The State Department web site below is a permanent electro
information released prior to January 20, 2001. Please see v
material released since President George W. Bush took offic
This site is not updated so external links may no longer func
us with any questions about finding information.

NOTE: External links to other Internet sites should not be c
endorsement of the views contained therein.

U.S. Department of State

Slovak Republic Country Report on Human Rights Practices for 1998

Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, February 26, 1999.

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. Parliamentary elections were held in September, and a new coalition government took office in October. Prime Minister Mikulas Dzurinda replaced former Prime Minister Vladimir Meciar. Slovakia chose to carry over the entire body of CSFR domestic legislation and international treaty obligations, which still are being renewed or updated. The Constitution provides for an independent judiciary; however, some critics allege that the Ministry of Justiceâs logistical and personnel authority allows it to exert some influence on the judicial system.

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. Starting in November a multipartisan parliamentary commission began overseeing the SIS. Civilian authorities maintain effective control of the security forces. Police committed some human rights abuses.

Slovakia continued to make progress in the difficult transition from a command-based to a market-based economy, with more than 82 percent of gross domestic product (GDP) now generated by the private sector. GDP growth continued to be strong (around 6 percent) and the inflation rate increased to 6.7 percent during the year. However, progress in industrial restructuring was uneven, and financial sector restructuring still has not occurred. The most critical problems are a large state budget deficit,

government debt, a weakened balance of payments, and a shaky banking sector. Real GDP per capita was approximately $3,600 at the end of June, providing most of the population with an adequate standard of living. Unemployment was more than 13 percent, reaching almost 30 percent in some areas. A disproportionate number of unemployed are Roma, who face exceptional difficulties in finding and holding jobs, partly as a result of discrimination. The economy is largely industrial, with only 7 percent of GDP generated by agricultural production. Major exports are iron and steel products, audio and video equipment, machinery and transport equipment, plastic materials, paper products, apparel, petroleum products, and organic chemicals.

Although the former Meciar government generally respected most of the human rights of its citizens, it demonstrated a lack of attachment to democratic principles and continued to show intolerance for opposition views and a penchant for the recentralization of state authority. Most notably, in July former Prime Minister Meciar, using presidential powers acquired when Parliament failed to elect a president in Parliament, granted general amnesties to those involved in the 1995 kidnaping and torture of the former President's son and the unconstitutional thwarting of a May 1997 referendum on direct election of the President. Both of these actions undermined the rule of law. Human rights monitors continued to report police brutality against Roma. In December the newly elected Parliament passed a resolution acknowledging that the previous Parliament violated the rights of ousted Deputy Frantisek Gaulieder. Although the new Parliament regretted the action of its predecessor, it did not annul the former Parliamentâs resolution, and Gaulieder chose not to withdraw his complaint that was accepted in September by the European Court of Human Rights.

There were credible allegations that the SIS under the former government conducted surveillance of many political figures, journalists, and their spouses. There also were credible allegations of politically motivated dismissals of public officials and the intimidation of opponents of government policy. Defamation laws and a climate of intimidation led some journalists to practice self-censorship. Media monitors confirmed government politicization of the state-owned electronic media. Actions by the former government called into question academic freedom. Discrimination and violence against women remain problems. Roma faced societal discrimination, and the police sometimes failed to provide adequate protection against attacks on them by skinheads or to investigate cases vigorously. Some anti-Semitic incidents occurred, and some discrimination against the Hungarian minority appears to persist.

The new government coalition took power in November and vowed that it would demonstrate greater respect for democratic principles and human rights. In its first 2 months, it corrected some constitutional misdeeds of the previous government, restarted investigations into some serious crimes, and created a new office of Deputy Prime Minister for Human Rights and Minorities. The new Deputy Prime Minister, Pal Csaky, opened a dialogue with religious and ethnic minorities.

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, there was widespread press speculation that elements of the security services were involved in the 1996 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 former President's son in August 1995--see Section 1.c.). Remias died when his car exploded on April 29, 1996 in Bratislava. The

investigation into his death has foundered for nearly 3 years and remained dormant at year's end with no suspects.

Skinhead violence against Roma led to one death (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, police on occasion abused Roma.

