

SLOVAK REPUBLIC 2012 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom and, in practice, the government generally respected religious freedom. The trend in the government's respect for religious freedom did not change significantly during the year. The government continued its dialogue with religious representatives on changes to government funding for churches and religious groups, which would extend the separation of church and state and resolve remaining restitution issues.

There were 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. embassy promoted religious freedom through direct interactions with government officials, religious leaders, and civil society representatives, as well as involvement in events promoting religious tolerance.

Section I. Religious Demography

According to the 2011 census, the population is 5.4 million. Roman Catholics constitute 62 percent of the population; Augsburg Lutherans, 5.9 percent; and Greek Catholics, 3.8 percent; 13.4 percent do not state a religious affiliation. Other groups present in small numbers include the Reformed Christian Church, other Protestant groups, Jehovah's Witnesses, Orthodox Christians, Jews, and Bahais.

There is some correlation between religion and ethnicity. Greek Catholics are generally ethnic Slovaks and Ruthenians (of Ukrainian origin), although some Ruthenians belong to the Orthodox Church. Most Orthodox Christians live in the eastern part of the country. 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 Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

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The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom. However, the religious registration law disadvantages smaller religious groups.

The law defines the status of religious groups that are registered with the government and the requirements for registration. To register as a religious group, 20,000 adult members who are either citizens or permanent residents must submit to the Ministry of Culture an “honest declaration” attesting to their membership, knowledge of the articles of faith and basic tenets of the religion, personal identity numbers and home addresses, and support for the group’s registration. The 18 registered churches and religious groups receive more than 30 million euros (\$40.1 million) in state subsidies. Registration confers the legal status necessary to perform economic functions such as opening a bank account or renting property, and religious functions such as presiding at burial ceremonies or gaining access to hospitalized group members. Although the law governing registration of citizen associations specifically excludes religious groups, some religious groups reportedly registered as citizen associations in order to obtain a measure of legal status.

A concordat with the Vatican provides the legal framework for relations among the Catholic Church, the government, and the Vatican. Two corollaries address religious education and priests serving as military chaplains. An agreement between the government and eleven other registered religious groups attempts to counterbalance the Vatican agreement and provide equal status to the remaining registered religious groups. All public elementary school students must take a religion class or ethics class, depending on personal or parental preferences.

The Ministry of Culture’s Department of Church Affairs oversees relations between religious groups and the state and manages the distribution of state subsidies to religious groups and associations. The ministry cannot legally intervene in the internal affairs of religious groups, nor direct their activities. The ministry administers a cultural grant program allocating money for the upkeep of cultural and religious monuments.

Two property-restitution laws, with a filing deadline of April 30, 2006, permit religious groups to re-claim agricultural land and forests, as well as other nonreligious property (e.g., community halls, schools) confiscated between May 8, 1945 and January 1, 1990. For the Jewish community the earlier date of November 2, 1938, applies.

The law does not allow burial earlier than 48 hours following death.

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The government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: Epiphany, Easter, the Day of the Virgin Mary of the Seven Sorrows, All Saints Day, Christmas, and Saint Stephen's Day. An agreement with the Vatican prohibits eliminating or changing existing religious holidays considered state holidays.

Government Practices

There were no reports of abuses of religious freedom. However, the government imposed restrictions that affected members of minority religious groups.

The requirement that religious groups have at least 20,000 adult adherents to be eligible to register with the government disadvantaged smaller groups. Smaller groups functioned, in some cases, by registering as civic associations to carry out activities requiring a legal status, but remained in legal limbo, which at times created difficulty gaining access to their clergy and other resources. Clergy from unregistered religious groups could not minister to their members in prisons or government hospitals and religious weddings conducted by unregistered groups were not legally valid. Funeral operators occasionally prevented representatives from unregistered religious groups from performing burial ceremonies.

The law requiring burial no sooner than 48 hours after death affected religious groups whose traditions mandated an earlier burial.

Religion class curricula did not mention unregistered groups or some of the smaller registered groups.

The government required public broadcasters to allocate airtime for registered religious groups, but not for unregistered groups.

The government continued discussions with stakeholders about property restitution and changes in the funding of churches and religious groups. In January Culture Ministry officials met with representatives of religious groups to discuss a future mechanism for funding, after an "expert commission" produced a new model of state funding for registered groups. Registered religious groups, especially the Catholic Church, continued to identify property restitution as a precondition to transitioning toward greater separation between church and state, including diminution of state funding.

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Religious groups continued to apply for the return of property confiscated by the former communist government under a 1993 restitution law that 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. Some of the properties returned were in poor condition. The law did not provide compensation for the damage done to these properties under the communist regime, and religious groups often lacked the funds to restore these properties to a usable state.

According to the Culture Ministry, it was difficult to estimate the number of confiscated properties not yet returned because the cases involved a large number of legal entities, including thousands of parishes or religious orders. The Slovak Bishops' Conference estimated the state had returned approximately 35 percent of Catholic Church property. In December the expert commission agreed to compile a list of unresolved property cases.

The religious group Christian Fellowship continued efforts begun in 2007 to secure registration. In September the Supreme Court overturned for a second time the ministry's decision to deny registration. The culture ministry asserted that it appropriately denied the application because groups seeking registration must, by law, not promote religious intolerance or impede the rights of others. The ministry further stated that the group "promoted hateful ideas toward other religious groups." The registration process continued at year's end.

In September the Supreme Court rejected the Church of Faith's appeal of the denial of its registration, which was rejected by the Culture Ministry in 2011. In May the prosecutor dismissed the criminal complaint filed by the ministry after it concluded that the majority of the 21,500 signatures in the application were forged and that the Church of Faith was a front for the Christian Fellowship.

The government-supported Nation's Memory Institute (UPN) provided access to previously undisclosed records of the regimes in power from 1939 until 1989. The Jewish community continued to accuse the UPN of treating favorably or supporting the rehabilitation of public officials active during the World War II era. In October the UPN organized a conference to present a publication about the World War II figure Jan Ferencik, emphasizing his persecution during the communist regime and downplaying his activities during World War II and his admiration for Adolf Hitler.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

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

Organized neo-Nazi groups, estimated to have 500 active members and several thousand sympathizers, espoused anti-Semitism and harassed and attacked other minorities. Vandalism of Jewish cemeteries occurred sporadically throughout the year. In April an unidentified group vandalized 35 gravestones at a Jewish cemetery in the eastern town of Kosice.

While direct Holocaust denial was not common, neo-Nazi groups including the People's Party – Our Slovakia (LS-NS), which expressed support for and used the symbols of the World War II-era fascist state, organized marches and gatherings throughout the year.

Jewish community officials criticized the Union of Anti-Communist Resistance's newsletter *Svedectvo* (Testimony) for downplaying anti-Jewish crimes occurring during World War II.

The Ecumenical Council of Churches promoted the role of churches in civil society through volunteering and development aid, and worked to overcome differences among its member churches.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

Embassy representatives discussed with Ministry of Culture officials developments regarding the religious registration law and proposed changes to the funding of churches and religious groups. Embassy officials met with religious figures and civil society to discuss religious freedom issues throughout the year.

Embassy representatives met repeatedly with the mayor of Pezinok to discuss land ownership of a disused Jewish cemetery. In April the ambassador hosted a panel discussion on tolerance during a festival dedicated to promoting multiculturalism and diversity. In July embassy representatives attended the opening of a Jewish-Muslim conference hosted by the Bratislava municipality.