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2015 Report on International Religious Freedom - Slovak Republic

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for freedom of religious belief and affiliation and states the country is not bound to any particular faith. Registration procedures requiring a minimum number of adherents prevented some smaller groups from attaining the legal status to perform economic functions and to carry out public functions. The Center for Research on Ethnicity and Culture (CVEK), a nongovernmental organization (NGO), said the religious registration law limited the ability of smaller unregistered religious groups to counter negative stereotyping. Some government officials portrayed Muslims as potential threats to national security, culture, and society and expressed interest in selecting only Christian refugees for resettlement. The government continued its dialogue with religious representatives on changes to government funding for religious groups.

Far-right groups organized a number of large anti-Islam protests, including verbal and physical attacks against Muslims. Acts of anti-Semitism persisted among far-right organizations; various groups continued to commemorate the World War II fascist state and praise its leaders. NGOs reported unregistered groups closely affiliated with immigrant communities were particularly vulnerable to negative stereotyping. Muslim community members reported increased levels of hate speech and anti-Muslim sentiment, as well as more fear within the community.

The U.S. embassy discussed the religious registration law and funding change proposals with Ministry of Culture officials and met with members of registered and unregistered religious communities. The embassy discussed the Ministry of Culture's decision to oppose the Christian Fellowship's religious registration with NGO members.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the population at 5.4 million (July 2015 estimate). According to the 2011 census, the most recent available, 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 religious groups present in small numbers include the Reformed Christian Church, other Protestant groups, Jehovah's Witnesses, Orthodox Christians, Jews, Bahais, and Muslims. Recent research by NGOs noted likely underreporting of unregistered religious groups. During the 2011 census, 1,213 individuals self-identified as followers of Islam, while representatives of the Islamic community estimate the number to be approximately 5,000. There are approximately 2,000 Jews.

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 primarily in the south, near the border with Hungary, where many ethnic Hungarians live. Other religious groups tend to be diffused 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 be without religious beliefs. The constitution states the country is not bound to any particular faith and religious groups can manage their affairs independently. The constitution guarantees the right to practice one's faith as part of a registered or unregistered group. It stipulates that in a democratic country religious freedom may only be restricted for the protection of public order, health, and morals or for the protection of the rights and freedoms of others.

The law requires religious groups to register in order to perform certain economic and civic religious functions. To register as a religious group, 20,000 adult members, either 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 to the Ministry of Culture.

Registration confers the legal status necessary to perform economic functions such as opening a bank account or renting property, and civic religious functions such as presiding at burial ceremonies or gaining access to hospitalized patients or prisoners. The 18 registered churches and religious groups receive annual state subsidies; some of these groups have. Less than 20,000 members, 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 cannot legally intervene in the internal affairs of religious groups or direct their activities.

Religious groups without 20,000 adult adherents can register as civic associations to carry out some activities requiring a legal status. They are not, however, recognized as registered religious groups as the law governing registration of citizen associations specifically excludes religious groups. Clergy from unregistered religious groups do not officially have the right to minister to their members in prisons or government hospitals, and weddings conducted by unregistered religious groups are not legally valid. Additionally, unregistered groups cannot establish religious schools.

A concordat with the Holy See provides the legal framework for relations among 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. An agreement between the government and 11 of the 17 other registered religious groups provides similar status to those groups. The unanimous approval of the existing parties to the agreement is required for other religious groups to have similar benefits.

All public elementary school students must take a religion or an ethics class, depending on personal or parental preferences. Religion class curricula do not mention unregistered groups or some of the smaller registered groups, and unregistered groups are not allowed to teach their faith at schools. Teachers from a registered religious group normally teach about the tenants of their faith, although there are exceptions.

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

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

Government Practices

Local NGOs, including CVEK, continued to support the removal of the 20,000-member requirement for registration of religious groups, saying the qualitative requirements defined in the law were sufficient to prevent

registering groups whose activities were unconstitutional or contradicted human rights principles. The government took no actions to amend the law. Muslim community leaders reported that prisons and detention facilities frequently prevented their spiritual representatives from gaining access to their adherents.