Human rights monitors reported cases of police brutality against Roma. According to an nongovernmental organization (NGO) spokesperson, there were five cases of police mistreatment of Roma in the eastern towns of Moldava and Turna, but he would not provide details of the incidents. In July police raided a Romani settlement in Rudnany, according to human rights monitors. Five police officers reportedly beat two male youths during the raid. The police conducted house-to-house searches during which they broke windows, doors, and furniture and confiscated residentsâ hammers, axes, and other tools without providing receipts. More often, the police are accused of tolerating violence against Roma by not preventing or investigating attacks against them in a timely and thorough manner.

The 1995 case of the violent abduction of the former 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." In March and again in August, then-Prime Minister Vladimir Meciar, using temporary presidential powers, stopped the investigations into the case and granted a general amnesty to anyone accused of a crime in the kidnaping. In December, using the same presidential powers, newly elected Prime Minister Mikulas Dzurinda rescinded the amnesty. Interior Minister Ladislav Pittner immediately reopened the investigation, but Members of Parliament (M.P.âs) in Meciar's party appealed Dzurinda's action to the Constitutional Court. At year's end, the appeal was pending. In another development in the case, in December the Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued an apology to Kovac Jr. for not providing consular services to him when he was kidnaped and taken to Austria. The Constitutional Court ruled in 1996 that the Ministry violated Kovac Jr.'s rights by not providing him the assistance to be accorded all citizens.

Dr. Vasilij Demidov, a victim of alleged police brutality in May 1996, was countercharged with interfering with the duties of a police officer and filing a false report. In March he was taken to court and supposedly convicted but has never received the judgement or a fine. His police record shows no conviction.

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 these prohibitions.

A person accused or suspected of a crime must be given a hearing within 24 hours and either set free or remanded by the court. During this time, the detainee has the right to an attorney. If remanded by a court, the accused is entitled to a hearing within 24 hours at which the judge either sets the accused free or issues 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 after 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. A system of bail exists. Noncitizens may be detained for up to 30 days for the purposes of identification. Detainees have the right to see an attorney immediately and should be notified of this right; however, one NGO reports that not all detainees are notified of their rights.

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. However, some critics allege 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 Constitutional Court judges to 7-year terms based on 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.

With respect to the Roma minority, human rights monitors continued to charge that police are 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 that this would have a negative effect on their practice.

Former Prime Minister Meciarâs granting of amnesty to those involved in the Kovac Jr. kidaping and torture case and in thwarting a referendum undermined due process and the rule of law.

There were no reports of political prisoners.

f. Arbitrary Interference With Privacy, Family, Home, or Correspondence

The law provides for these rights, but the authorities sometimes infringed upon them. 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. It has never been determined who was responsible for two highly publicized taped interceptions of phone conversations in 1996. One involved a conversation between then-Minister of Interior Ludovit Hudek and then-SIS chief Ivan Lexa, in which they appeared to be discussing the dismissal of the police investigator of the Kovac kidnaping case. A second tape was allegedly of a conversation between then-deputy Prime Minister Sergei Kozlik and the former State Secretary of the Justice Ministry Lubomir Dobrik discussing plans to shift control of the state insurance company into the hands of fellow members of the Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (HZDS). There were credible allegations that the SIS conducted routine surveillance of some political figures and their spouses. Radio Free Europe (RFE) representatives alleged that SIS agents followed RFE reporters who were working on sensitive stories. Other journalists also alleged that they were placed under surveillance and that their telephones were tapped.

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, several laws and a climate of intimidation led some journalists to practice self-censorship.

The print media are free and uncensored, although some journalists and media outlets reported that they exercised self-censorship out of fear for personal safety or economic repercussions under the former government. Newspapers and magazines regularly publish a wide range of opinions and news articles. However, the politicization of the state-owned broadcast media was a significant problem. Individuals continued to report attempts at intimidation that made them reluctant to criticize the former government openly without fear of some form of reprisal. Several cases highlight this trend. In each of these cases, respected journalists accused government agencies of perpetrating the crimes.

On March 16 Czech Television Nova correspondent in Slovakia Eugen Korda's car was damaged seriously by unknown persons. Korda, who reported stories that were not favorable to the former government, was harassed in the past; his previous car was damaged 3 months earlier, he reportedly has received threatening phone calls, and he reportedly was followed (as were his wife and son).

