



Slovak Republic

International Religious Freedom Report 2006

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.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report, and government policy continued to contribute to the generally free practice of religion.

The generally amicable relationship among religious groups in society contributed to religious freedom; however, anti-Semitism persisted 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 18,859 square miles and a population of 5,396,193. 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 were 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 (.9 percent); and 20,630 members of Jehovah's Witnesses. There were 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. According to the 2001 census, 13 percent of the population claimed no religious affiliation, and 3.5 percent were undecided. There were also some Muslims living in the country, primarily immigrants from Middle Eastern countries, international students, or Albanian immigrants. Estimates of the Muslim population varied from 300 to 3,000.

There were three categories of nonregistered religions that comprised approximately thirty groups: nontraditional religions, 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, Movement of the Holy Grail, and the Baha'i Faith; 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, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), Free Peoples' Mission, Presbyterian Church Emmanuel, and Brothers in Christ (Christadelphians).

The number of immigrants was statistically insignificant. There were very small numbers of refugees and migrants who practiced faiths different from those of the majority of native-born citizens. Missionaries do not register with the Government, and no official statistics existed, although, according to government information, there were missionaries from Roman Catholic, Augsburg Lutheran, and Methodist religious groups, as well as a Jewish emissary, active in the country. Among the nonregistered churches, there were a significant number of Mormon missionaries.

There was some correlation between religious differences and ethnic or political differences. The Christian Democratic Party (KDH), which had ties to the Catholic faith, was the only political party with an explicitly religious agenda. The Slovak Democratic Christian Union (SDKU) was a Christian democratic party similar to those found in many western European countries. The Party of the Hungarian Coalition (SMK) also had a Christian wing.

Followers of the Orthodox Church lived predominantly in the eastern part of the country. The Ruthenian minority were typically adherents to the Orthodox faith. The Reformed Christian Church existed primarily in the south, near the border with Hungary, where many ethnic Hungarians lived. Other religious groups tended to be spread evenly throughout the country.

According to polling data, the number of religious practitioners continued to increase after the fall of communism, and 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 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. It 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. The Catholic Church receives significantly larger government subsidies because of the higher percentage of Catholics in the country. In 2001, the Government signed an international treaty with the Vatican, which provides the legal framework for relations between the country's Catholic Church, the Government, and the Vatican. Four corollaries to the framework treaty were proposed. In 2002, the Government signed an agreement with eleven other registered religious groups in an attempt to counterbalance the Vatican agreement and provide equal status to the remaining registered religious groups. This agreement 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.

In 2002, the Government approved one of the corollaries regarding military service in the chaplaincy for priests. In 2003, the president signed a second corollary regarding religious education, which was approved by Parliament in January 2004. An identical agreement was signed with eleven other registered religious groups. This treaty 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. This was previously required only for students in the fifth through ninth grades. Private schools affiliated with a particular religion do not need to provide classes in other religions. These courses were often taught by religious leaders, and the religious groups were responsible for providing instructors, although their salaries were paid from the government budget. There was a lack of qualified teachers for certain religions. Some representatives of religious groups complained that the status of religious lecturers was not equal to that of regular teachers. Religious lecturers were usually hired on contract and were not paid during the two-month summer vacation. There was some concern about possible ostracism of student members of smaller religious groups, who might be one of a small group requesting the class, especially in smaller municipalities. Despite these resource concerns, smaller churches reiterated that they were generally pleased with the system.

The remaining two corollaries to the Vatican treaty, including a proposal to allow employees to refuse to perform certain job requirements on religious grounds, were not passed into law during the period covered by this report. The so-called "conscientious objector treaty" was turned into a draft law that was widely debated in society and political circles, but was not forwarded to the cabinet for a vote on adoption.

Registration of religious groups is not required; however, under existing law, only registered religious groups 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 in practice. Those that register receive government benefits, including subsidies for clergymen, office expenses, the right to visit and proselytize in prisons and hospitals, and access to public television broadcasting. 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 religion may elect not to accept the subsidies.