The Ministry of Culture solicited a new expert opinion to re-evaluate the registration application of the Christian Fellowship, which the ministry had rejected in 2007. The ministry's original expert had concluded the group promoted hatred toward other religious groups and was therefore ineligible for registration. The Christian Fellowship disagreed with the ministry's expert and submitted its own expert opinion. The ministry approached a third, independent expert to attempt to resolve the disagreement and convened a hearing of experts in October. The registration application remained pending.

While the law does not prevent unregistered groups from establishing prayer rooms and religious sites, members of some religious communities reported the lack of official registration made obtaining the necessary construction permits more difficult. The Muslim community is not registered, and has not been able to employ formally an imam because only registered religious groups are allowed to employ spiritual leaders.

In the context of the migration crisis in Europe, government officials repeatedly said that while the government opposed mandatory EU refugee quotas, it would accept 200 Christian refugees from Syria. NGOs and international observers criticized the government's plan as discriminatory. In August the Ministry of Interior explained its preference for Christian refugees by stating that Christians would integrate more easily into society than Muslims because no officially recognized mosques existed in the country.

In September, while discussing EU negotiations over the adoption of mandatory refugee quotas, Prime Minister Robert Fico stated that while the country would initially be required to accept 2,000 refugees, it would be forced to take more refugees in future years. "And one day," he said, "we will have here 40,000 to 50,000 Muslims, who will have their own church, will be present in the army, the police, and they will operate as an official church – do we really want this here?" Fico also said Da'esh (Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant) was recruiting among the refugees. NGOs denounced the prime minister's rhetoric as fear mongering.

Some government officials portrayed Muslims, particularly migrants, as potential threats to national security, culture, and society. Prime Minister Fico said in a public radio broadcast in January that because Christian churches were dominant in the country, "we would not be able to easily tolerate 300,000 to 400,000 Muslims coming here, starting to build mosques and starting to change the character of this state." In response to the November terrorist attacks in Paris, Prime Minister Fico told media that the government was monitoring every single Muslim on the national territory.

The leader of the Slovak National Party, Andrej Danko, proposed in January increasing the number of signatures needed to register a religious group from 20,000 to 50,000. Danko said the measures were intended to prevent the Muslim community from registering Islam. He also proposed introducing a law that would ban the construction of Islamic religious buildings.

Former interior minister, parliamentarian, and New Majority (NOVA) political party leader Daniel Lipsic said in January that as far as he was aware, only Muslims, not Christians or Jews, committed violent crimes or terrorist acts in Europe.

The Ministry of Culture administered a cultural grant program allocating money for the upkeep of cultural and religious monuments. A large portion of the government subsidy to registered religious groups was used to pay clergy and was allocated to groups based on the number of their clergy.

The 18 registered religious groups received approximately 38 million euros (\$41.3 million) in annual state subsidies. The government continued discussions with stakeholders about changes in the funding of religious groups and convened two sessions of an expert commission to address this and other issues. During the April session, the Ministry of Culture continued to discuss possible new models of government funding for registered religious groups with stakeholders and tasked religious groups with submitting their evaluations of the proposed models by November. These models included allowing individuals to allocate a certain percentage of their taxes to a particular registered religious group or providing government contributions to registered religious groups based on the number of adherents rather than the number of clergy, as is currently the case. Some religious groups criticized the tax allocation model, stating they would have to start competing with other civil society organizations, which already benefit from a percentage of taxes assigned to them by taxpayers.

The Nation's Memory Institute, a public institution established by the government, provided access to previously undisclosed records of the regimes ruling the country from 1939 to 1989. Jewish community leaders continued to criticize the institute for focusing on the persecution of prominent figures of the World War II-era fascist state by the subsequent communist regime and playing down these individuals' role in supporting anti-Semitic policies.

In September Prime Minister Fico commemorated Holocaust victims and emphasized the importance of future generations continuing to learn about their suffering. The commemoration recognized the 74th anniversary of the World War II government issuing the “Jewish Code,” which stripped Jews of their civil rights. The Code was developed according to Nazi legislation on Jews and was one of the toughest anti-Jewish legal measures in Europe. The deportation of Jews to death camps followed a year later.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Observers reported a noticeable increase in anti-Muslim and anti-refugee protests by far-right extremists and others, sparked by the migration crisis in Europe.