Arpad Soltesz, journalist for the Kosice-based daily Korzar, was attacked physically on May 7 in a Kosice restaurant. His injuries required 4 weeks of recuperation. Soltesz reported that he does not know why he was attacked but that he thinks the incident was related to the articles he wrote about VSZ (East Slovak Iron Works) and its relationship with the government.

Two Slovak journalists who were critical of the Government, Karol Lovas (Radio Twist) and Slavomir Klikusovsky (Novy Cas), were the targets of a campaign to discredit them. On May 14 anonymous flyers appeared in Bratislava alleging that the two had sexually abused boys and produced pornographic

films. The harassment began after Lovas interviewed Jozef Kroslak, then spokesman for Prime Minister Meciar, on independent Radio Twist. In the interview Lovas questioned Kroslak about the role of Prime Minister Meciar's advisor Blazena Martinkova. Kroslak referred to Martinkova as Meciar's "girlfriend" and was forced to resign the following day.

SME assistant editor Peter Toth, who has aggressively reported on the Kovac Jr. kidnaping (see Section 1.c.) and other allegations of government wrongdoing, reported in May that someone nailed a dead cat to the door of his apartment. Toth's car was burned in September 1997. Police later closed the investigation into the burning, leading to a formal complaint by Toth.

Threatened and actual defamation suits by politicians against journalists continued. Since losing a case could cause financial difficulties for most newspapers, the threat of a lawsuit is one method used to intimidate journalists. In April cabinet members began testifying in their libel suit against the opposition daily SME. Cabinet members, including Prime Minister Meciar, alleged that a 1996 article about the murder of Robert Remias damaged their reputations by insinuating that the Government was involved in Remias' death (see Section 1.a.). Court proceedings were postponed indefinitely on April 16 when SME's attorney objected that the judge was biased because he granted Prime Minister Meciar's request that the public be excluded from the trial.

Government officials sometimes harassed private media or restricted the flow of information. Culture Minister Ivan Hudec filed a complaint on February 11 against the Radio and Television Broadcasting Council (RRTV) for granting a license to private opposition-oriented Radio Twist on January 27 to begin broadcasting in eastern Slovakia. Hudec demanded that the decision be reversed because the station gave 81.1 MHZ as its broadcasting frequency instead of the correct 88.1 MHZ. Twist stated that this was merely a technical error. Hudec also accused Twist of trying to influence the Council. Confidential council documents apparently were given to Hudec. The RRTV refused to comply with Hudec's request to reverse its decision to grant the license to Twist.

Three boards appointed by majority vote of Parliament supervise radio and television broadcasting. The Slovak Television Council and the Slovak Radio Council establish broadcasting policy for state-owned television and radio. The Slovak Radio and Television Broadcasting Council issues broadcast licenses and administers advertising laws and some other regulations. The Radio and Television Broadcasting Council has made significant progress in fostering the spread of private broadcasting, for which it issued 26 radio and 99 television and cable television licenses. A private company, Markiza Television, with a signal covering two-thirds of the country, is the most watched station.

When the Parliament changed the national election law in June, it did not follow recommendations of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) to increase the role of the independent media. Rather, the HZDS-sponsored bill added penalties to the vague standing restrictions on any private media political coverage. HZDS officials sometimes interpreted the term "political coverage" to include the news. The media section of the law empowers state radio and television to allocate 21 hours of broadcast time evenly among all political parties participating in elections. The press is free to publish anything during election campaigns, including party platforms, until 48 hours before elections. Sanctions range from fines to loss of license for violations. The RRTV has the authority to determine violations and recommend penalties. Publicly supported Slovak Television (STV), contrary to its public mandate, provided biased and unbalanced news coverage of the September election campaign. STV is the only televised news source that covers the entire country. News coverage by the private media only partially offset STV coverage.

The RRTV tried to enforce the law evenhandedly, but largely was ignored by STV and to a lesser extent by the country's two most important independent broadcasters, TV Markiza and Radio Twist. The

smaller independents exercised a caution forced on them by the law's vagueness.

