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2018 Report on International Religious Freedom: Slovakia

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for freedom of religious belief and affiliation and states the country is not bound to any particular faith. Religious groups faced increased registration requirements, including the need to present a petition with signatures of at least 50,000 adherents, up from 20,000 in 2017, which made it more difficult to attain official status. Some groups utilized registration procedures for civic associations in order to perform economic and public functions. Unregistered groups continued to report difficulties in ministering to their adherents and obtaining permits to build places of worship. Members of parliament, from both the government coalition and opposition parties, continued to make anti-Muslim statements. In January then Prime Minister Robert Fico stated that he rejected the creation of Muslim communities in the country. The Central Union of Jewish Communities in Slovakia (UZZNO) reported that anti-Semitic hate speech increased after then Prime Minister Fico indirectly accused a U.S. philanthropist of organizing antigovernment protests. Some members of the People’s Party Our Slovakia (LSNS) faced criminal prosecution for producing materials defaming minority religious beliefs and for Holocaust denial. The president, speaker of parliament, and prime minister agreed in August with political, social, and religious communities the state would adopt a “zero-tolerance approach toward extremism” and fight the spread of hatred and insults over the internet. In November parliament codified a new legal definition of anti-Semitism and the Holocaust, which its sponsors said would facilitate criminal prosecution of hate crimes and hate speech.

The Muslim community continued to report anti-Muslim hate speech on social media. Muslim community members reported that a man verbally and physically assaulted an Iraqi woman wearing a headscarf in Bratislava due to her religious affiliation. Christian groups and other organizations described in media as far right continued to organize gatherings and commemorations of the World War II fascist state and to praise its leaders, although without statements formally denying the Holocaust. Human rights nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) said the increased legal requirements for registration of religious groups, including Muslims, also continued to make it difficult to alter negative public attitudes that viewed unregistered small minority groups as “fringe cults.”

The Ambassador and other embassy officers discussed with government officials religious freedom and the treatment of minority religious groups, as well as measures to counter the increase in anti-Semitism and public expressions of anti-Muslim sentiment. Embassy officials also met regularly with registered and unregistered religious organizations and NGOs to discuss hate speech and the role of churches and religious groups in countering extremism and promoting tolerance. The embassy awarded a grant to an NGO to develop a curriculum to foster religious tolerance through interfaith discussions in secondary schools.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the population at 5.5 million (July 2018 estimate). According to the 2011 census, the most recent available, Roman Catholics constitute 62 percent of the population, Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession 5.9 percent, and Greek Catholics 3.8 percent; 13.4 percent did not state a religious affiliation. Other religious groups present in small numbers include the Reformed Christian Church, other Protestant groups, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Orthodox Christians, Jews, Bahai’s, and Muslims. During the 2011 census, approximately 1,200 individuals self-identified as followers of Islam, while representatives of the Muslim community estimate their number at 5,000. According to the census, there are approximately 2,000 Jews.

Greek Catholics are generally ethnic Slovaks and Ruthenians, although some Ruthenians belong to the Orthodox Church. Most Orthodox Christians live in the eastern part of the country. Members of the Reformed Christian Church live 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 Framework

The constitution guarantees freedom of religious belief and affiliation, as well as the right to change religious faith or to refrain from religious affiliation. The constitution states the country is not bound to any particular faith and religious groups shall manage their affairs independently from the state, including in providing religious education and establishing clerical institutions. The constitution guarantees the right to practice one’s faith privately or publicly, either alone or in association with others. It states the exercise of religious rights may be restricted only by measures “necessary in a democratic society for the protection of public order, health, and morals or for the protection of the rights and freedoms of others.”

The law prohibits establishing, supporting, and promoting groups dedicated to the suppression of fundamental rights and freedoms as well as “demonstrating sympathy” with such groups. These crimes are punishable by up to five years’ imprisonment.

The law requires religious groups to register with the Department of Church Affairs in the Ministry of Culture in order to employ spiritual leaders to perform officially recognized functions. Clergy from unregistered religious groups do not officially have the right to perform weddings or to minister to their members in prisons or government hospitals. Unregistered groups may not establish religious schools or receive government funding.

