



## Slovak Republic

### International Religious Freedom Report 2007

Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respected this right in practice.

An amendment to the religious registration law that became effective in May 2007 toughened the requirements for a religious group to register. While a religion need not be registered for its members to practice their faith, recognition through official registration affords religious groups certain benefits, including monetary and administrative assistance, to which unregistered religious groups are not entitled. These practical administrative aspects are further complicated by legal restrictions on alternative forms of organization, such as creating nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and civic associations, which are forbidden from promoting any religion or performing religious services.

There were limited reports of societal discrimination based on religious belief. Periodic acts of anti-Semitism persisted and anti-Islamic sentiment appeared to be growing among some elements of the population.

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

#### Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 18,900 square miles and a population of 5.4 million. According to the 2001 census, the number of persons who claimed a religious affiliation increased from 72.8 percent in 1991 to 84.1 percent in 2001. This increase may have been in part due to greater willingness among persons to state their affiliation, in contrast to 1991 immediately after the fall of communism. According to the census, there are 3,708,120 Roman Catholics (68.9 percent of the population), 372,858 Augsburg Lutherans (6.9 percent), 219,831 Byzantine Catholics (4.1 percent), 109,735 members of the Reformed Christian Church (2 percent), 50,363 Orthodox Christians (0.9 percent), and 20,630 members of Jehovah's Witnesses. There are also 3,562 Baptists, 3,217 Brethren Church members, 3,429 Seventh-day Adventists, 3,905 Apostolic Church members, 7,347 Evangelical Methodist Church members, 3,000 Jews, 1,733 Old Catholic Church members, 6,519 Christian Corps in Slovakia members, and 1,696 Czechoslovak Husite Church members. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) and the Baha'is, which were registered in October 2006 and April 2007, respectively, have several hundred adherents each. Estimates of the Muslim population, including immigrants and international students, vary from 1,200 to 5,000. The 2001 census showed that 13 percent of the population claims no religious affiliation and that 3.5 percent are undecided.

There were 3 categories of nonregistered religions that comprised approximately 30 groups: nontraditional religious groups, such as Ananda Marga, Hare Krishna, Yoga in Daily Life, Osho, Sahadza Yoga, Shambaola Slovakia, Sri Chinmoy, Zazen International Slovakia, Zen Centermyo Sahn Sah, Rosicrucians, and Raelians; religious societies termed "syncretic" by the Government, such as the Unification Church, the Church of Scientology, and the Movement of the Holy Grail; and Christian religious societies, such as the Church of Christ, Manna Church, International Association of Full Gospel Businessmen International, Christian Communities, Church of the Nazarenes, New Revelation, Word of International Life, Society of the Friends of Jesus Christ, Sword of the Spirit, Disciples of Jesus Christ, Universal Life, Free Peoples' Mission, Presbyterian Church Emmanuel, and Brothers in Christ (Christadelphians). There are very small numbers of refugees and migrants who practice faiths different from those of the majority of native-born citizens.

Missionaries are active in the country.

There is some correlation between religious differences and ethnic or political differences. The Christian Democratic Party, which has ties to the Catholic faith, is the only political party to advocate an explicitly religious agenda. The Slovak Democratic Christian Union is a Christian democratic party similar to those found in many western European countries.

Followers of the Orthodox Church live predominantly in the eastern part of the country. The Ruthenian minority are primarily Greek Catholics with some adherents to the Orthodox faith. The Reformed Christian Church exists primarily in the south, near the border with Hungary, where many ethnic Hungarians live. Other religious groups tend to be spread evenly throughout the country.

The most recent (2002) polling data revealed that the number of religious practitioners continued to increase after the fall of communism and that approximately 54 percent of Catholics and 22 percent of Lutherans actively participated in formal religious services.

## Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

### Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respected this right in practice. The Government at all levels sought to protect this right in full and did not tolerate its abuse, either by governmental or private actors.