Money allocated to minority groups for the publication of minority language newspapers in some cases was eliminated. At the same time, the Government reportedly gave the R-press publishing company, with owners tied to the HZDS, $270,000 (Sk 9 million) to publish bimonthly minority-language supplements in the progovernment daily newspaper Slovenska Republika. Of the $270,000, less than $120,000 (Sk 4 million) was reportedly used for this purpose.

On September 2, the RRTV declared that private radio stations and independent TV Markiza violated the election law by broadcasting news programs that spotlighted opposition figures. TV Markiza canceled its "Leaders" program after being threatened with fines and license revocation. One of Markizaâs managers fled the country on September 6, claiming that he was about to be arrested on trumped-up charges. On September 15, protestors demonstrated outside TV Markiza against perceived efforts by the Government to control the stationâs programming and interfere with its independence. On September 16, the RRTV imposed a fine of approximately $150,000 (5 million SK) on Markiza for broadcasting those rallies.

The law provides for academic freedom, but the former government took actions that called into doubt its commitment to that principle. The 1996 amendment to the Law on Higher Education instituted restrictions on the autonomy of universities and gave the government increased control over the administration and funding of institutions of higher learning. In January the Ministry of Education issued implementing regulations to assert new control over university campuses. For example, under these regulations the Ministry of Education must approve the appointments of all professors. This and other features of the new law give the Government increased control over the administration of universities.

In 1997 the government established new universities in four cities where universities already existed. At the same time, it cut the budgets of the older universities. Critics maintain that the former government throughout 1998 continued to try to weaken the older universities, which it reportedly considered to be antigovernment, by diverting funds to the new campuses.

At the level of basic education, the former Minister of Education politicized the appointment of school principals and other administrators. School administrators were pressured to join the then-ruling HZDS and administrators received their jobs because of their HZDS ties.

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 the 15 registered churches and religious organizations.

In December Deputy Prime Minister Pal Csaky apologized to the chairman of the Slovak Bishops' Conference, Bishop Rudolf Balaz, for the behavior of the previous Government toward the Catholic Church. Among other things, Balaz had been the victim of what was being investigated at year's end as a

SIS frame-up for selling religious art.

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 United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and other humanitarian organizations in assisting refugees. The law includes provisions for granting refugee/asylee status in accordance with the provisions of the 1951 U.N. Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol. The Government provides first asylum and during the year provided it to 337 persons. Of these, 28 were granted citizenship, 49 were accepted as refugees, 36 claims were rejected and 224 persons terminated their cases. There were no reports of the 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). The country was without a President from March 3 to year's end because Parliament could not agree on a replacement. During that time, the majority of the President's powers were delegated to the Prime Minister, and the rest to the Speaker of Parliament, in accordance with the Constitution.

Elections were held in September, and four major opposition parties won 93 of 150 seats in the new Parliament. The four, including a party representing ethnic Hungarians, formed a coalition in November and vowed to improve respect for the rule of law and basic democratic principles, including human rights. Prime Minister Mikulas Dzurinda heads the new government. OSCE observers monitored the elections and found them free of discernible fraud. Voter turnout was 84 percent. Only two of the then-governing coalition parties crossed the 5 percent threshold to gain seats in Parliament. They went into opposition and were assigned a vice chairmanship of Parliament as well as proportional representation in parliamentary committees.

In June Parliament passed a new election law. The law, passed on a partisan basis with no consultation with the opposition, was designed to disadvantage the then-opposition. The OSCE and NGO observers criticized the law specifically for its lack of transparency and negative treatment of the independent media.

On August 10, the HZDS appealed to the Supreme Court to rescind the Central Election Commission's registration of the Slovak Democratic Coalition (SDK), the leading opposition party, in an attempt to make it ineligible to run in the September parliamentary election. The HZDS argued that by putting the word "coalition" in its name, the SDK should be considered a coalition rather than a valid party. However on August 14 the Supreme Court ruled in favor of the SDK.

In December 1996, deputies ousted Member of Parliament Frantisek Gaulieder from Parliament against his will because he earlier resigned his membership in the then-ruling HZDS. A bomb exploded at his residence 2 days later. In July 1997, the Constitutional Court ruled that Gaulieder's ouster was unconstitutional but left the formal remedy up to Parliament, stating that the Court could not change a

parliamentary resolution. Court judges said that if Parliament did not return Gaulieder's mandate, it would remain in violation of the Constitution. In September 1997, in direct contradiction of the July Constitutional Court ruling, the Parliament refused to reinstate Gaulieder. In December 1998 the newly elected Parliament passed a resolution acknowledging that the previous Parliament violated Gauliederâs rights and granted him 5 monthsâ salary in compensation. Although the new Parliament regretted the action of its predecessor, it did not annul the former Parliamentâs resolution, and Gaulieder chose not to withdraw his complaint that was accepted in September by the European Court of Human Rights.