A 2017 legislative amendment increased the minimum number of adherents from 20,000 to 50,000 for organizations seeking official registration as religious groups. The 50,000 individuals must be adults, either citizens or permanent residents, and 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. All groups registered before these requirements came into effect were grandfathered as officially recognized religions; no new religious groups have attained recognition since the amendment passed. According to the law, only groups registered as churches may call themselves churches, but there is no other legal distinction between registered churches and other registered religious groups.

Registration confers the legal status necessary to perform economic functions such as opening a bank account or renting property and civil functions such as presiding at burial ceremonies. The 18 registered churches and religious groups are: the Apostolic Church, Baha’i Community, The Brotherhood Unity of Baptists, Seventh-day Adventists, Brotherhood Church, Czechoslovak Hussite Church, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession, Evangelical Methodist Church, Greek Catholic Church, Christian Congregations (Krestanske zbory), Jehovah’s Witnesses, New Apostolic Church, Orthodox Church, Reformed Christian Church, Roman Catholic Church, Old Catholic Church, and Central Union of Jewish Religious Communities. Registered groups and churches receive annual state subsidies. All but the Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession, Greek Catholic Church, Orthodox Church, Reformed Christian Church, and Roman Catholic Church have fewer than 50,000 members, but they registered before this requirement came into effect.

The Department of Church Affairs of the Ministry of Culture oversees relations between religious groups and the state and manages the distribution of state subsidies to religious groups and associations. The ministry may not legally intervene in the internal affairs of religious groups or direct their activities.

A group without the 50,000 adult adherents required to obtain status as an official religious group may seek registration as a civic association, which provides the legal status necessary to carry out activities such as maintaining a bank account or entering into a contract. In doing so, however, the group may not call itself a church or identify itself officially as a religious group, since the law governing registration of citizen associations specifically excludes religious groups from obtaining this status. To register a civic association, three citizens are required to provide their names and addresses and the name, goals, organizational structure, executive bodies, and budgetary rules of the group.

A concordat with the Holy See provides the legal framework for relations between the government and the domestic Catholic Church and the Holy See. Two corollaries cover the operation of Catholic religious schools, the teaching of Catholic religious education as a subject, and Catholic priests serving as military chaplains. A single agreement between the government and 11 of the 17 other registered religious groups provides similar status to those 11 groups. The unanimous approval of the existing parties to the agreement is required for other religious groups to obtain similar benefits.

The law does not allow burial earlier than 48 hours following death, even for religious groups whose traditions mandate an earlier burial.

All public elementary school students must take a religion or ethics class, depending on personal or parental preferences. Schools have some leeway in drafting their own curricula for religion classes, but these must be consistent with the National Educational Program (an official Ministry of Education document). Representatives of registered religious communities are involved in the preparation of the National Program. Although the content of the religion classes in most schools is Catholicism, if there is a sufficient number of students, parents may ask a school to open a separate class focusing on the teachings of one of the other registered religious groups. Alternatively, parents may request that teachings of different faiths be included in the curriculum of the Catholic religion classes. Private and religious schools define their own content for religion courses. In both public and private schools, religion class curricula do not mention unregistered groups or some of the smaller registered groups, and unregistered groups may not teach their faiths at schools. Teachers from a registered religious group normally teach about the tenets of their own faith, although they may teach about other faiths as well. The government pays the salaries of religion teachers in public schools.

The law criminalizes issuance, possession, and dissemination of extremist materials, including those defending, supporting, or instigating hatred, violence, or unlawful discrimination against a group of persons on the basis of their religion. Such criminal activity is punishable by up to eight years' imprisonment.

The law requires public broadcasters to allocate airtime for registered religious groups but not for unregistered groups.

The law prohibits the defamation of a person's or group's belief as a criminal offense punishable by up to five years' imprisonment.