The Constitution provides for the right to practice the religion of one's choice, the right to change religion or faith, and the right to refrain from any religious affiliation. The Government generally observed and enforced these provisions in practice.

The law provides for freedom of religion and defines the status of religious groups, including those groups not registered with the Government. The law does not prohibit the existence of nontraditional religious groups. It allows the Government to enter into agreements with religious communities. The law was applied and enforced in a nondiscriminatory fashion.

Governmental entities at all levels, including the courts, interpreted the law in a way that protected religious freedom.

No official state religion exists; however, because of the numbers of adherents, Catholicism is considered the dominant religion. In 2001 the Government signed an international treaty with the Vatican, which provides the legal framework for relations between the country's Roman Catholic Church, the Government, and the Vatican. Two of four proposed corollaries to the framework treaty, including one regarding military service in the chaplaincy for priests and another regarding religious education, were later approved and signed into law. In 2002 the Government signed an agreement with 11 other registered religious groups in an attempt to counterbalance the Vatican agreement and provide equal status to the remaining registered religious groups. This agreement with the other groups is subordinate to national law and subject to amendment by statute; the Vatican treaty, as an international agreement, can be amended only through international legal mechanisms. The corollary agreement on religious education, identical versions of which were signed with the 11 other registered religious groups, mandates that all public elementary schools require children to take either a religion class or an ethics class, depending on their (or their parents') preference. Despite some concerns, smaller churches reiterated that they were generally pleased with the system.

Registration of religious groups is not required, but only registered religious groups have the legal right to build places of worship and conduct public worship services and other activities. Those that register receive government benefits, including subsidies for clergymen; office expenses; the right to visit, proselytize, and minister to their members in prisons and hospitals; and access to public television broadcasting--privileges which unregistered religious groups do not receive. The Roman Catholic Church, being the largest religious group, receives the largest share of government subsidies. Government funding also is provided to religious schools and to teachers who lecture on religion in state schools. The Government occasionally subsidizes one-time projects and significant religious activities, and registered religious groups are partly exempt from paying taxes and import custom fees. A group may elect not to accept the subsidies.

The Cabinet decided on June 12, 2007, to increase by 7 percent salaries for clergy from registered groups who perform religious rites and services and who serve religious communities. Some groups, such as the Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons, Baha'is, refused to accept the financial support, preferring to keep their independent status. Additionally, it was easier for newly registered groups to gain approval if they announced they would not request the state subsidy. During the period covered by this report, 2 religious groups, the Mormons in October 2006 and the Baha'is in April 2007, were registered, bringing the total number of registered religious groups in the country to 18. Christian Fellowship filed for registration prior to the new law, but on June 22, 2007, the Minister of Culture rejected the application. Christian Fellowship leaders planned to appeal the decision, claiming that they complied with all the requirements, while the Ministry defended the rejection by negative references from some reviewing institutions. No new religious groups filed for registration after the stricter requirements went into effect in May 2007.

According to the newly amended registration law, to register a religion, 20,000 members of the group who are permanent residents must submit an "honest declaration" attesting to their membership, knowledge of articles of faith and basic tenets

of the religion, personal identity number and home address, and support for the group's registration. The previous law allowed for registration based on a petition of 20,000 permanent residents who supported the registration, or in practice simply supported religious freedom, and were not required to be members of the faith.

The General Prosecutor, who had filed a suit with the Constitutional Court in 2004 on the grounds that the previous religious registration law was unconstitutional, filed an amendment to his suit in 2007 and continued to argue that the new version of the religious registration law is also unconstitutional. On June 20, 2007, Prosecutor General Dobroslav Trnka announced his intention to file a complaint at the Constitutional Court against the new law on church registration, claiming that the law is discriminatory and violates freedom of association. The Constitution allows the state to restrict the freedom of association only in exceptional cases, such as when state security is threatened. He claimed that there is no serious and convincing reason for such an intervention into the freedom of assembly or any theoretical or real reason to presume that small religious communities could threaten basic democratic freedoms.