Far right groups organized protests against what they called the “Islamization of Europe and Slovakia” throughout the year. In June between 3,000 and 5,000 individuals from throughout Central Europe attended a protest march in Bratislava called “STOP to the Islamization of Europe! Together against the Brussels dictate, for a Europe for Europeans.” The protest turned violent when a group of protestors verbally and physically attacked a family from Saudi Arabia at the local train station.

In September far right groups again convened a protest march in Bratislava against the “Islamization of Europe,” this time attended by several hundred persons. In October several hundred individuals organized a protest, called “Stop the Islamization of Europe,” in Kosice, the largest city in eastern Slovakia.

Human rights NGOs and unregistered religious groups reported the registration law made it difficult for unregistered groups to enter the public discourse, and therefore limited their ability to alter negative public attitudes toward smaller religious organizations. In particular, according to a 2014 CVEK report, some people referred to unregistered religious organizations as “cults.” NGOs also reported religious groups associated with new immigrant communities were particularly disadvantaged by the registration law.

In September a group of residents in the town of Topolcany collected signatures for a petition to prevent a Muslim first-grade student from attending the same school as their children. They reportedly initiated the petition after parents noticed the child’s mother wearing a headscarf. They later abandoned the petition.

Some Christian and far right groups continued to praise the World War II-era fascist government, which deported thousands of Jews to Nazi death camps. While direct Holocaust denial was not common, neo-Nazi groups organized gatherings throughout the year expressing support for and using symbols of the World War II-era fascist state. On March 14 and April 19, the People’s Party Our Slovakia, whose leader, Marian Kotleba, is the governor of the Banska Bystrica region, organized a commemoration of the creation of the World War II fascist state and the execution of World War II-era President Jozef Tiso.

In October Kotleba filed a criminal complaint in response to an exhibition by the NGO Post Bellum on Stefania Lorandova, who saved hundreds of lives during the Holocaust by forging documents for Jews so they could relocate to Hungary and obtain new identities. Kotleba stated her story promoted Zionism due to Lorandova’s membership in the Hashomer Hatzair Zionist youth organization, which he said was racist and discriminatory and suppressed the rights and freedoms of citizens.

In August the *Bystricky Kraj* newspaper, controlled by Kotleba, published a cartoon that appeared to have been copied from a Nazi-era anti-Semitic cartoon. Only the text “with Jews...you lose” was removed. The cartoon showed a man with a long nose and curly hair holding banknotes; it was published next to a story criticizing “bankers” for the indebtedness of Banska Bystrica residents. Media outlets, including the daily *Pravda*, which uncovered the similarities with the Nazi-era cartoon, were quick to condemn the picture. The Banska Bystrica Regional Prosecutor’s Office opened an investigation, although it ultimately concluded that the newspaper had not violated any law. Kotleba’s spokesperson stated the picture was an “illustrative stock photo.”

Funeral operators occasionally prevented representatives from unregistered religious groups from performing burial ceremonies.

Members of the Muslim community reported greater levels of fear compared with previous years. Human rights groups and the Muslim community reported increased levels of hate speech against Muslims on social media sites. According to a June 2015 Eurobarometer survey, 63 percent of citizens would “definitely not be OK” with having a Muslim as a son or daughter in law.

The Ecumenical Council of Churches was the only formal association for interreligious dialogue and assembled only Christian groups that followed the Bible. The “new religiosity” section of its website focused exclusively on the study of what it termed to be “cults.” According to a report by CVEK, this linking of smaller religious groups to cults contributed to negative public perceptions of unregistered groups.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

Embassy representatives continued to discuss developments regarding the religious registration law and proposed changes to the funding of churches and religious groups with Ministry of Culture officials. The Ambassador and other embassy officials regularly met with government officials to discuss religious freedom issues, including the treatment of minority religious groups and anti-Muslim sentiment. The Charge d'Affaires and other embassy officials participated in the annual Holocaust observation ceremony in Bratislava. Embassy officials met with registered and unregistered religious organizations and civil society groups to discuss religious freedom issues throughout the year.

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