The law prohibits Holocaust denial, including questioning, endorsing, or excusing the Holocaust. Violators face sentences of up to three years in prison. The law also prohibits denial of crimes committed by the prior fascist and communist regimes.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Government Practices

As of year's end, the Supreme Court continued to evaluate a motion submitted in 2017 by the prosecutor general to dissolve the LSNS, which experts generally considered a far-right extremist party. The motion said the LSNS was in violation of the constitution and other laws prohibiting support for groups and movements aimed at the suppression of fundamental rights and freedoms and defamation of race, nation, or religious belief.

There continued to be no resolution to the registration application of the Christian Fellowship. By year's end, the Ministry of Culture had not concluded its consideration of additional expert opinions regarding whether it should reverse its 2007 rejection of the original application, which was based on expert opinion saying the group promoted hatred toward other religious groups.

Some members of registered Christian churches said stringent registration requirements limited religious freedom by preventing dissent within churches. Dissenting members stymied in attempts to reform official theological positions might normally split off to form their own church, but the difficulty in registering a new religious group prevented such an action.

The government allocated approximately 42.5 million euros (\$48.7 million) in annual state subsidies to the 18 registered religious groups. The basis for each allocation was the number of clergy each group had, and a large portion of each group's subsidy continued to be used for payment of the group's clergy and operating costs as stipulated by law. The Expert Commission on Financing of Religious Groups and Societies, an advisory body within the Ministry of Culture, continued discussions with representatives of registered religious groups about changes in the model to be used for their future funding and reportedly considered a model allocating funding on the basis of the number of adherents, rather than on the number of clergy. Some members of religious groups said their groups' reliance on direct government funding limited their independence and religious freedom, and they said religious groups self-censored potential criticism of the government on sensitive topics to avoid jeopardizing their finances.

Muslim community leaders stated prisons and detention facilities continued to prevent their spiritual representatives from gaining access to their adherents. Muslim leaders had no legal basis to appeal to the government and request access because Islam is not an officially recognized religion.

Members of the Muslim community also continued to report the lack of official registration made obtaining the necessary construction permits for prayer rooms and religious sites more difficult, although there was no law prohibiting unregistered groups from obtaining such permits. Representatives of the community said local officials feared opposition from the wider public, which may view unregistered groups as "sects," and would seek technical grounds, such as zoning regulations, to reject their applications. There were no reported cases of revoked construction permits for unregistered religious communities.

The Ministry of Culture’s cultural grant program continued to allocate funding for the upkeep of religious monuments and cultural heritage sites owned by religious groups. In 2017, the ministry allocated 3.2 million euros (\$3.67 million) for these purposes.

The three highest constitutional officials – President Andrej Kiska, Speaker of Parliament Andrej Danko, and Prime Minister Peter Pellegrini – agreed during an August meeting with political, social, and academic institutions and religious communities that the state would adopt a “zero-tolerance approach toward extremism” and would crack down on the spread of hatred and insults over the internet. UZZNO representatives welcomed the meeting of the top constitutional officials and said they were satisfied with concrete proposals raised in the meeting to fight anti-Semitism.

Many political parties, including the largest party represented in parliament, Direction – Social Democracy (Smer), continued to express anti-Muslim views in their public statements. In January then Prime Minister Fico stated that he rejected the creation of Muslim communities in the country. On another occasion, Fico said that tourists came to Slovakia because they did not have to “fear explosions” and would not be “bothered” by Muslims, given the small Muslim population.

In a February public debate, Richard Sulik, the leader of Freedom and Solidarity, the second-largest political party in parliament and the largest opposition party, said he perceived Islam as a threat to Slovak society. He stated Islam was an “incompatible ideology” for the European way of life.

During a parliamentary debate on legislation dealing with abortion, LSNS Member of Parliament (MP) Stanislav Mizik likened Muslims to barbarians and stated legislative changes would be necessary to prevent the country from becoming a “caliphate” in the future.

UZZNO representatives said the number of anti-Semitic comments and hate speech on the internet and social media increased following March statements by then Prime Minister Fico in which he indirectly accused a Jewish American philanthropist of staging a “coup” and destabilizing his government. Fico suggested the philanthropist aided in the organization of large-scale antigovernment protests held across the country in reaction to the February killing of an investigative journalist and his fiancée, calling NGO protest organizers the philanthropist’s “children.”