In March 2007 a Member of Parliament (MP) from the Slovak National Party (SNS), one of the three parties in the government coalition, stated that the purpose of the stricter religious registration requirements was to prevent "our children going to a mosque to pray and professing that we are Al-Qaeda." Reportedly, one of the main reasons for the amendment was to prevent uncontrolled registration of new religious groups, often considered to be harmful sects that could spread dangerous ideas and claim subsidies from the state budget.

The 14 religious groups established before the registration law passed in 1991 were exempt from the membership requirements. Although the Nazarene and the Muslim communities existed in the country prior to 1991, they were never properly registered and thus were not given registered status under the 1991 law. At the end of the period covered by this report, other groups that had not registered were the Moonists, Movement of the Holy Grail, Word of Life, and several others. The four religious groups registered since 1991 are the Jehovah's Witnesses, New Apostolic Church, Mormons, and Baha'i Community.

The explanatory documents of the amendment claim that religious minorities who do not satisfy the requirements may register under the law governing Citizens Associations. According to the NGO Human Rights Without Frontiers, this is not accurate, because the act governing registration of citizens associations specifically excludes religious organizations and churches. Additionally, a separate instructional document which the Ministry of Interior issues to potential filers confirms that it will reject an application from a religious group.

Because the law on registration of religious groups does not provide for registration of nontheistic groups, the Department of Church Affairs suggested that an atheist group that made inquiries into obtaining registration might find funding from the Department of Minority Culture.

There is no specific licensing or registration requirement for foreign missionaries or religious organizations. The law allows all religious groups to send out their representatives, as well as to receive foreign missionaries, without limitation. Missionaries neither need special permission to stay in the country, nor are their activities regulated in any way.

Most religious groups had few remaining claims regarding property taken during the Nazi and communist regimes. The main exception was the Reformed Christian Church, which had claims for approximately 70 church premises nationalized by the communist government.

Several religious holy days are celebrated as national holidays, including Epiphany, the Day of the Virgin Mary of the Seven Sorrows, All Saints' Day, St. Stephen's Day, Christmas, and Easter. A treaty with the Vatican prohibits the removal or alteration of existing religious holidays considered state holidays.

The Department of Church Affairs at the Ministry of Culture oversees relations between religious groups and the state and manages the distribution of state subsidies to religious groups and associations. However, the Ministry cannot intervene in the internal affairs of religious groups and does not direct their activities. The Ministry administers a cultural state fund, "Let's Renew Our House," which allocates money for the upkeep of cultural and religious monuments.

The Government continued to promote interfaith dialogue and understanding by supporting events organized by various religious groups. The state-supported Ecumenical Council of Churches promotes communication within the religious community. Most Christian churches have the status of members or observers in the Council. The Central Union of Jewish Religious Communities in the Slovak Republic (UZZNO) was invited and participates in its activities.

The Holocaust Documentation Center (DSH) continued to organize seminars, cosponsor programs, and provide instructional material about the Holocaust, particularly for teachers. The DSH also sent teachers on excursion trips to Holocaust sites. In September 2006 the DSH held a seminar entitled "Activities of an Illegal Jewish Labor Group in the

War-time Slovak State" with the Jewish community.

As in previous years, the Ministry of Education continued to host seminars and programs for teachers related to the history of Judaism in the country.

In addition, during the reporting period the Institute for Church-State Relations organized several conferences on topics, such as alternative curative methods affiliated with religions, religion in Japan, and the history of church funding in the country.