Parliament also passed in June a new law on local elections against the advice of experts and without consulting the opposition. Domestic and international experts criticized the new law on two main grounds: that its provision for representation on ethnic principles created "false separations" and that the forging of one district out of many local precincts created a confusing and nonrepresentational winner-take-all system of local governance. In November Parliament passed a new law on local elections and voted to postpone local elections for a month until December 18 and 19. The delay was necessitated by an October 15 Constitutional Court ruling that the law under which the November 13-14 elections were organized was unconstitutional.

Women are underrepresented in government. Two women are in the Cabinet. Women hold 12 seats in the 150-member Parliament.

The large ethnic Hungarian minority, whose coalition gained 15 seats in Parliament in the September elections, is well represented in Parliament and in local 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. A 1996 law, requiring NGO's and foundations to reregister and have substantial financial resources in order to operate, eliminated some foundations, primarily dormant groups. However, no organization was denied registration or faced any other major problem in continuing to operate. The impact of another law setting limits on allowable administrative expenses has not created significant problems. Many NGO representatives believed the Meciar government was hostile to NGO's. In contrast, the new Government appointed many NGO representatives to government positions.

In November the new Government created a new position of Deputy Prime Minister for Human and Minority Rights. The new Deputy Prime Minister, Pal Csaky, a member of the Party of the Hungarian Coalition, immediately opened a dialogue with religious and minority groups.

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. However, enforcement is uneven, with different minority groups reporting that their members often receive no government assistance with complaints about discrimination. 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.

According to Ministry of Interior statistics, both domestic and public violence against women has been increasing: 1,000 cases of public violence were registered in 1997, compared with 276 in 1985. Domestic violence in 1997 included 2,656 cases, compared with 1,874 in 1995 when statistics first were kept. One NGOâs regional research showed that 38 to 40 percent of women were victims of domestic violence. Police estimate that two-thirds of female rape victims fail to report their cases. Police treat spousal abuse, child abuse, and other violence against women in the same way as other criminal offenses; sections in the Criminal Code specifically address rape, sexual abuse, trafficking in women, and pandering.

Legislation has not yet recognized and specified the term domestic violence. There is one consulting center for abused women in the country. There is no shelter for battered women, but several NGOâs continue to advocate the idea strongly. In the view of some NGOâs, the lack of relevant data on domestic violence is used by police authorities to downplay the extent of domestic violence.

As a result of amendments to the Criminal Code that took effect in 1994, prostitution is not illegal. However, the code prohibits activities related to prostitution, such as renting apartments for conducting prostitution, spreading sexually transmitted diseases, or trafficking in women for the purpose of prostitution. Trafficking in women is a potential problem that the Government views with concern.

Women are equal under the law. They have the same property, inheritance, and other legal rights as men. Women receive approximately 85 percent of men's wages for the same work.

In December 1997, the Gender Center for Equal Treatment of Men and Women was founded. The Center is an independent NGO that cooperates with the U.N. Development Program and the Government. The Government's Coordinating Committee for Women's Affairs (including NGOâs) drafted a national action plan for women that was adopted by the government in September 1997. The plan presents a thorough analysis of the situation of women and proposes specific measures to resolve existing problems in the next decade. In contrast to the past, a number of organizations emerged in the last decade that serve as advocates for women's issues and interests.

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 a system of 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 societal pattern of abuse of children, some problems remain. Abuse of children remains an underreported problem. Experts claim that there are significant discrepancies between official figures on child violence and the actual situation. According to available police statistics, child beating and sexual abuse is on the rise. In 1997 there were 1,083 reported cases of crimes against children. Among the most frequent crimes committed against children are the following: Nonpayment of child support, sexual violence, drugs, and beatings.