Representatives of the LSNS party continued to make anti-Semitic statements and faced criminal prosecution for past statements. Party members and supporters frequently glorified the Nazi-allied World War II-era fascist Slovak state and its leaders and downplayed the role of that regime in wartime atrocities.

In July the Special Prosecutor’s Office indicted LSNS leader and MP Marian Kotleba for his charitable donation of 1,488 euros (\$1,700) to three families at a 2017 event marking the founding of the Nazi-allied wartime Slovak state. Experts stated the amount was a symbolic representation of a 14-word white supremacist phrase and the numeric representation of a salute to Hitler.

Also in July the Specialized Criminal Court acquitted LSNS MP Stanislav Mizik of extremism charges in a case concerning a January 2017 Facebook post which criticized President Kiska for giving state awards to people of Jewish origin and to defenders of “gypsies and Muslims.” The judge ruled there was insufficient evidence to prove it was actually Mizik who wrote the post and dismissed the charges. The case remained pending as the Special Prosecutor’s Office appealed the verdict.

In August the LSNS party sponsored the release of a film called *Rejected Testimonies*, which historians said was revisionist, and planned to premiere the film on August 8 in the city of Poprad. The premiere was canceled due to opposition by the Poprad city council, because the film was suspected of breaking laws on defamation of race and religious belief, or on support of groups and movements aimed at the suppression of fundamental rights and freedoms. Experts considered the choice of date and place a reference to Nazi symbolism. The documentary focuses on the positive memories of people who lived under the World War II-era Slovak state without mentioning the victims of that regime, particularly the 70,000 Slovak Jews deported by the regime and murdered in Nazi death camps.

In February LSNS MP Milan Mazurek verbally attacked an expert witness during Mazurek’s trial on extremism charges, saying the witness was “not impartial, since he is a Jew.” In April the Specialized Criminal Court found Mazurek guilty and fined him 5,000 euros (\$5,700). Speaking to supporters after the verdict, LSNS leader Marian Kotleba stated the current “regime” was “completely equal to the Nazi regime in the thirties” for silencing critics through legal proceedings.

As of October criminal proceedings for Holocaust denial remained pending against Marian Magat, who ran as an LSNS candidate in the 2016 parliamentary elections and was described by the press as a far-right radical.

In November parliament passed an amendment proposed by Speaker of Parliament Danko (Slovak National Party) to codify a new definition of anti-Semitism and the Holocaust, which had been developed by the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance. Danko stated the new definitions closed loopholes and would facilitate prosecution of hate crimes and hate speech.

During an official state visit to Israel in July, Danko stated it was “high time to start fighting against intolerance and Holocaust denial in Slovakia.” Danko also said he would fight politically to show that the LSNS was a “bunch of crazies” who have “no business being in parliament.”

In commenting on LSNS-proposed legislation, the Episcopal Conference of Slovakia, which represents the Roman and Greek Catholic Churches, said it was regrettable there had been no progress in implementing stricter prolife legislation and said the fact a party without a “consistent approach to protecting human dignity” [LSNS] was putting forward such legislation was a reason for all religious politicians to “examine their conscience.”

In September Prime Minister Pellegrini and Culture Minister Lubica Lassakova commemorated Slovak Holocaust and Ethnic Violence Remembrance Day by opening a new exhibition wing at the Holocaust Museum in Sered, which was subsidized through a one million euro (\$1.15 million) government grant. Pellegrini said on the occasion the state had the responsibility to “create a place where the young generation could come to see the horrors people had to endure between 1941 and 1945.” The prime minister warned against historical revisionism and downplaying the wartime suffering of persecuted groups. Government representatives, including the deputy prime minister, also participated at wreath-laying ceremonies organized by the Jewish community in Sered and Bratislava.

