 Respect for Civil Liberties, Including:**

### **a. Freedom of Speech and Press**

The Constitution provides for freedom of speech and of the press, and the Government generally respects this right in practice. However, both the law and an atmosphere of intimidation restrict freedom of expression in certain areas.

Although dependent on a state-owned distribution company, the print media are free and uncensored, and newspapers and magazines regularly publish a wide range of opinions and news articles. However, the politicization of state-owned broadcast media remains a significant problem. Private broadcast media are widespread but are threatened by huge cost increases imposed by the state-owned telecommunications company.

Many individuals reported an atmosphere of intimidation that made them reluctant to criticize the Government openly without fear of some form of reprisal. This led some to practice self-censorship. Among the events contributing to this view were: The mysterious death of former policeman Robert Remias (see Section 1.a.), who had assisted journalists investigating the 1995 kidnaping of the President's son; widespread reports of civil servants being dismissed for refusing to join the ruling political party; reports that the Government, acting through the Fund for National Property, required newly privatized companies to advertise exclusively in progovernment media; and public questioning by officials of the governing coalition of the patriotism of citizens and journalists who spoke critically of developments in the country.

In November a Banska Bystrica court ruled that an opposition daily was guilty of libel and sentenced it to pay \$250,000 (7.5 million crowns) to the prime minister and each member of his cabinet for quoting a journalist who spoke at the funeral of Robert Remias (see Section 1.a.). The journalist was found not guilty because the paper used his quotation out of context. The newspaper filed an immediate appeal,

which was pending at year's end.

The bitter dispute between the President and the Prime Minister generated multiple defamation suits. In May the President sued the Prime Minister for defamation. The President also sued Jan Smolec, a former editor of the newspaper Slovenska Republika, for defamation in October. The newspaper SME was charged in October in a secret indictment with publishing secret documents from a government meeting. The editors of SME reported that they were told they could be punished if they revealed the existence of the indictment, which they nonetheless did.

An amendment to the Criminal Code, commonly referred to as "the Law on the Protection of the Republic" was passed in March despite domestic and international criticism that it is undemocratic. The amendment makes it a crime to facilitate the spread of false information damaging to the interests of the Slovak Republic. The amendment was returned by the President to Parliament in April. In December a revised law was passed and again returned by the President. The 1995 State Language Law also restricts freedom of expression by banning the use of foreign languages in the media. Broadcasting in minority languages continued, but several radio stations canceled English language programming in order to comply with the law.

Slovak radio and television are supervised by three boards appointed by majority vote of Parliament. The Slovak Television Council and the Slovak Radio Council establish broadcast policy for state-owned television and radio. The Slovak Radio and Television council issues broadcast licenses and administers advertising laws and some other regulations. The Radio and Television Council has made significant progress in fostering the spread of private broadcasting. It has issued 27 licenses for private radio broadcasting. A private company, Markiza Television, began broadcasting with a signal covering two-thirds of the country, and it quickly established a leading position in the ratings. In September Parliament passed a law to privatize the second channel of Slovak television (STV). Three private companies and one local government hold licenses and broadcast television regionally. The Radio and Television Council revoked the license of one regional broadcaster, TV Sever, because it changed programming abruptly. In December TV Sever won a court decision that restores its license. Cable television licenses are held by 73 municipalities and private companies.

The state-owned electronic media have continued to be highly politicized. Critics have charged that STV avoids controversial topics and provides limited space for opposition views or reporting the activities of the President. STV was censured by the Television and Radio Council for violating programming rules by abruptly interrupting its regular schedule to broadcast a program charging the President's son with fraud.

Slovak Radio's coverage of internal politics remains more objective. However, in April an editor at Slovak radio was fired after reporting erroneously that two intelligence service agents would testify in the kidnapping case involving the President's son. The error was in not noting that the two witnesses were former intelligence agents. The editor sued, and in December a court ruled that dismissal was too great a penalty for such an error. The dismissed editor charged that he was really fired for disseminating antigovernment commentaries.

In January the Radio and Television Council sharply criticized some programs of Radio Free Europe for being unbalanced, unobjective, and anti-Slovak. It nevertheless finally renewed Radio Free Europe's license for 18 months in November.

The Government continued to restrict the activities of minorities: It terminated the autonomous status of the ethnic Hungarian and Roma theaters (see Section 5).

