

2024 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Slovakia

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Senior government officials in Slovakia criticized civil society organizations critical of the ruling coalition's policies, including restricting their access to government funding, and threatened retaliatory actions and legislative measures against the independent media and opposition during the year.

Significant human rights issues included credible reports of serious restrictions on freedom of expression and media freedom, including threats of violence against journalists.

The government generally took credible steps to identify and punish officials who committed human rights abuses, but enacted legal reforms to shield some high-level government officials from criminal investigation and prosecution.

Section 1.

Life

a. Extrajudicial Killings

There were no reports the government or its agents committed arbitrary or unlawful killings during the year.

b. Coercion in Population Control

During the year there were no reports of coerced abortion or involuntary sterilization by government authorities.

Section 2.

Liberty

a. Freedom of the Press

The constitution and law provided for freedom of expression, including for members of the press and other media. An independent media, an effective judiciary, and a functioning democratic political system combined to promote freedom of expression, including for media members. While the government generally respected this right, some senior government officials routinely threatened or intimidated journalists for their reporting.

The law prohibited the defamation of nationalities and race, punishable by up to three years in prison. It also prohibited the denial of the Holocaust and crimes committed by the fascist and communist regimes, which carried a prison sentence of six months to three years. These prohibitions also applied to print and broadcast media, the publication of books, and online newspapers and journals.

In 2023, the government established the Platform for the Promotion of Press Freedom and Safety of Journalists, a permanent expert-coordinating body for the implementation of the country's national media freedom initiatives. The platform comprised representatives of government institutions, regulatory and self-regulatory bodies, as well as media and press freedom organizations including the Investigative Center of Jan Kuciak (ICJK) and Reporters Without Borders. In September, the ICJK and Reporters Without Borders announced they had suspended their participation in the platform after the government replaced a civil society representative, former journalist and Let's Stop Corruption Foundation Director Zuzana Petkova, with Dominik Papala, a reporter and host at a controversial online outlet and a local radio station known for promoting disinformation. ICJK and Reporters Without Borders signaled their concerns that the appointment lacked professional criteria and would endanger the platform's international recognition. As of December, the platform had not convened since at least June.

Physical Attacks, Imprisonment, and Pressure

Government officials verbally attacked journalists and encouraged their supporters to harass the press, particularly on social media. The ICJK, which operated the Safe Journalism online platform, recorded 48 incidents targeting journalists between January 1 and July 9. These included 34 instances of verbal threats or online harassment, seven cases of stalking or harassment, two Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation or legal threats, and one death threat. In 12 cases, politicians were responsible for the incidents, while three cases were linked to politically affiliated individuals or institutions. The ICJK noted an increase in attacks against journalists compared with 2023, especially following the May assassination attempt against Prime Minister Robert Fico. In the 48 incidents documented by the ICJK, harassers targeted women journalists in 29 of them.

In October, Peter Bardy, the editor in chief of *Aktuality*, a major news outlet, and author of a 2023 book about Prime Minister Fico, announced Fico sued him and the outlet's publishing house over the use of Fico's photo on the book's cover. According to Bardy, Fico claimed he had exclusive rights to the use of his photos and demanded an apology and compensation of €100,000 (\$109,000) from Bardy and from the publishing house.

Censorship by Governments, Military, Intelligence, or Police Forces, Criminal Groups, or Armed Extremist or Rebel Groups

In June, parliament passed a law overhauling the public broadcaster RTVS, replacing it with a new entity, STVR. Critics argued the government's control of the broadcaster's nine-member oversight council allowed it to prohibit antigovernment viewpoints. In August, an STVR journalist claimed newsroom leadership intervened in a story on nepotism allegations against Environment Minister Tomas Taraba. This journalist and other STVR correspondents expressed concerns regarding censorship and reported instances of intimidation after the interim STVR director implemented personnel changes in the newsroom.

Observers expressed concerns regarding the consolidation of media ownership and its potential long-term threat to press freedom. Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) reported most of the country's private media outlets, including television stations and print publications, were controlled by relatively few financial conglomerates or wealthy individuals.

b. Worker Rights

Freedom of Association and Collective Bargaining

The law provided for workers to form and join independent unions, bargain collectively, and conduct legal strikes, and workers exercised these rights. The law recognized the right to strike with advance notice, both when collective bargaining did not reach an agreement and in support of other striking employees' demands (a solidarity strike).

The law prohibited dismissing workers who lawfully took part in strikes but did not offer protection if a strike was illegal or unofficial. The law prohibited antiunion discrimination, but did not state whether reinstatement of workers fired for union activity was required.

