

SLOVAK REPUBLIC 2021 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for freedom of religious belief and affiliation and states the country is not bound to any particular faith. Registration requirements for religious groups include the need to present a petition with signatures of at least 50,000 adherents, which members of some religious groups considered discriminatory. A group lacking the minimum 50,000 adult adherents required to obtain status as an official religious group may register as a civic association to function; in doing so, however, it may not identify itself officially as a religious group. Some groups registered as civic associations in order to function. Government officials and members of parliament (MPs) from both the government coalition and opposition parties continued to make anti-Muslim statements. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the government implemented restrictions on the freedom of movement and public assembly throughout the year that some religious leaders stated violated freedom of religion. A former deputy prime minister asked the Prosecutor General's office to formally request that the Constitutional Court assess whether these restrictions violated the right to freedom of religion. The court confirmed that the state of emergency accorded with the constitution. The government's ombudsperson separately concluded that while COVID-19 measures introduced by the government in 2020 did restrict fundamental rights, the measures were substantiated and proportional and "did not interfere with the core of religious freedom." State authorities continued to prosecute some members of the Kotlebovci – Ludova strana Nase Slovensko (Kotleba's – People's Party Our Slovakia) (LSNS) for defaming minority religious beliefs and denying the Holocaust. The party chairperson's appeal against a four-and-a-half-year prison sentence for an act of antisemitism remained pending before the Supreme Court. The government adopted a formal resolution apologizing for crimes committed by the Slovak fascist state and denouncing the adoption of an antisemitic "Jewish Code" in 1941 that enabled the deportation of Slovak Jews. The government created the position of Plenipotentiary for Freedom of Religion or Belief charged with promoting religious freedom at home and abroad.

The Muslim community continued to report anti-Muslim hate speech on social media, which it mostly attributed to public statements by politicians portraying Muslim refugees as a threat to the country's society. According to a survey by a local nongovernmental organization (NGO), a majority of Slovaks, citing the religion as "very dangerous," held negative attitudes toward Muslim refugees and

migrants; 43 percent believed Islam should be banned in the country. Organizations that media described as far right continued to publish material on and to commemorate the World War II-era, Nazi-allied Slovak state, and to praise its leaders. In September, the Brussels-based NGO Action and Protection League issued the results of its European antisemitism survey, which found that 20 percent of 1,000 respondents ages 18-75 in Slovakia said they had negative feelings towards Jews. Unregistered religious groups said the public tended to distrust them because of their lack of official government recognition.

The U.S. Ambassador and other embassy officers raised with government officials the treatment of religious minorities and the difficulties those groups faced regarding registration, as well as measures to counter what religious groups and others described as widespread antisemitism and anti-Muslim sentiment. The Ambassador and other embassy officers also repeatedly raised public awareness of the importance of religious freedom, using private and public events, as well as social media, to highlight the need for tolerance in society and the importance of countering hate speech. Embassy officials, including the Ambassador, met regularly with registered and unregistered religious organizations and NGOs to raise the issue of hate speech and to highlight the role of churches and religious groups in countering extremism and promoting tolerance. The embassy continued to support efforts aimed at combating anti-Islamic sentiment and antisemitism and increasing tolerance through public diplomacy grants.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 5.4 million (midyear 2021). According to the most recent census in 2021, Roman Catholics constitute 55.8 percent of the population, more than 300,000 members fewer than in the previous census (2011), when they constituted 62 percent of the population. Members of the Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession constitute 5.3 percent, and Greek Catholics 4 percent; 23.8 percent did not state a religious affiliation – almost 600,000 persons more, compared with 13.4 percent in 2011. There are smaller numbers of members of the Reformed Christian Church, other Protestants, members of the Orthodox Church, Jehovah's Witnesses, Buddhists, Muslims, Jews, Hindus, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, and Baha'is. In the 2021 census, 3,862 persons self-identified as Muslim, more than double the number in 2011, while representatives of the Muslim community estimate their number at 6,000. According to the census, there are 2,007 Jews, although the Central Union of Jewish Religious Communities in the Slovak Republic estimates the Jewish population at 5,000. 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 are equally distributed across the country.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution provides for freedom of religious belief and affiliation, as well as the right to change religious faith or to refrain from religious affiliation. It prohibits discrimination on religious grounds. 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, which courts have interpreted to include Nazis and neo-Nazis. Violators are subject to up to five years' imprisonment.

The law requires religious groups to register with the Ministry of Culture's Department of Church Affairs to employ spiritual leaders to perform officially recognized functions. Clergy from unregistered religious groups do not have the right to minister to their members in prisons or government hospitals. Civil functions such as weddings officiated by clergy from registered groups are recognized by the state, while those presided over by clergy from unregistered groups are not, and couples must undergo an additional civil ceremony. Unregistered groups may apply to provide spiritual guidance to their adherents in prisons, but they have no legal recourse if their requests are denied. Unregistered groups may conduct religious services, which the government recognizes as private, rather than religious, activities. Unregistered groups lack legal status and may not establish religious schools or receive government funding. The law exempts registered groups from the duty to notify public authorities in advance of

organizing public assemblies – an exemption that does not apply to unregistered groups.