Youth criminality has increased as well. Children under the age of 15 reportedly committed 226 crimes in 1990. In 1996 this number increased to 555. Juveniles (15 to 18 years of age) committed 92,395 crimes in 1992, compared with 69,872 in 1990. In 1997 the number of resolved cases caused by juvenile offenders was 12,349, compared with 6,964 in 1989. Child prostitution and pornography are not addressed specifically in the Criminal Code but are covered by more general provisions in the law.

The U.N. Childrenâs Fund (UNICEF), several NGOâs, and other institutions dealing with children's issues called for amendments to the Law on Families, particularly the part on relations between parents and children. UNICEF also recommends creation of an ombudsman's office that would defend children's rights. There are two regional emergency hot line numbers for abused children and one counseling help line.

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 the 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 the 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 mechanism to enforce them. A spokeswoman for an NGO dealing with the disabled said in 1997 that due to pressure from a number of NGOâs, accessibility has been improving--particularly regarding new construction. NGOâs complained that other legislation, including the provision of jobs, while on the books, often is ignored.

Religious Minorities

Despite an order by the Prime Minister to withdraw a controversial history book entitled the "History of Slovakia and the Slovaks" by Milan Durica, it remains available in schools. The book has been widely criticized by religious groups and the Slovak Academy of Sciences for gross inaccuracies and distortions, particularly in its portrayal of wartime Slovakia and the deportation of Jews and Roma.

Despite protests by the Federation of Jewish Communities (FJC), 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 and to rehabilitate its leader Jozef Tiso. On the 59th anniversary of the wartime Slovak state, a small group of Tiso Society members and approximately 100 skinheads met in front of the presidential palace. A group of Young Democrats held a counterdemonstration in the main square to protest the legacy of the Tiso regime. Unlike in 1997, the event did not develop into an organized march of skinheads. The 200 police on hand confiscated a number of weapons from the skinheads.

Two other March events commemorated this anniversary. Archbishop Jan Sokol held a commemorative mass in the western Slovak town of Sastin. The mass was attended by several government coalition officials including deputy chair of the HZDS and of the Parliament Augustin Marian Huska, HZDS M.P. Jan Cuper and deputy chair of the Slovak National Party Anna Malikova. After the mass the Slovak National Party held a reception at which the same officials were present and spoke about the importance of the first Slovak state's legacy.

On January 30, a bronze memorial plaque commemorating the 1,800 Jewish citizens of Komarno who were killed in World War II concentration camps was stolen from the synagogue in Komarno. The crime remained unsolved at year's end. In October police arrested four teenage skinheads who allegedly painted swastikas and pro-Fascist slogans on a business run by a Jewish manager in Zvolen.

In May the Supreme Court upheld a prior verdict that the publisher of Zmena weekly had to publish an

apology to the honorary chairman of the FJC for abusing his person and offending his religious feelings. The apology was not published by year's end.

In February the Government returned approximately $315,000 (Sk 10 million) to the Jewish community as settlement for the gold, diamonds, and jewelry that were confiscated by pro-Nazi officials from the wartime Slovak state's Jewish citizens.

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 November the new Government and the Government of Hungary signed an implementation agreement for their 1996 bilateral treaty, which called for the establishment of commissions to deal with the treatment of ethnic minorities.

The largest minority is the ethnic Hungarian minority. It 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 in recent years there have been occasional expressions of anti-Hungarian sentiments by Slovak nationalists.

Hungarian ethnic leaders complained about large and disproportionate cuts in government subsidies to Hungarian cultural organizations, with the funding for some organizations eliminated. They noted as well a number of government initiatives that they said sought to reverse progress for minorities made in previous years. Under pressure, the Government did not pass a nationalist-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 1996 then-Foreign Minister Juraj Schenk assured the High Commissioner for Minorities of the OSCE that the Government would pass a law codifying the use of minority languages. In October 1997, the former government, against the advice of the OSCE High Commissioner, stated that it no longer saw a need for such a law, despite its previous promises.