The government effectively enforced laws protecting freedom of association, collective bargaining, and the right to strike. Penalties for violations were commensurate with penalties for other laws involving the denial of civil rights. Procedures were, however, occasionally delayed and appealed. The government sometimes applied penalties against violators.

Workers and unions generally exercised these rights without restrictions and the government generally respected their rights.

Forced or Compulsory Labor

See the Department of State's annual *Trafficking in Persons Report* at <https://www.state.gov/trafficking-in-persons-report/>.

Acceptable Work Conditions

Wage and Hour Laws

The law provided for a minimum wage for all sectors.

The law mandated a maximum workweek of 48 hours, including overtime, except for employees in the health-care sector, whose maximum workweek was 56 hours, including overtime. Alleged violations of wage, hour, or overtime laws were common in the construction and hospitality sectors.

Occupational Safety and Health

The law established occupational safety and health (OSH) standards generally appropriate for the main industries. The government responded to workers' OSH complaints. Workers could generally remove themselves from situations that endangered health or safety without jeopardizing their employment, and authorities effectively protected employees in these situations. Alleged violations of OSH standards were common in industrial production, transport, warehouse, and wholesale industries.

Wage, Hour, and OSH Enforcement

Government effectively enforced minimum wage, overtime, and OSH laws. The NLI enforced these laws and conducted inspections effectively. Trade unions, local employment offices, and the Ministry of Labor, Social Affairs, and Family monitored compliance with wage, hour, and OSH laws. The number of labor inspectors was sufficient to enforce compliance, and inspectors had the authority to make unannounced inspections and initiate sanctions. Penalties for violations were commensurate with those for similar crimes, such as fraud or negligence, and were regularly enforced against violators. Labor offices and the NLI provided key information on legal employment, employment rights, and wage, hour, and OSH laws to Ukrainian refugees in their native language to raise awareness and prevent labor law violations and trafficking in persons. The

NLI also ran a limited awareness campaign targeting workers and employers in seasonal industries to prevent illegal employment and violations of wage, hours, and OSH laws.

Experts estimated the informal sector accounted for up to 15 percent of the country's gross domestic product. While wage, hour, and OSH laws and inspections covered workers in the informal economy, the government did not enforce labor laws in this sector.

c. Disappearance and Abduction

Disappearance

There were no reports of enforced disappearances by or on behalf of government authorities.

Prolonged Detention without Charges

The constitution and the law prohibited arbitrary arrest and detention and provided for the right of any person to challenge the lawfulness of their arrest or detention in court. The government generally observed these requirements.

d. Violations in Religious Freedom

See the Department of State's annual *International Religious Freedom Report* at <https://www.state.gov/religiousfreedomreport/>.

e. Trafficking in Persons

See the Department of State's annual *Trafficking in Persons Report* at <https://www.state.gov/trafficking-in-persons-report/>.

Section 3.

Security of the Person

a. Torture and Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment

The constitution and the law prohibited such practices, but there were reports that government officials employed them in some cases.

NGOs expressed concerns that living conditions in some detention centers for asylum seekers and foreign nationals were inadequate but noted that authorities made some improvements during the year.

A January Prosecutor General's Office (PGO) report on government-run "re-education centers," facilities housing juvenile offenders and disadvantaged children, noted physical abuse by staff, placement of some children in solitary confinement for several days, examples of children doing unpaid work, restrictions on children's contact with their families, poor living conditions, and other concerning observations. The PGO noted this mistreatment violated children's personal freedom and rights, including those provided by the constitution and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. The PGO further stated children in "re-education centers" were not provided the same rights

as detainees in prisons and detention facilities. In May, the minister of labor, social affairs, and family decided to close two of 13 “re-education centers” by the end of June due to the poor state of their premises.

The Bureau of the Inspection Service of the Ministry of Interior dismissed or discontinued most investigations into cases involving injuries allegedly caused by police or by prison and court guards.

b. Protection of Children

Child Labor

There was no significant presence of the worst forms of child labor. The law prohibited all the worst forms of child labor. The minimum age for employment was 15 for all sectors, although younger children could perform light work in cultural or artistic performances, sports events, or advertising activities if it did not affect their health, safety, personal development, or schooling. The law did not permit children younger than 16 to work more than 30 hours per week on average and restricted children younger than 18 to 37.5 hours per week. The law applied to all children who were high school or full-time university students. The law did not allow children younger than 18 to work underground, work overtime, or perform labor considered inappropriate for their age or health.

The government effectively enforced applicable laws. Penalties for violations of child and juvenile labor laws were commensurate with those for other analogous crimes and were regularly applied against violators. Regional inspection units, under the National Labor Inspectorate (NLI), received and investigated child labor complaints. The state Social Insurance Company also monitored child labor law compliance. If a unit found a violation, it transferred the case to the NLI, which fined employers and individuals who did not report incidents adequately. Resources, inspections, and remediation were generally adequate.