According to the law, organizations seeking registration as religious groups must have a minimum of 50,000 adherents. The 50,000 persons must be adult citizens with permanent residence in the country 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 of all members, and support for the group’s registration. All groups registered before these requirements came into effect in 2017 remained registered without having to meet the 50,000-adherent requirement; no new religious groups have attained recognition under the revised requirements. According to the law, only groups that register using the title “church” in their official name may call themselves a church, but there is no other legal distinction between registered “churches” and other registered religious groups.

The 18 registered 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, 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 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 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.

In 2020, a legislative amendment took effect that increased the total state subsidies to registered religious groups, basing the funding on the number of adherents reported in the most recent census. Under the law, the state adjusts annual subsidy payments for inflation.

A group lacking the 50,000 adult adherents required to obtain status as an official religious group may register as a civic association, which provides the legal status necessary to carry out activities such as maintaining a bank account, entering into a contract, or acquiring or renting property. In doing so, however, the group may not identify itself officially as a religious group, since the law governing registration of civic associations specifically excludes religious groups from obtaining this status. The group must also refrain from carrying out activities related to practicing religion, which from a legal perspective are reserved for registered religious groups only, or face possible dissolution by authorities. To register as a civic association, three citizens must 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 among the government, the Roman Catholic Church in the country, and the Holy See. Two corollaries cover the operation of Catholic religious schools, the teaching of Catholic religious education as a subject in public schools, and the service of Catholic priests as military chaplains. A single agreement between the government and 11 of the 17 other registered religious groups provides similar status to those groups. These 11 religious groups may also provide military chaplains. The unanimous approval of all 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.

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 Ministry of Education's National Educational Program. Representatives of registered religious communities are involved in the preparation of the National Education Program. Although most school religion classes teach Roman 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. All schools offer ethics courses as an alternative to religion classes. Alternatively, parents may request that teachings of different faiths be included in the curriculum of the Catholic religion classes. There are no clear requirements as to course content when teaching about other faiths in the Catholic classes. Private and religious schools define their own content for religion courses and may teach only their own religion, but they are required to offer ethics courses as an alternative. Registered religious groups approve textbooks used for religious classes and the state finances the textbooks. 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 normally teach about the tenets of their own faith, although they may teach about other faiths as well. The Roman Catholic Church appoints teachers of Catholic classes. Depending on the registered religious group and the school, other religious groups may appoint the teachers of their classes. The government pays the salaries of religion teachers in public schools.

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

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

The law prohibits the defamation of a person's or group's belief, treating a violation as a criminal offense punishable by up to five years' imprisonment. If such crimes are committed with a "special" aggravating motive, which includes hatred against a group or individuals for their actual or alleged religious beliefs, the defamation and incitement crimes are punishable with sentences of up to five and six years, respectively.

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 Nazi-allied, WWII-era fascist and postwar communist regimes.

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

Government Practices

The Ministry of Culture again did not reconsider its repeated rejections of the 2007 registration application of the Grace Christian Fellowship, despite Supreme Court rulings in 2009 and 2012 ordering it to do so. In the past, the ministry said it based its rejections on assessments by several religious affairs experts that the group promoted hatred toward other religious groups. In June 2020, the Bratislava Regional Court dismissed the Grace Christian Fellowship's legal action contesting the legality of the ministry's 2018 decision. The group appealed to the Supreme Court. The case was pending as of December.

Representatives of the Jewish and Muslim communities reported that authorities were generally willing to make exceptions on grounds of religious belief and allow burials to take place within 24 hours, rather than requiring community members wait the legally mandated 48 hours. According to a representative of the Muslim community, authorities generally tolerated Islamic burial customs such as ritual washing and draping of the deceased, and burial without a coffin.

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the government implemented restrictions on freedom of movement and public assembly throughout the year, as well as several hygienic measures concerning religious practices. A state of emergency, introduced in October 2020, was in place until May, during which a curfew, a ban on public assembly, and internal travel restrictions applied. According to several religious groups, these violated the right of religious freedom in the country. In February and March, Jan Figel, a former deputy prime minister and former European Union (EU) special envoy for promotion of freedom of religion or belief outside the EU, filed three motions with the Prosecutor General's Office asking it to formally request that the Constitutional Court assess whether the government's measures violated the right to freedom of religion.

According to Figel, in practice these measures prevented individuals from exercising religious freedom and manifesting their religious beliefs – fundamental rights the constitution guarantees may be exercised publicly through worship. Figel also challenged the legality of what he termed restrictions on fundamental rights, stating that the relevant decree issued by the Public Health Authority lacked legal backing, legitimacy, and proportionality. Although the Prosecutor General did not act on these motions, on March 31, the Constitutional Court confirmed that the state of emergency accorded with the constitution, and on December 1, the court ruled against a separate motion submitted by the Prosecutor General in May in which he had challenged the power of the Public Health Authority to issue antipandemic measures as mere decrees. In February, Figel submitted a religious freedom rights violation motion in the European Court of Human Rights, which accepted the motion; a ruling in the case was pending as of December. The Conference of Slovak Bishops, which is composed of Roman and Greek Catholic bishops, together with leadership of the Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession and the Orthodox Church, expressed support for Figel's initiative.