During the period covered by this report, there were sixteen registered religious groups in the country. The last group to successfully register was the Apostolic Church in 2001. Because of the high membership requirement, no new religious groups have filed for registration since then.

To register a new religion, a group must submit a list of 20,000 permanent residents who adhere to that religion. Fourteen of the religious groups already established before the law passed in 1991 were exempt from this membership requirement. Although the Nazarene and the Muslim communities existed in the country prior to 1991,

they were never properly registered and, therefore, were not given registered status under the 1991 law. Two additional religious groups have been allowed to register since 1991: the Jehovah's Witnesses and the New Apostolic Church. Leaders of a number of minority religious communities, in particular Muslims, smaller Protestant churches, the Hare Krishna community, and the Church of Scientology, have in previous years complained that the membership requirements effectively barred them from obtaining registered status. Nonregistered religious groups may not build public places of worship or conduct legally valid religious ceremonies such as weddings. In 2000, the Muslim community in Bratislava purchased a plot of land with the hope of building an Islamic center. While they previously speculated that municipal officials were denying them permission for the construction, it appears that financial problems, zoning questions, and a lack of identifiable leadership in the Muslim community could have also affected the construction delay. Several of Bratislava's Muslims also criticized the registration law, noting that the community in the Czech Republic was able to submit an application for first-tier registration under Czech law with only 300 or more citizen member signatures. The Ministry of Culture was aware of the registration controversy.

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 had made inquiries into obtaining registration might find funding from the Department of Minority Culture.

There are no specific licensing or registration requirements 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.

Joint education projects on Jewish history and culture for elementary and high school teachers were successful and well received. In November 2005, the Government was accepted as a full member in the Task Force for International Cooperation on Holocaust Education, Remembrance, and Research. The Ministry of Education organized a January 2006 international seminar in Bratislava on "Teaching and Remembering the Holocaust," together with the International School of the Holocaust at the Yad Vashem Museum, the Council of Europe, and the Holocaust Documentation Center. In March 2006, two seminars were held at the Terezin Memorial, with eighty teachers attending; that same month, twenty Slovak teachers took part in a seminar at Jerusalem's Yad Vashem Museum entitled "Teaching about the Holocaust." In 2005, two teachers participated in a seminar at the Florida Holocaust Museum. The Ministry of Education jointly organized a seminar in July 2005 on the history of Judaism and the Holocaust in southern Slovakia.

Several Slovak schools received grants from the Anne Frank House, and a school in Sered initiated a project to restore the local Jewish cemetery. It also created an exhibit about Judaism in the country, despite the complete decimation of the city's Jewish community in the first half of the twentieth century, at which time the city hosted one of the country's three labor camps for Jews awaiting deportation. In 2004, teachers continued to visit U.S. universities to participate in summer training programs; twenty-five Slovak teachers visited the concentration camp in Dachau, and twenty teachers traveled to Terezin for training on Holocaust education in the Czech Republic. To assist teachers with instruction about the Holocaust, the Ministry of Education published a textbook, "Why We Learn about the Holocaust," during the reporting period, and distributed it to four teacher-training centers. In 2003, a Holocaust Documentation Center was established as a joint project of the Bratislava Jewish community and the Milan Simecka Foundation; after May 2005, the Union of Jewish Communities and the Simecka Foundation took over its administration. It has released several publications dealing with the Holocaust in the country, Jewish wartime history, and memoirs of Jewish personalities. In August 2005, President Ivan Gasparovic participated in the inauguration of an exhibit on "The Fate of Slovak Jews" at a refurbished synagogue in Nitra.

The Institute for Church-State Relations also organized two conferences, including one on "Islam in Europe" in November 2005, and another titled "Western Muslim Culture-Implications for Slovakia" in March 2006.

In 2005, the Institute for National Memory began publishing on the Internet the names of Slovaks who organized the "aryanization" of Jewish property during World War II. The project was met with controversy, as the Institute planned to release the names of Slovaks who benefited from "aryanization."