Child Marriage

The legal minimum age for marriage was 18 and authorities effectively enforced this law. In exceptional cases, a court could allow marriage at 16 if both parents consented and one member of the couple requested it. Children of Romani descent were vulnerable to forced marriages, often arranged by their legal guardians seeking financial benefit.

c. Protection to Refugees

The government cooperated with the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and other humanitarian organizations in providing protection and assistance to refugees, returning refugees, asylum seekers, and other persons of concern.

Provision of First Asylum

The law provided for the granting of asylum or refugee status, and the government had a system for providing some protection to refugees. Some civil society organizations, however, noted the Migration Office applied a restrictive asylum policy and granted asylum only in a limited number of cases. One-third of asylum seekers left the country before the Migration Office issued a decision on their applications.

UNHCR and the local NGO Slovak Humanitarian Council monitored access to asylum procedures, including at the country’s borders and in detention and accommodation centers. Both the Ministry

of Justice's Center for Legal Aid and the Slovak Humanitarian Council provided legal advice to asylum seekers.

d. Acts of Antisemitism and Antisemitic Incitement

According to the 2021 census, there were 2,000 Jews in the country, although the Central Union of Jewish Religious Communities in the Slovak Republic estimated the Jewish population at 5,000.

Organized neo-Nazi groups with an estimated 500 active members and several thousand sympathizers spread antisemitic messages. Antisemitic stereotypes characterizing Jews as greedy or secretly influencing world affairs were widespread, even beyond neo-Nazi groups and their sympathizers. Experts noted that senior government officials often helped spread and legitimize antisemitic sentiments for political purposes. Experts and watchdog organizations criticized senior representatives of the ruling coalition parties, Smer and Hlas, including then-Deputy Speaker of Parliament Lubos Blaha, Minister of Interior Matus Sutaj-Estok, the Prime Minister's Office Chief of Staff Juraj Gedra, and the Chairman of the Council of Advisors to the Prime Minister, Erik Kalinak, for participating in online conversations with an influential United Kingdom-based neo-Nazi antisemitic blogger throughout the year. Critics claimed that by engaging with the blogger, operating under the alias "Danny Kollar," throughout the year, the officials lent credence to his antisemitic comments.

After YouTube removed Kollar's channel on June 3 for "violations of community guidelines," Deputy Prime Minister and Defense Minister Robert Kalinak denounced the decision, downplayed Kollar's actions and rhetoric, and criticized the media for labeling him a neo-Nazi. In October, Kalinak said his private law firm could take over Kollar's legal defense after media reported that authorities in the United Kingdom rejected Kollar's appeal against his extradition order to Slovakia over three international warrants by Slovak authorities over suspected online harassment. Separately, experts denounced Prime Minister Fico's use of lyrics from the "Cut and Slash to Blood!" song, notorious for its use by the fascist Slovak state's "Hlinka Guard" militia during World War II, in his criticism of an opposition party leader in an April 7 Facebook video.

On January 25, the Specialized Criminal Court in Pezinok convicted Marian Magat, a former candidate of Kotleba's – People's Party Our Slovakia, to six years in prison for "extensive and long-term 'extremist' criminal activity." The judge found Magat guilty on 43 counts of various "extremist" crimes, including founding, supporting, and promoting a movement suppressing basic rights and freedoms; possessing, producing, and disseminating "extremist" neo-Nazi materials; and promoting Holocaust denial in his 2020 book, *Jewocracy*. After Magat appealed, the Supreme Court overturned the verdict on April 30 and ordered a retrial, citing insufficient consideration of the defense's evidence and arguments. Magat remained in custody as the trial was pending as of October.

While direct denial of the Holocaust was rare, expressions of approval of the World War II-era Slovak fascist state and its leaders, who deported tens of thousands of Jews, Roma, and others to death camps, occurred often. Marking the anniversary of his execution, admirers of President Jozef Tiso organized an annual memorial pilgrimage on April 19 from Rajec to Bytca, Tiso's birthplace, to honor the "martyr" head of the Nazi-era Slovak state. On June 26, the Administrative Court in Banska Bystrica ordered the village of Varin to rename its street bearing Tiso's name within six months, ruling it violated the law banning streets named after representatives of the Slovak fascist regime of 1939-1945.

For further information on incidents of antisemitism in the country, whether or not those incidents were motivated by religion, and for reporting on the ability of Jews to exercise freedom of religion or belief, see the Department of State's annual *International Religious Freedom Report* at <https://www.state.gov/religiousfreedomreport/>.