The law provides for academic freedom, which is generally respected. However, the universities law adopted in September transferred final decisionmaking power regarding curriculum, the establishment of departments, faculty promotions, and the granting of degrees from individual universities to the Ministry of Education. Students and rectors characterized the law as an infringement on academic freedom.

b. Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and Association

The Constitution provides for these rights, and the Government respects them in practice.

c. Freedom of Religion

The Constitution provides for freedom of religious belief and faith, and the Government respects this provision in practice. Under existing law, only registered churches and religious organizations have the explicit right to conduct public worship services and other activities, although no specific religions or practices are banned or discouraged by the authorities. The State provides financial subsidies only to registered churches and religious organizations, of which there are 15.

d. Freedom of Movement within the Country, Foreign Travel, Emigration, and Repatriation

The Constitution provides for these rights, and the Government respects them in practice.

The Government cooperates with the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and other humanitarian organizations in assisting refugees. The Government provides first asylum and provided it to 403 persons in 1996. Of these, 4 were granted citizenship, 128 were accepted as refugees, 62 claims were rejected, 193 persons terminated their cases, and the remainder are pending. In addition, under the auspices of the UNHCR, approximately 250 persons granted first asylum in previous years were repatriated to Bosnia-Herzegovina in 1996. There were no reports of forced expulsion of those having a valid claim to refugee status. However, some refugee claimants had difficulty in gaining access to initial processing.

### **Section 3 Respect for Political Rights: The Right of Citizens to Change their Government**

Citizens have the constitutional right to change their government through the periodic free election of their national representatives. Citizens over the age of 18 are eligible to vote, and voting is by secret ballot. The Constitution reserves certain powers to the President as Chief of State (elected by the Parliament), but executive power rests with the Government. Legislative power is vested in the National Council of the Slovak Republic (Parliament).

A number of actions served to consolidate the Government's power in a manner, which, taken as a whole, gave rise to continued concern over the future course of pluralism, separation of powers, and democratic development overall.

In December in a virtual party line vote, deputies ousted M.P. Frantisek Gauleider from Parliament against his will because he had earlier resigned his membership in the ruling party, the Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (HZDS). A bomb exploded at his residence 2 days later (see Section 1.a.). Gauleider's expulsion was referred to the Constitutional Court, where it was pending at year's end. The incident, along with the bombing which followed parliamentary action, undercuts the freedom to express opposing views without fear of reprisals.

Many academics criticized the new higher education law as an infringement on academic freedom (see

Section 2.a.). In the absence of a civil service law, the Government continued to replace national and local government officials with its supporters, apparently based largely on political loyalty. In August Parliament passed a territorial administration law redistricting regional and local government. Details of the relationship between appointed heads of the newly created regions and counties and elected mayors are not yet clear, and further legislation is expected. Ethnic Hungarian and other opposition politicians accused the Government of gerrymandering and excessive patronage as the Government moved to appoint coalition party members to newly created positions associated with this law. Most politicians were unable to describe the role of the new regional entities except to say that they were dependent on central government funds and that their leaders were appointed, not elected like the local mayors. In its handling of the privatization of large state enterprises, the national property fund, nominally independent of the Government, appeared to favor primarily supporters of the ruling coalition.

Women are underrepresented in government. They hold 2 of 15 portfolios: Labor/Social Affairs and Education. One of three Deputy Prime Ministers is a woman. Women hold 22 seats in the 150-member Parliament.

The large ethnic Hungarian minority, whose coalition gained 17 seats in Parliament in the 1994 elections, is well represented in Parliament and in local government but not in the central government. Roma are not represented in Parliament and hold no senior government positions.

#### **Section 4 Governmental Attitude Regarding International and Nongovernmental Investigation of Alleged Violations of Human Rights**

A number of human rights groups operate without government restriction, investigating and publishing their findings on human rights cases. Nonetheless, nongovernmental organizations (NGO's) and foundations protested a government-sponsored law that required such organizations to have substantial financial resources in order to operate, a condition which would eliminate 95 percent of existing foundations. NGO's protested another provision of this law that required documentation of sources and origin of property donated to a foundation out of concern that this provision compels the public and perhaps unwelcome exposure of donors. In April, after no evidence of fraud was found, the General Prosecutor stopped the investigation of human rights foundations funded by international philanthropist George Soros. The investigation was started in 1995, at the behest of the head of the Slovak National Party (SNS), after Soros criticized the Government.

#### **Section 5 Discrimination Based on Race, Sex, Religion, Disability, Language, or Social Status**

The law prohibits discrimination and provides for the equality of all citizens. Health care, education, retirement benefits, and other social services are provided regardless of race, sex, religion, disability, language, or social status.