Citing a law requiring that official documents be prepared only in Slovak, the Ministry of Education instructed school principals in 1997 to issue report cards only in that language. In schools where courses are taught in Hungarian and report cards for many decades were prepared in both Slovak and Hungarian, many parents protested this change by keeping their children home from school. In March regional administration officials dismissed at least two school principals of schools where parents insisted on bilingual report cards. The officials explained that the principals did not notify the district office of the parents' protests. In June hundreds of parents took over the town council building in Komarno to protest the dismissal of the two principals. On June 12, 3,000 parents, children, and teachers held demonstrations in Moldava and Bodron in Eastern Slovakia and Galnta in Western Slovakia. The two principals were rehired in December after the change in government.

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, housing, and the administration of state services. In the spring some Roma families were granted asylum by a judge in the United Kingdom for the persecution they faced at home. The ensuing increase in Slovak Roma seeking asylum in the UK (1,600 persons applied due to asylum in August and September) led the British Government to impose a visa

requirement on Slovaks in October, thereby focusing attention on the problem in Slovakia.

Skinhead violence against Roma was a serious problem, and human rights monitors reported that police remain reluctant to take action. An Office of Legal Protection (KPO) spokesman stated in October that the number of skinhead attacks on Roma dropped compared with the previous year. However, the authorities tended to tolerate such attacks and accepted them as "normal." In almost no case did the police categorize the incidents as racially motivated.

In January an unidentified device exploded in front of some houses inhabited by Roma in Trnava. No one was injured. It was the third explosion within 6 months in front of Romani houses in that city. In February three Romani children were brutally attacked in Presov in eastern Slovakia and beaten by a group of skinheads. An 11-year-old boy had to undergo surgery, and due to serious injuries he remained in a coma for some time. The police started an investigation, but it produced no results by year's end.

On May 7 in the southern town of Lucenec, a non-Romani man allegedly assaulted a Romani boy who was playing ball and then beat unconscious a 16-year-old Rom who tried to intervene. The 16-year-old was taken to the hospital and released after 3 days. When the father of the first boy went to the police to file a complaint, officers reportedly tried to dissuade him from pursuing the matter.

In July a Romani youth was beaten unconscious and hospitalized following an attack after his house in Zarovnice was set on fire. He subsequently died. At year's end, the police had no suspects. In July an unknown perpetrator threw a bomb through an open window of a familyâs house in Banska Bystrica where nine Roma were sleeping. The blast injured one child and damaged the interior of the house. The case is under investigation. In September skinheads with baseball bats beat a group of five Roma in Banska Bystrica. Two Roma suffered serious injuries. Fearing retaliation, the youths did not press charges. In September six unidentified males attacked a Romani house in the town of Cierny Balog. They kicked in doors and smashed windows and left one man with a broken leg and another with a broken ankle.

In the August 1997 case in which two persons broke into a Romani home in Banska Bystrica and beat the whole family with baseball bats, the trial remains in progress but is stalled since the victim refused to participate. The victims of an October 1997 attack by 10 skinheads on 3 Romani students refused to press charges.

Beginning in January, Romani families living in the center of Spisska Nova Ves in central Slovakia began receiving notices that they would be settled involuntarily approximately 2 kilometers outside of town. They were to be resettled into two-family houses with a common kitchen, bathroom, and toilet, although municipal authorities then revised their plans to house four families in each two-family structure. As of late spring, 14 families consisting of approximately 100 individuals had received eviction notices from their present accommodations, although only 5 of the houses were ready.

During the most recent census (1991), 14,000 citizens registered themselves as Ukrainians, and 17,000 registered themselves as Ruthenians. However, about 50,00 persons listed Ruthenian as their native language. Ruthenians disagree that they are Ukrainians and that their language is only a Ukrainian dialect. In September Slovak State Radio started broadcasting a long-promised daily regional program for the Ruthenian minority in Presov. The Ruthenian program alternates with programming for the Ukrainian minority. A representative of the Ruthenian Revival organization stated that Ruthenian language instruction began in September in some schools in the northeast. Also in September, an Institute for Minority Languages was opened at Presov University in the northeast. Two instructors at the institute teach Ruthenian culture and language.

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 estimate, approximately 50 percent of the work force is unionized. Most unions are independent of the government and political parties but lobby those entities in order to gain support for union positions on key labor issues.

The Constitution provides for the right to strike, and there are no restrictions on this right. The national statistical office officially reported only six strikes in 1997 and no strikes in 1998.