In 2007 the Institute for National Memory continued its work of publishing documents related to crimes committed by the state during World War II and the communist era. In January the Institute published the statistical data of the number of Jews living in all municipalities across the country compiled in 1942 as part of the preparation to deport Slovak Jews to Nazi concentration camps. During the reporting period, the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum continued multiple cooperative programs, such as providing expert technical advice and sharing data, with the Institute. Starting in 2005 the Institute began publishing on the Internet the list of liquidated companies and the names of Slovaks who organized the liquidation of Jewish property during World War II. The institute planned to release the list of "aryanizers" by the end of 2007.

#### Restrictions on Religious Freedom

Government policy and practice contributed to the generally free practice of religion. Although government support was provided in a nondiscriminatory manner to registered religious groups that seek it, the requirement that a registered organization have 20,000 members disadvantaged smaller religious groups. Lack of registration means that a religious group cannot form a legal entity and therefore cannot, for example, purchase land to build a house of worship or open a bank account to accept donations. In practice, unregistered religious groups were generally able to function in spite of these obstacles. Members of unregistered religious groups may have difficulty gaining access to their clergy and other resources in limited situations. For example, clergy from unregistered religious groups may not conduct official visits to minister to their members in prison and government hospitals. Occasionally, members of unregistered religious groups were prevented from burying their relatives in municipal cemeteries.

The Institute of State-Church Relations monitors and researches religious "cults" and "sects"; however, it was difficult to identify these groups because they largely register as NGOs rather than as religious groups. Additionally, groups are not formally defined as sects because the term is not considered a legal one. The Institute researches groups such as the Church of Scientology and the Unification Church. The Institute conducted seminars, issued publications, and provided information to the media regarding its findings. The Institute's budget came mainly from the Ministry of Culture's general fund, although it received some grants for its projects from other sources. Other organizations not funded by the Government, such as the Center for the Study of Sects, engaged in similar work.

Some property restitution cases remained unresolved at the end of the period covered by this report. Property confiscated by the communist government which was restituted in accordance with the law on the restitution of communal property, enabling all religious groups to apply for the return of their property confiscated by the communist government, was returned in its existing condition. The Government did not provide any compensation for the damage done to it during the previous regime. Thus churches, synagogues, and cemeteries have been returned mostly in poor condition, and religious groups often lacked the funds to restore these properties to a usable condition. The property was returned by the Government, municipalities, state legal entities, and, under certain conditions, by private persons. The deadline for restitution claims was December 31, 1994.

In some cases, although the Government legally returned a property, it was not vacated by the former tenant, often a school or hospital with nowhere else to go. There were also problems with the return of property that was undeveloped at the time of seizure but was subsequently developed. The main obstacles to the resolution of outstanding restitution claims were the Government's lack of financial resources and bureaucratic resistance on the part of those entities required to vacate restitutable properties.

In 2005 a new restitution law permitted religious organizations to claim property taken between May 8, 1945, (November 2, 1938 for the Jewish community) and January 1, 1990, and established April 30, 2006, as the filing deadline. With the exception of the Reformed Christian Church, religious groups had few remaining claims for unreturned property. Several religious institutions noted that they could not provide precise data on the few outstanding claims since many of their branches operated somewhat independently. The Reformed Christian Church has been vocal regarding its unfulfilled restitution claims. According to its representatives, the new law addressed some complex property claims but did not resolve the cases of approximately 70 church premises (church schools, teachers' facilities, etc.) that were owned by individual parishes and nationalized by the communist government after 1948. Reformed Christian Church officials also complained that the Government did not allow church organizations to draw from European Union structural funds for

social purposes.

The Orthodox Church reported that all of its claims had been settled, while the Catholic Church reported that more than half of the property that it had claimed had been returned. The Catholic Church had not received any compensation for the remaining 40 percent of claims, since the properties were undeveloped at the time of nationalization but were developed later. The Church also is not eligible to reacquire lands that originally were registered to church foundations that no longer exist or operate in the country, such as the Benedictines.