##### **Women**

Violence, particularly sexual violence against women, remains a serious and underreported problem. Experts say that in 1993, the latest year studied, there were 47,000 acts of violence or intolerance against women (violence is defined as physical, sexual, emotional, and economic). Physical and sexual violence account for almost half of all reported cases. These experts conclude that most of the unreported cases, estimated to be as high as half of all cases, involve sexual violence. They note that although police (in 1993) reported a drop of 19 percent in officially reported cases of sexual violence, centers of psychological counseling registered a 60 percent increase in such cases. Police estimate that two-thirds of female rape victims fail to report the cases for personal reasons. Police deal with spousal abuse, child

abuse, and other violence against women in the same way as other criminal offenses; specific sections in the Criminal Code deal with rape, sexual abuse, trade in women, and pandering.

As a result of amendments to the Criminal Code that took effect in 1994, prostitution is not an illegal act. However, the Code prohibits activities related to prostitution, such as renting apartments for conducting prostitution, spreading contagious diseases, or trafficking in women for the purpose of prostitution.

Women are equal under the law. They enjoy the same property, inheritance, and other legal rights as men. Women are well represented in the judicial and administrative professions but are underrepresented in other public service areas. Labor law prohibits women from engaging in certain types of work considered dangerous to their health.

Despite the lack of overt discrimination, women face large wage discrepancies in the workplace. Women receive 25 to 30 percent less pay than men for the same work. A February 1995 report prepared by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs stated that for the period 1988-93, "gross earnings of men are 71 percent higher than those of women." The report concluded that "since there is little difference in the level of education achieved by men and women, and since a significantly greater number of women are graduates of technical universities as well as universities, the discrepancy in wages is caused by factors other than educational achievement."

The Democratic Union of Women of Slovakia (DUZS) monitors observance of the rights of women and their families in light of internationally accepted documents and the Constitution, especially as they affect the social and family spheres. In August DUZS representatives stated that the number one problem facing women was insufficient resources to provide for everyday family needs. Other major problems included women's health and the health of their family members. The DUZS continued to promote creation of a parliamentary committee on women and the family, and passage of a law on the family. Regarding legislation, the DUZS was particularly interested in more day care and preschool programs. The DUZS also complained about growing discrimination against middle-aged and older women in employment.

After the 1995 U.N. Conference on Women in Beijing, the Government formed a Coordinating Committee for Women's Affairs. The Committee meets periodically to discuss the status of women's issues and any necessary followup from the Beijing Conference. The committee includes government officials as well as NGO participants. Some NGO representatives have chosen not to participate, characterizing the committee as ineffective.

## Children

The Government demonstrates its commitment to children's rights and welfare through its system of public education and medical care. The Ministry of Labor oversees implementation of the Government's programs for children. The Constitution, the law on education, the Labor Code, and the system of child welfare payments to families with children each provide in part for children's rights. Education is compulsory for 9 years, or until the age of 15.

While there is no evidence of a pattern of societal abuse of children, some problems remain. One NGO reported almost 400 cases of child beating and 500 cases of sexual abuse although the number of unreported cases could be much higher. In September police began an investigation into the legitimacy of an advertising agency that was sending children across the border into Austria for nude and seminude photo sessions. In cooperation with Interpol, police were also investigating a connection to the

case in Belgium. Dutroux was in active contact with many families in the town of Topolcany and the police were investigating whether any girls there were subject to abuse.

### People with Disabilities

The Constitution and implementing legislation provide for health protection and special working conditions for mentally and physically disabled persons, including special protection in employment relations and special assistance in training. A 1994 decree provides incentives to employers who create a "sheltered" workplace (i.e., a certain percentage of jobs set aside for disabled). The law also prohibits discrimination against physically disabled individuals in employment, education, and the provision of other state services. Nevertheless, experts report discrimination in such areas as accessibility of premises and access to education (especially higher education). Although not specifically required by law, another 1994 government decree mandates the provision of accessibility with regard to new building construction. The decree provides for sanctions but lacks a control mechanism to enforce them. A spokeswoman for an NGO dealing with people with disabilities said that the Government made some limited progress on accessibility issues and in supplying prosthetics.

### Religious minorities

Isolated instances of verbal harassment against Jews occurred during the year. Despite protests by the Federation of Jewish Communities, Slovak National Party members and the official Slovak cultural organization Matica Slovenska continued their efforts to revise the history of the pro-Nazi wartime Slovak state. These efforts included: Stopping publication of a new school history text, written by prominent historians, because it was not sufficiently positive in its treatment of then-president Tiso and his Nazi puppet state; television programs extolling the virtues of the Tiso Government; and statements by one SNS parliamentarian linking the deportation of Jews during the war to their excessive enrichment and their "paupering" of the Slovak people. However, the Prime Minister has publicly distanced himself from the glorification of the Tiso regime and has condemned fascism and anti-Semitism.