There are several religious holy days that 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 as 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.

Since 1989, the Government has promoted 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.

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.

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 nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) rather than as religious groups. Such groups included Scientologists 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. Law 282/93 on the Restitution of Communal Property enabled all religious groups to apply for the return of their property confiscated by the communist government. The deadline for these claims was December 31, 1994. The property was returned in its existing condition, and the Government did not provide any compensation for the damage done to it during the previous regime. The property was returned by the Government, municipalities, state legal entities, and, under certain conditions, by private persons. In some cases, the property was returned legally by the Government, but 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. Churches, synagogues, and cemeteries have been returned, albeit mostly in poor condition. Religious groups often lacked the funds to restore these properties to a usable condition. The main obstacles to the resolution of outstanding restitution claims were the Government's lack of financial resources, due to its austerity program, and bureaucratic resistance on the part of those entities required to vacate restitutable properties. The Reformed Christian Church was vocal regarding its unfulfilled restitution claims. According to their representatives, the new restitution law that went into effect in May 2005 addressed some complex property claims, but did not resolve the cases of approximately seventy 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 Church existed primarily in poorer areas of the country where there was little money for restoration and consequently was seeking funds from abroad during the period covered by this report.

The Orthodox Church reported that all of its claims for restitution have been settled, while the Catholic Church reported that more than half of the property that it had claimed had been returned. In another 12 percent of cases, the property had been returned legally to the Church, but typically was occupied by other tenants and would require court action to be returned to church hands. The Church had not received any compensation for the remaining 40 percent of claims, since these 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 no longer operate in the country, such as the Benedictines.

In 2004, the Bratislava City Government proposed to evict the state-run Jewish Museum from its current location unless it paid a higher, market-rate rent rather than the nominal rate that it was paying. The museum responded that it did not have the funds to pay the higher rent. Jewish community leaders suggested that the city owed some consideration to them since it owned many other buildings that once belonged to Jewish Holocaust victims. While this building was not among them, it was occupied by many who also perished in the concentration camps. At the end of the period covered by this report, there were no new developments.

Following two years of negotiations, the deputy prime minister's office drafted a proposal of compensation for heirless property owned by Jewish families before the Holocaust. In 2002, the Cabinet agreed to \$18,747,253 (SKK 850 million) in compensation for this property. The entire amount was placed into an account at the Slovak National Bank, and one-third was made available immediately as needed because of the advancing age of Holocaust survivors. The Jewish community would draw interest on the account for ten years before receiving the remaining principal. The community intended to use the funds to compensate some community members as well as to fund social, educational, and cultural programs.

UZZNO has filed a lawsuit 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. UZZNO lost the lawsuit in 2003 and immediately appealed; the case was still pending during the reporting period.

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 incidences of violence and vandalism. According to estimates, 500 to 800 neo-Nazis and 3,000 to 5,000 sympathizers operated in the country and committed serious offenses; however, only a small number of these 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 three years. In May 2005, police broke up a skinhead concert in the northern part of the country. Legislation is similar to that of neighboring countries, but court delays prevented comparable improvements in the situation. Religious minorities had not yet needed to avail themselves of protections provided by a new anti-discrimination law passed in 2004.

In October 2005, the town of Topolcany issued a public apology to former Jewish residents forced out by a pogrom in September 1945, in which forty-eight Jews were badly injured. A documentary film about the pogrom was widely viewed when it aired on Slovak television in 2005.

The nationalist group Slovenska Pospolitost, whose members frequently dress in black uniforms similar to those of the fascist Hlinka Guards (who identified and sent Jewish persons to the concentration camps during World War II), undertook several actions during the reporting period and clashed with police forces at several marches. The Ministry of the Interior stripped Slovenska Pospolitost of its status as a political party in 2006, in advance of parliamentary elections. However, the group's leadership cooperated with other nationalist political parties to get themselves on the ballot for the elections. Slovenska Pospolitost remained a registered NGO, although this status was in dispute.