In April the prime minister and the minister of culture met with representatives of the Roman Catholic, Augsburg Lutheran, Greek Catholic, and Reformed Christian Churches, as well as UZZNO, to discuss mutual efforts to combat social exclusion and possible changes to the state financial subsidy to religious groups. Religious leaders publicly stated they were worried about increasing extremism and anti-Semitism in Slovak society.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

In August the Islamic Foundation in Slovakia reported an incident in which a young man verbally assaulted and pushed an Iraqi woman wearing a headscarf while walking her children to preschool in Bratislava. The man reportedly asked the victim whether she was an Arab and demanded to know what she was doing in the country. The victim did not report the incident to the police, and there was no official investigation. NGOs and unregistered religious groups reported they continued to have difficulties altering negative public attitudes toward smaller, unregistered religious organizations because of the social stigma associated with not having the same legal benefits accorded to registered religions. Representatives of unregistered religious groups said the public tended to view their activities with mistrust and perceive them as fringe “cults” because of their lack of official government recognition as religious communities.

NGOs reported continued online hate speech toward Muslims and refugees, which they attributed mostly to the social controversy surrounding the 2015 European migration crisis and inflammatory public statements by local politicians portraying Muslim refugees as an existential threat to Slovak society and culture. Muslim community leaders said they continued to keep their activities and prayer rooms low profile to avoid inflaming public opinion.

As of August the police reported three cases of defamation of race, nation, or religious belief and two cases of incitement of national, racial, and ethnic hatred. In the same period in 2017, there were three cases in each of the two categories.

A survey conducted by the Sociological Institute of the Slovak Academy of Sciences, published in February, showed that more than 54 percent of Slovaks would not want to have a Muslim neighbor, up from 20 percent in the same survey 10 years prior. Similarly, approximately 23 percent of respondents indicated objections to having a

Jewish neighbor, up from 11 percent in 2008. The same survey also found that people's trust toward churches and religious groups had declined from 65 percent in 1999 to 34 percent in 2017.

In September UZZNO filed a criminal complaint after media reported that the village of Zlate Klasy (in the western part of the country) organized its annual village fair at the local Jewish cemetery, with an inflatable bouncy castle, draft beer dispensaries, and picnic tables interspersed among tombstones and memorials to Holocaust victims. UZZNO stated the organization of a festivity at the burial ground demonstrated a complete disregard for Jewish religious traditions and elementary principles of decent behavior and said it constituted a criminal offense according to the law, which prohibits desecrating or vandalizing a place of “eternal rest.”

Some Christian groups and other organizations characterized in media as far right continued to issue statements praising the World War II-era fascist government responsible for the deportation of thousands of Jews to Nazi death camps, and they continued to organize gatherings where participants displayed symbols of the World War II fascist state. While there were no media reports of direct Holocaust denial by these groups, organizers often included photographs showing World War II symbols in online posts promoting their events. On April 18, the Slovak People's Party, described by media as a neofascist party, used such symbols during a protest march commemorating the anniversary of the execution of the president of the Nazi-allied wartime Slovak state, Jozef Tiso.

The Ecumenical Council of Churches continued to be the only government-recognized association for interreligious dialogue. In February the Parliament of the World's Religions, a local NGO, organized a series of public debates and school lectures to promote interfaith dialogue and tolerance. The events hosted Catholic and Lutheran clergy, an imam, and a rabbi and aimed to debunk popular myths about the represented religions and demonstrate how religious diversity contributes to society.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The Ambassador and other embassy officers regularly discussed the treatment of religious minority groups and the continued growth of anti-Muslim sentiment and anti-Semitism with government officials, including the speaker of parliament and the prime minister. The embassy continued to express to government officials its concerns about the higher number of members required for religious groups to register.

Embassy officers met with registered and unregistered religious organizations and civil society groups to discuss hate speech directed against Muslims and the negative impact on religious minorities of the new membership requirement as well as of previously existing legal requirements for registration of religious groups. In April the embassy hosted an interfaith event with representatives of various religious and NGO groups to discuss religious freedom and tolerance. In September the embassy awarded a grant to an NGO for a new program to develop a curriculum for secondary school teachers to build religious tolerance through interfaith discussions.

The embassy used its social media channels to commemorate Slovak Holocaust Remembrance Day and International Religious Freedom Day and highlight the importance of fighting all forms of xenophobia, racism, and intolerance, including intolerance based on religion.

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