

SLOVAK REPUBLIC

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom and, in practice, the government generally enforced these protections. The Constitutional Court upheld the constitutionality of an amendment to the religious registration law that increased the requirements for a religious group to register.

The government generally respected religious freedom in law and in practice. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the government during the reporting period.

There were few reports of societal abuse and 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, self-described 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, Bahais, 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, an offshoot of the Christian Democratic Party, are also closely associated with the Roman Catholic Church. Greek Catholics are generally 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 Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

Please refer to Appendix C in the *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices* for the status of the government's acceptance of international legal standards <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2010/appendices/index.htm>.

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom and, in practice, the government generally enforced these protections. However, an amendment to the religious registration law disadvantages smaller religious groups.

The law defines the status of religious groups that are registered with the government. The law does not prohibit nontraditional religious groups. It allows the government to enter into agreements with smaller 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 priests serving as military chaplains 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.

Registration of religious groups is not required. However, 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 Roman Catholic Church, as the largest religious group, receives the most 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.

To register as a religious organization, 20,000 adult members who are citizens or permanent residents must submit 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. Additionally, the act governing registration of citizens associations specifically excludes religious organizations and churches.

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

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 the removal or alteration of existing religious holidays considered state holidays.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The government generally respected religious freedom in law and in practice. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the government during the reporting period.

The requirement that an organization have at least 20,000 adult members to register disadvantaged smaller religious groups. Although such groups were able to function, they complained that they were in legal limbo with authorities and could have difficulty gaining access to their clergy and other resources in certain situations. For example, clergy from unregistered religious groups could not minister to their members in prisons and government hospitals. Occasionally, members of these groups were prevented from burying their relatives in municipal cemeteries.

The Ministry of Culture rejected Christian Fellowship's application for registration in 2007. In 2009 the Supreme Court determined the ministry did not provide sufficient evidence to support the rejection of the group's application for

registration. Consequently, the ministry renewed the registration process and informed the Christian Fellowship. The ministry began collecting additional documents and materials required for the registration process according to the relevant legislation. In early 2010 the ministry hired an independent expert to conduct fieldwork and make a professional recommendation about the Christian Fellowship. In August 2010 the Christian Fellowship rejected the negative findings of the independent expert and requested a second expert recommendation. The case was pending at the end of the reporting period.

The Atheist Church's complaint to the Constitutional Court regarding the Ministry of Culture's rejection of its registration application was pending at the end of the reporting period.

Some property restitution cases remained unresolved. 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.

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; it 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 Roman Catholic Church, represented by the Slovak Bishops' Conference, claimed that there were no precise statistics on returned property, but several claims remained pending in the courts. The bishops estimated that the state had returned approximately 33 to 35 percent of Catholic Church property. The Catholic 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 matter, linking restitution with state

support. They believed that existing subsidies for churches and their priests' salaries mitigated an incomplete restitution process.

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

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

Section III. Status of Societal Actions Affecting Enjoyment of Religious Freedom

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

Organized neo-Nazi groups, estimated to have 500 active members and several thousand additional sympathizers, promoted anti-Semitism and harassed and attacked other minorities, including Roma.

While direct denial of the Holocaust was not common, expressions of support for the World War II-era Slovak fascist state, which deported tens of thousands of Slovak Jews, Roma, and others to their deaths in Nazi concentration camps, occurred during the reporting period.

The Nation's Memory Institute (UPN) provides access to previously undisclosed records of the Slovak regimes from 1939-89, and in past years there were efforts to abolish it. In April 2009 parliament elected Arpad Tarnoczy, former chairman of the Union of Anti-Communist Resistance (ZPKO) and known for his sentiments in favor of the wartime fascist Slovak state, to the UPN supervisory board. The ZPKO issues the newsletter *Svedectvo* (Testimony), which Jewish community officials criticized for advocating the wartime fascist state and downplaying its anti-Jewish crimes.

The number of reported racially motivated crimes, including anti-Semitism, decreased from 213 in 2008 to 66 in the first nine months of 2010. However, an additional 64 cases of extremism were also reported in the first nine months of 2010.

There were several ecumenical organizations that fostered closer relationships among religious groups. The Ecumenical Council of Churches 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 U.S. embassy continued to follow developments regarding the religious registration law.