In December the Rabbi of Bratislava was attacked by three skinheads while on his way to inspect a large menorah in a public square. Bystanders chased the skinheads away, and the police were present during the subsequent candle-lighting ceremony, which proceeded without incident. One of the skinheads was identified and arrested.

### National/Racial/Ethnic Minorities

The Constitution provides minorities with the right to develop their own culture, receive information and education in their mother tongue, and participate in decisionmaking in matters affecting them. The Government continued to provide funding for cultural, educational, broadcasting, and publishing activities for the major ethnic minorities, but at greatly reduced levels. In April Parliament ratified a bilateral treaty with Hungary, which deals extensively with the treatment of ethnic minorities.

The politically active ethnic Hungarian minority, which is the most numerous, is concentrated primarily in southern Slovakia, with a population registered at 570,000 (150,000 of whom are thought to be Roma who speak Hungarian and choose to declare themselves as ethnic Hungarian). Most ethnic Hungarians and ethnic Slovaks living in mixed areas continued to coexist peacefully, but there were occasional outbreaks of anti-Hungarian feeling, mostly in areas where the two do not coexist.

Hungarian ethnic leaders complained about large cuts in government subsidies to Hungarian cultural organizations, as well as a number of government initiatives, which they said sought to reverse gains

made in previous years. The Government took no action in 1996 on the proposed education law that would expand the use of Slovak in schools of the Hungarian minority, and in particular require that history and literature be taught in Slovak. In January then-Foreign Minister Juraj Shenk assured the Commissioner for Minorities of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe that the Government would pass a law codifying the use of minority languages. The Ministry of Culture did not draft a bill, but ethnic Hungarian Members of Parliament did. Parliament did not act on this proposal. A September law on state symbols restricts the playing of foreign anthems to events where official foreign representatives are present. Ethnic Hungarian leaders had yet to notice any impact of this law.

Roma constitute the second largest ethnic minority and suffer disproportionately from high levels of poverty and unemployment. Credible reports by human rights monitors indicated that Roma continued to suffer from discrimination in employment and housing, and administration of state services. Skinhead violence against Roma was a serious and growing problem, and monitors reported that police remain reluctant to take action. In April three serious incidents took place: A Roma house was set on fire killing Jozef Miklos and injuring three other Roma in the town of Hontianske Nemce. According to witnesses, the mayor was unwilling to call the police to intervene; a Roma man suffered burns when three men threw a bottle of flaming liquid into his house in Zalistie after having assaulted him and four other Roma; and in Topolcany a group of skinheads attacked mentally disabled Romani children from an orphanage attending a hockey game, yelling "we will kill all gypsies."

In August a Romani man, who was taunted on a bus, knifed and killed a skinhead in the town of Prievidza. In the aftermath, skinheads set fire to Romani houses and spray-painted anti-Semitic, anti-Roma, and pro-Nazi graffiti in town.

In December a father and son of Romani heritage were stabbed by a skinhead at the train station in Handlova. The father died while the son suffered serious wounds. The police found and arrested the perpetrator, who remained in custody at year's end charged with murder and attempted murder.

Human rights monitors reported cases of police brutality against Roma (see Section 1.c.). Both ethnic Hungarians and Roma protested the June decision of Culture Minister Ivan Hudec to end the autonomous status of the country's two ethnic Hungarian theaters and its only Roma theater. The theaters were placed under the direction of a state official appointed by the Minister. Government involvement in, and control of, cultural activities occurs throughout the country, however, and is not restricted to minority areas.

Persons of color also suffered from attacks or discrimination. In August a U.S. serviceman was called racially derogatory names and attacked by skinheads in Banska Bystrica before other citizens came to his rescue. Another person of color was verbally harassed at the airport due to the color of his skin.

## **Section 6 Worker Rights**

### **a. The Right of Association**

The Constitution provides for the right to form and join unions, except in the armed forces. According to one reliable, independent estimate, approximately 50 percent of the work force is organized. Official sources stated that the figure is closer to 75 percent. Unions are independent of the government and political parties. There are no restrictions on the right to strike. Slovakia has been largely free of strikes since the 1989 revolution. However, in 1996 low-level labor unrest increased. In September state-employed doctors threatened to strike because of low wages. No strike took place, and negotiations continued. In