However, an increasing number of strike alerts and unofficial strikes were reported during the year. Many of these actions anticipated layoffs or protested the nonpayment or partial payment of salaries due to the restructuring of a company or insolvency. For example, work actions took place in a textile company, Sabina Sabinov, and in a dairy in Kosice to protest the insolvency of these companies and their failure to pay salaries. The trade union representing workers at the Slovak Railways company (ZSR) maintained a strike alert throughout the year, based on political and work issues. An unofficial strike of 1 hour was organized by pharmacists to protest the critical financial situation of the health sector.

There were no instances of retribution against strikers or labor leaders. Relevant legislation on collective bargaining prohibits the dismissal of workers legally participating in strikes. However, according to this law, a strike is legal and official only if it is for the purpose of collective bargaining; if it is announced beforehand; and if a list of strike participants is provided. If the strike is not considered to be official, strikers are not ensured protection.

Unions are free to form or join federations or confederations and to affiliate with and participate in international bodies.

b. The Right to Organize and Bargain Collectively

The law provides for collective bargaining. Following the September election victory of the new Government, the Confederation of Trade Unions (KOZ) decided to reenter tripartite negotiations with employers and the Government. This followed elimination by the new Parliament of wage regulation imposed by the previous government in July 1997.

The law on citizens' associations prohibits discrimination by employers against union members and organizers. Complaints may be resolved either in collective negotiations or in court. If a court rules that an employer dismissed a worker because of union activities or for any reason other than certain grounds for dismissal listed in the Labor Code, the employer must reinstate the worker. There were no reports of abuses targeted against unions or workers. However, there were reports of reassignments and other actions affecting workers, allegedly for union activity, under the previous government. It also was reported that some public service employees were pressured to join then-government coalition parties. The implication was that refusal would jeopardize a worker's job. Some workers at a major company reportedly were pressured to join an allegedly more progovernment union.

The Customs Act of 1996 regulates free customs zones and customs warehouses. Firms operating in such zones must comply with the Labor Code; to date there have been no reports of special involvement by the trade unions. No special legislation governs labor relations in free trade zones.

c. Prohibition of Forced or Compulsory Labor

Both the Constitution and the Employment Act prohibit forced or compulsory labor, including that performed by children, and there were no reports of violations. The Ministry of Labor, as well as district and local labor offices, have responsibility for enforcement.

d. Status of Child Labor Practices and Minimum Age for Employment

The law sets the minimum employment age at 15 years. Children must remain in school for 9 years, or until the age of 15. Workers under the age of 16 may not work more than 33 hours per week; may not be compensated on a piecework basis; may not work overtime or night shifts; and may not work underground or in specified conditions deemed dangerous to their health or safety. Special conditions and protections, though somewhat less stringent, apply to young workers up to the age of 18. The Ministry of Labor enforces this legislation. There were no reports of violations. The law and the Constitution prohibit forced and bonded child labor, and the Government effectively enforces these prohibitions (see Section 6.c.).

e. Acceptable Conditions of Work

The minimum wage in 1998 was $86 (Sk 3,000) per month. Even when combined with special allowances paid to families with children it did not provide a decent standard of living for a worker and family. The Ministry of Labor is responsible for enforcing the minimum wage. No violations were reported. The standard workweek mandated by the Labor Code is 42.5 hours, although collective bargaining agreements have achieved reductions in some cases (most often to 40 hours). For state enterprises, the law requires overtime pay up to a maximum of 8 hours per week, and 150 hours per year, and provides 5 weeks of annual leave. Private enterprises can compensate their employees for more hours of overtime than stipulated by the law. There is no specifically mandated 24-hour rest period during the workweek. The trade unions, the Ministry of Labor, and local employment offices monitor observance of these laws, and the authorities effectively enforce them.

The Labor Code establishes health and safety standards that the Office of Labor Safety effectively enforces. For hazardous employment, workers undergo medical screening under the supervision of a physician. They have the right to refuse to work in situations that endanger their health and safety and may file complaints against employers in such situations. Employees working under conditions endangering their health and safety for a certain period of time are entitled to paid "relaxation" leave in addition to their standard leave.

[end of document]

Return to 1998 Human Rights Practices report home page.
Return to DOSFAN home page.
This is an official U.S. Government source for information on the WWW. Inclusion of non-U.S. Government links does not imply endorsement of contents.