



Slovak Republic

International Religious Freedom Report 2008

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

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and other laws and policies contributed to the generally free practice of religion. The constitutionality of an amendment to the religious registration law effective May 2007 that increased the requirements for a religious group to register was under consideration by the Constitutional Court.

The Government generally respected religious freedom in practice. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the Government during the period covered by this report.

There were limited reports of societal discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. Periodic acts of anti-Semitism persisted among some elements of the population.

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom 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, Roman Catholics constitute 68.9 percent of the population and Augsburg Lutherans 6.9 percent. Smaller religious groups include Greek Catholics, the Reformed Christian Church, Orthodox Christians, Jehovah's Witnesses, various Protestant groups, Jews, Baha'is, and Muslims.

There is some correlation between religious differences and political or ethnic differences. The Christian Democratic Party, which has ties to the Catholic faith, is the only political party to advocate an explicitly religious agenda. The founders of the Party of Conservative Democrats, a new offshoot of the Christian Democratic Party, are also closely associated with the Roman Catholic Church. Greek Catholics are ethnic Slovaks and Ruthenians (Ukrainians), although some Ruthenians follow the Orthodox faith. Followers of the Orthodox Church live predominantly in the eastern part of the country. The Reformed Christian Church is found primarily in the south, near the border with Hungary, where many ethnic Hungarians live. Other religious groups tend to be spread evenly throughout the country.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and other laws and policies contributed to the generally free practice of religion. The law at all levels protects this right in full against abuse, either by governmental or private actors. However, an amendment to the religious registration law disadvantages smaller religious groups.

The law 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.

No official state religion exists; however, because of the number of adherents, Roman Catholicism is

considered the dominant religion. A 2001 concordat with the Vatican provides the legal framework for relations between the country's Catholic Church, the Government, and the Vatican. Two corollaries deal with military service in the chaplaincy for priests and religious education. A 2002 agreement between the Government and 11 other registered religious groups attempts to counterbalance the Vatican agreement and provide equal status to the remaining registered religious groups. A 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 religious groups reiterated that they were generally pleased with the system.

The Government observes Epiphany, Easter, the Day of the Virgin Mary of the Seven Sorrows, All Saints' Day, Christmas, and St. Stephen's Day as national holidays. An agreement with the Vatican prohibits the removal or alteration of existing religious holidays considered state holidays.

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. Registered groups receive government benefits, including subsidies for clergymen; office expenses; the right to visit, proselytize, and minister to their members in prisons and hospitals; the right to conduct legal marriage ceremonies; and access to public television broadcasting. The 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.

According to the May 2007 registration law, for a group to register a religious organization, 20,000 members of the group who are citizens or permanent residents must submit an "honest declaration" attesting to their membership, knowledge of articles of faith and basic tenets of the religion, personal identity numbers and home addresses, and support for the group's registration. The explanatory documents of the law claim that religious minorities who do not satisfy the requirements may register under the law governing citizens associations. However, the nongovernmental organization (NGO) Human Rights Without Frontiers claimed that the act governing registration of citizens associations specifically excludes religious organizations and churches. Additionally, a separate instructional document that the Ministry of Interior issues to potential applicants confirms that it will reject an application from a religious group.

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 that allocates money for the upkeep of cultural and religious monuments.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The Government generally respected religious freedom in practice. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the Government during the period covered by this report.

The requirement that a registered organization have 20,000 members disadvantaged smaller religious groups; however, unregistered religious groups were generally able to function. Members of unregistered religious groups could have difficulty gaining access to their clergy and other resources in limited situations. For example, clergy from unregistered religious groups could 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.

In April 2008 Christian Fellowship leaders appealed the Minister of Culture's June 2007 rejection of their application for registration to the Supreme Court, claiming that they had complied with all registration requirements. The Ministry defended the rejection, referring to administrative inconsistencies in their name designation and negative feedback from institutions asked to review the decision at the Ministry's request. At the end of the reporting period, the appeal was pending.

In February 2008 the Prosecutor General filed a complaint at the Constitutional Court against the May 2007 registration law, claiming that it is discriminatory and violates freedom of association. The Constitution allows the state to restrict freedom of association only in exceptional cases, such as when state security is threatened. The Prosecutor General 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. The case was pending at the end of the period covered by this report.

In August 2007 the Atheist Church unsuccessfully appealed the Ministry of Culture's rejection of its registration application to the Supreme Court. The Ministry claimed that the group attempted to misuse the new legislation and failed to justify its existence as a new church. Subsequently, it filed a complaint at the Constitutional Court. At the end of the reporting period, a decision was pending.