In March 2007 the state-run Jewish Museum and the Bratislava City Government resolved a dispute from a 2004 request from the city that the Museum pay market-rate rent, which it could not afford, or face eviction. The Ministry of Culture facilitated a tri-party building and land ownership exchange among the National Opera, National Museum, and Jewish Museum. All parties were satisfied with the outcome.

During the period covered by this report, the 2002 compensation package between the Government and the Jewish community for heirless property owned by Jewish families before the Holocaust was completed.

There was no progress in the lawsuit UZZNO filed against Germany to reclaim compensation for monies paid by the wartime Slovak government to Germany to cover the cost of Germany's deportation of 57,000 members of the country's Jewish population.

Per a corollary to the Vatican treaty, a 2004 law requires public elementary school students to take either a religion or ethics class. Critics claim that students in some schools, particularly in poor, rural communities, are not given a choice or are pressured to choose the religious classes. The law also allows government-funded religious schools to remove teaching materials not consistent with students' religious beliefs.

#### Abuses of Religious Freedom

In Trnava on September 22, 2006, local police told 12 Mormons who were gathering signatures for a petition to register to stop their activity and leave the city. The signature collectors departed peacefully and did not file a formal complaint. Trnava city officials stated that the police instruction stemmed from citizens' complaints of harassment. Members of the Mormon Church did not experience police or any other official intimidation in the approximately 30 other cities where they conducted their petition drive. One Mormon representative noted that police in another city had upheld the right of the signature gatherers when questioned by a local resident.

There were no reports of religious prisoners or detainees in the country.

#### Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of the refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

#### Anti-Semitism

Anti-Semitism persisted among some elements of society, manifested occasionally in incidents of violence and vandalism. An estimated 500 to 800 active neo-Nazi members and 3,000 to 5,000 sympathizers operated in the country and committed serious offenses; however, only a small number of the abuses were prosecuted. The Penal Code stipulates that anyone who publicly demonstrates sympathy towards fascism or movements oppressing human rights and freedoms can be sentenced to jail for up to 3 years.

During the reporting period, extreme-right nationalist and neo-Nazi groups, including Slovenska Pospolitost (Slovak Community) and Narodny Odpor (National Resistance), held numerous public rallies in support of the World War II-era fascist Slovak state and its leader Jozef Tiso, responsible for sending thousands of Slovak Jews to their death in Nazi concentration camps. The neo-Nazi groups also held events to support public figures who openly praised Tiso and to protest against other ethnicities and lifestyles. Police intervened when such rallies and events turned violent. As in past years, rallies took place in March 2007 on the anniversary of the fascist state and on Tiso's birthday. A leading SNS MP participated in a public commemoration for the WWII Slovak state, which took place at Tiso's gravesite, on March 14, 2007. Other rallies occurred in August 2006 and in February, April, and May 2007.

In December 2006 Archbishop of Bratislava-Trnava Jan Sokol praised Jozef Tiso during a media interview and stated that the country enjoyed a period of well-being under Tiso's leadership. The public outcry over the incident resulted in Prime

Minister Robert Fico reaffirming that Tiso was a war criminal.

The number of prosecutions for racially motivated crimes, although still low, continued to increase as a result of the creation of a specialized police unit, the placement of an advisor in the Bratislava Regional Police, and increased training. In 2006 police investigated 188 cases of racially motivated attacks and public support for ideologies that suppress the rights of others. A total of 107 investigations resulted in prosecutions, although the number of convictions was not available. Because of the monitoring unit and its NGO advisory board, police were better trained in identifying neo-Nazi members and more informed about their activities. The Ministry of Interior assigned specialists on hate crimes to each of the country's eight regions.

Multiple Jewish cemeteries were desecrated during the period covered by this report. In August 2006 unidentified persons overturned gravestones in a Jewish cemetery in Ruzomberok. That same month vandals painted swastikas on graves at a Jewish cemetery in Rajec. In these cases police opened investigations but did not find the culprits. As of December 2006, both investigations were closed.