The low number of prosecutions for racially motivated crime generally improved over the past three years because of the creation of a specialized police unit, an advisor in the Bratislava Regional Police, and increased training. Their successes included the investigation of 121 persons in 2005, 82 of whom were formally charged with supporting ideas or movements that suppressed the rights of others, including the leader of Slovenska Pospolitost, who taught high school in Banska Bystrica. In another 2004 success, the Bratislava Police checked 158 suspected meeting places of extremist groups in an overnight raid that resulted in 14 arrests. Because of the monitoring unit and its NGO advisory board, the police were better trained in identifying neo-Nazi members and more informed about their activities. The minister of the interior had an advisor on racially motivated crime who participated actively on the Government's advisory commission with NGOs. The Ministry of Interior assigned specialists on hate crimes to each of the country's eight regions.

Meetings and demonstrations to commemorate the anniversary of the first Slovak state from World War II occur each year throughout the country. At these and other events, extremists frequently appear in the uniforms of the Hlinka guards. In March 2005, 200 persons dressed in Hlinka guard uniforms marched through Bratislava to commemorate the anniversary of the establishment of the Fascist Slovak state in 1939. Jewish community groups complained that the Government had not done enough to investigate and identify the benefactors of this group.

In 2005, a publication by the cultural organization Matica Slovenska questioned the scope and nature of the Holocaust, suggesting that the deportation of the country's Jewish population to concentration camps was simply part of a "resettlement program."

A Jewish cemetery was desecrated during the period covered by this report. In April 2006, unknown culprits placed three posters of Hitler with eagles and swastikas at a monument to Jewish Holocaust victims in Rimavska Sobota. It was previously vandalized in July 2005, when it was both damaged and covered in graffiti claiming that the Holocaust was a lie. A week earlier, five tombstones were destroyed in a Jewish cemetery in Rimavska Sec. An UZZNO official claimed that the cases appeared to be simple vandalism, but racial motivation could not be ruled out, and some NGOs believed the vandalism may be more organized. Vandals regularly spray-painted anti-Semitic slogans and toppled or broke gravestones. In most cases, police caught adolescent perpetrators, who were sentenced to pay at least part of the cost 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. In one notable sentencing that occurred in 2004, a judge sentenced vandals to unconditional jail sentences, which the Jewish community believed sent a needed message to the community. In January 2005, juveniles vandalized nineteen tombstones in a Jewish cemetery in Ruzemberok; an investigation into the incident was ongoing at the end of the period covered by this report. In June 2005, vandals broke a pane of glass at Bratislava's memorial to Rabbi Chatam Sofer. In July 2005, derogatory inscriptions, such as "The Holocaust is a lie," were painted and carved on the new Holocaust Memorial in Rimavska Sec; the investigation concluded without charges being filed. Vandals destroyed five tombstones and damaged another two at Rimavska Sobota's Jewish cemetery the following week; the investigation concluded with no suspects.

Section III. Societal Abuses and Discrimination

The generally amicable relationship among religious groups in society contributed to religious freedom. 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. The embassy encouraged tolerance for minority religious groups. Embassy officers and official visitors met with officials of major and minor religious groups on a regular basis to discuss property restitution issues as well as human rights conditions and religious freedom.

The embassy continued its dialogue with the Conference of Bishops, the Federation of Jewish Communities, and the Orthodox Church. 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 this successful project.

The embassy hosted several roundtable discussions and representational events focusing on the need for the country to lower its numerical threshold for religious registration to better correspond with OSCE standards. The embassy publicly expressed U.S. opposition to the numerical threshold, and the ambassador raised the issue with the minister of culture.

The embassy also hosted a series of events focusing on relations with the Muslim community, which continues to face difficulties organizing and constructing a mosque in the country, in some part because of local bias. Embassy officers often made tolerance and diversity the subject of speeches during outreach trips.

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