The Institute of State-Church Relations monitored and researched new religious movements and drafted analyses for the Religious Section of the Ministry of Culture; however, it was difficult to identify these groups because they largely register as NGOs rather than as religious groups. The institute researched new religious groups that were suspected of attempting to infiltrate schools, such as the Church of Scientology and the Unification Church. The institute also conducted seminars, issued publications, and provided information to the media regarding its findings.

Some property restitution cases remained unresolved at the end of the period covered by this report. Religious organizations applied for the return of their property confiscated by the former communist government under the 1993 law on the restitution of communal property, which specified a filing deadline of December 31, 1994. The Government, municipalities, state legal entities, and, under certain conditions, private persons returned property in its existing condition. Restituted churches, synagogues, and cemeteries generally were in poor condition. The law did not provide compensation for the damage done under the communists, and religious groups often lacked the funds to restore these properties to a usable state.

In some cases, although the Government returned a property, it was not vacated by the former tenant, often a school or hospital with nowhere else to go. There also were 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.

The 2005 restitution law permitted religious organizations to claim agricultural land and forests as well as other nonreligious property (community halls, schools, etc.) 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 because many of their branches operated somewhat independently. The Reformed Christian Church alleged that the 2005 law addresses some complex property claims but does not resolve the cases of approximately 70 church properties (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 religious organizations to draw from European Union structural funds for social purposes.

The Catholic Church, represented by the Slovak Bishops' Conference, claimed that there were no precise statistics on returned property. The bishops believed that the state had returned approximately 33 to 35 percent of Catholic Church property. The Church is not eligible to reacquire lands originally registered to church foundations that no longer exist or operate in the country, such as the Benedictines. However, the bishops advocated a broader view of the issue, linking restitution with current state support. They believed that existing subsidies of churches and their priests' salaries mitigated an incomplete restitution process.

The Orthodox Church reported that all of its property restitution claims had been settled.

There was no progress in the 2003 lawsuit the Central Union of Jewish Religious Communities in the Slovak Republic (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.

According to a corollary to the Vatican concordat, a 2004 law requires public elementary school students to take either a religion or ethics class. Critics claimed students in some schools, particularly in poor, rural communities, might be denied a choice or were pressured to choose the religious class.

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.

Section III. Societal Abuses and Discrimination

There were reports of societal discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

Multiple acts of anti-Semitism occurred. In April 2008 police arrested three persons for damaging a memorial to a Jewish scholar at the oldest Jewish cemetery in Bratislava, the Chatam Sofer memorial. At the end of the reporting period, the three individuals accused in the incident were free on bail awaiting trial. In February 2008 the president of the Institute of Public Affairs was assaulted, allegedly because of his Jewish background. The perpetrator was arrested and sentenced to a fine and 2 years' probation. In January 2008 unidentified persons spray-painted a swastika and a neo-Nazi symbol on a synagogue in Komarno. The investigation of this case continued as of the end of the reporting period. In December 2007 police arrested a person for verbally abusing a rabbi; criminal charges were filed against the offender. In the same month, police arrested two teenage students for spray-painting pro-Nazi graffiti at an elementary school in Semerovce, Nove Zamky District. The offenders were charged with support and propagation of groups suppressing rights and freedoms. As juvenile offenders, they could face 2 to 4 years in prison. At the end of the period covered by this report, their trial was pending.

Extreme-right nationalist and neo-Nazi groups, including Slovenska Pospolitost (Slovak Community) and Narodny Odpor (National Resistance), held 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 reportedly intervened when one of these events turned violent in Nitra.

In April 2008 an ecumenical group, including prominent theologians and historians as well as the director of the Holocaust Documentation Center, expressed concern that the celebration by the Catholic archbishop of Trnava of a Mass commemorating the 61st anniversary of President-Priest Jozef Tiso's execution minimized the nature of the crimes against Jews and others committed under Tiso's rule during World War II. In response the Slovak Bishops' Conference declared that it was a "private act" on the archbishop's part.

The number of prosecutions for racially motivated crimes, although 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. Because of the monitoring unit and its NGO advisory board, police were better trained in identifying neo-Nazi members and more informed of their activities. The Ministry of Interior assigned specialists on hate crimes to each of the country's eight regions.

During the reporting period, the Institute for National Memory carried out multiple cooperative programs with the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, which provided expert technical advice and shared data with the institute.

There were several ecumenical organizations that fostered closer relationships among religious groups. The Ecumenical Council of Churches operated and represented several groups.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. The Embassy continued to follow the status of the religious registration law. With the law under review by the Constitutional Court, the Ambassador raised the matter with the Court's president in May 2008 and emphasized the Embassy's concern regarding any abridgement of religious freedom that might arise due to the law.

The U.S. Embassy maintained contacts with a broad spectrum of religious groups and 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. During the reporting period, the U.S. Ambassador met with Helsinki Commission representatives.

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

Released on September 19, 2008

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