Vandals regularly spray-painted anti-Semitic slogans and toppled or broke gravestones. In most cases police caught the adolescent vandals, who were sentenced to pay for at least part of the repairs. Jewish community leaders stated they were satisfied with the Government's response to these incidents, and they did not believe that the communities supported this vandalism.

The Government continued implementing an action plan to fight discrimination, racism, xenophobia, and anti-Semitism.

### Section III. Societal Abuses and Discrimination

There were limited reports of societal discrimination based on religious belief.

Anti-Islamic sentiment was apparent during the reporting period. Members of the Muslim community believed that the stricter religious registration requirements were also aimed at them and claimed they faced general harassment within society. Experts on racism reported a growing atmosphere of acceptance for public displays of intolerance after the SNS joined the governing coalition in July 2006. In May 2007 the ultranationalist party Slovenska Pospolitost organized a demonstration against Turkey joining the European Union, with speeches denouncing the spread of Islam in Europe.

In March 2007 a prominent SNS MP said that "we don't want to run around in turbans on Slovak soil" and, in reference to Afghanistan, that "anyone who thinks that they can democratize those lunatics in turbans is terribly naive."

Anti-Semitic sentiments persisted as well. Neo-Nazis held numerous public rallies, there were several reports of vandalism of Jewish cemeteries and other properties, and public figures occasionally expressed anti-Semitic viewpoints (see Anti-Semitism).

In September 2006 Catholic bishops reportedly urged Catholics to not support the registration of the Mormon Church in the country, saying it would betray the Catholic Church. Members of other religious groups with few adherents in the country described incidents of prejudice and harassment, generally small in scale and not obviously religious discrimination. Such incidents included having an apartment lease for missionaries revoked, being turned down to rent a hall for a religious gathering, and physical shoving during a petition drive for religious registration.

Few communication problems existed among the major religious groups, and there were several ecumenical organizations that fostered closer relationships. The Ecumenical Council of Churches operated and represented several religious groups.

### Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. The U.S. Embassy maintained contacts with a broad spectrum of religious groups and hosted an interfaith roundtable discussion in April 2007. The Embassy encouraged tolerance for minority religious groups. Embassy officers and official visitors met with officials of major and minor religious groups to discuss property restitution issues as well as human rights conditions and religious freedom. In February 2007 the U.S. Ambassador spoke with the parliamentary Human Rights Committee on the subject of religious tolerance, specifically urging acceptance of a broader range of religions under the religious registration law.

While Parliament was considering the legislation to make religious registration requirements stricter, embassy officers met with numerous MPs from coalition and opposition political parties to criticize the tougher registration requirements and to

urge greater respect for religious freedom. The Embassy hosted numerous discussions and events focusing on the need for the country to lower its numerical threshold for religious registration to better correspond with OSCE standards. The Ambassador delivered a strong message to Archbishop Sokol on the registration issue. The Embassy publicly expressed U.S. opposition to the numerical threshold, and the Ambassador raised the issue with the Minister of Culture and other government officials.

The Embassy also continued its dialogue with the Conference of Bishops, the Ecumenical Council of Churches, the Federation of Jewish Communities, the Orthodox Church, and other religious groups. The Embassy had good relations with the Ministry of Culture and fostered an effective dialogue between religious groups, the Ministry of Culture, and the Commission for the Preservation of U.S. Heritage Abroad on matters of importance to the commission.

Embassy officers aided the Government in its membership in the Task Force for International Cooperation on Holocaust Education, Remembrance, and Research and the initiation of a liaison project on Holocaust education in cooperation with the task force. Embassy officers continued to be active in perpetuating the project.

Embassy officers met regularly with members of the Muslim community, which continued to face difficulties organizing and constructing a mosque, in part due to local bias. Embassy officials also made tolerance and diversity the subject of speeches during outreach trips. The Embassy hosted several public events highlighting Slovak assistance and cultural outreach to Muslim countries.

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