In May, the Public Defender of Rights (ombudsperson) published her annual report, in which she concluded that while the COVID-19 measures introduced by the government in 2020, including a temporary suspension of services and restrictions on attendance, restricted fundamental rights, the measures were

substantiated and proportional and “did not interfere with the core of religious freedom.” The ombudsperson said that the restrictions were aimed at safeguarding public health, not at limiting the freedom of religious belief. She noted that religious groups were allowed to make religious services available to the public via televised and online broadcasts. She also said that a regulation introduced by the Public Health Authority in May 2020 that listed religious activities that were exempted from restrictions on public events did, however, discriminate against some registered religious groups, since it specifically included first holy communion and confirmation as exempted activities – rites that not all religious groups in the country perform.

In November, the government reintroduced a state of emergency, coupled with restrictions on freedom of movement and public assembly. Under the rules in place, the government exempted religious services from the ban on mass events but initially limited exemptions to individual pastoral care only, while restrictions allowed citizens to visit churches only individually. Following protests by several religious and political groups, the government relaxed the restrictions as of December 10, allowing the fully vaccinated and those who had recovered from COVID-19 to attend religious services in limited numbers proportional to the size of the place of worship.

A representative of the Muslim community again stated that Muslims faced increasing difficulties in finding suitable burial grounds for their adherents, since a cemetery they had used for these purposes in Bratislava was close to reaching its maximum capacity, and the city council had not provided a new suitable location that would allow funeral services and burial according to Islamic traditions. They also said the lack of registration meant it was difficult to establish a mosque in the country; they pointed to the rejection of an application to build a mosque and cultural center years earlier by the then mayor of Bratislava, who had cited the lack of registration as one reason for the rejection. Although Muslims had registered as a civic association, they continued to state that the lack of recognition as a religious group made obtaining the necessary construction permits for other sites for religious worship such as prayer rooms difficult. They said the officials would utilize technical grounds, such as zoning regulations, to reject their applications or fail to act on them.

The government allocated approximately 52 million euros (\$58.96 million) in its annual state subsidies to the 18 registered religious groups, compared with 51.7 million euros (\$58.62 million) in 2020. Up to 80 percent of each group’s subsidy was used to pay the group’s clergy and operating costs.

Some members of religious groups continued to state 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 relationship with the state and, consequently, their finances. There were no reports, however, that the government arbitrarily altered the amount of subsidies provided to individual religious groups.

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 2020, the ministry allocated approximately five million euros (\$5.67 million) for these purposes, compared with 6.5 million euros (\$7.37 million) in 2019.

Many political parties, including the largest opposition party in parliament, Smer-SD, continued to express anti-Muslim views in their public statements, and leaders from across the political spectrum engaged in rhetoric portraying Muslim migrants as threats to society in their public communications throughout the year.

In August, former prime minister and Smer-SD chair Robert Fico published a post on his Facebook page entitled, "It is terrific to be a Muslim," where he responded to criticism against his party by a political commentator who is a Muslim convert. Fico expressed his lack of understanding for the commentator's motivations in becoming a Muslim and stated that the commentator "should not work as a political scientist in a Christian country." Smer-SD MP and former European Affairs Committee chair Lubos Blaha echoed Fico's criticism in a post on his Facebook page in which he labeled the commentator's criticism of Smer-SD as the "primitive spluttering of an offended Muslim." Both Fico's and Blaha's Facebook accounts had more than 160,000 followers.

During an April press conference on the EU's new migration and asylum pact that introduced new common migration and asylum procedures, as well as a flexible burden-sharing mechanism, representatives of the ruling coalition's Sme Rodina party warned of a possible threat of 70 million migrants, including "illiterates," flooding Europe and leading to the creation of "Muslim communities" that would, according to them, ruin parts of cities and irreversibly change Europe.

Representatives of the LSNS party, which received 7.97 percent of the vote in the 2020 parliamentary election and secured 17 of 150 seats in parliament, continued to make antisemitic statements and faced criminal prosecution for past statements. According to local experts on political extremism, party members and supporters

frequently glorified the Nazi-allied World War II-era fascist government and its leaders and downplayed the role of that regime in wartime atrocities.

In 2020, the Specialized Criminal Court convicted LSNS chairman Marian Kotleba of supporting and promoting groups aimed at suppressing fundamental rights and freedoms for a 2017 ceremony in which he gave three checks, each worth 1,488 euros (\$1,700), to families with children with disabilities. Prosecution experts testified the amount was a well-known neo-Nazi code that represented the white supremacist “14-word” slogan (“We must secure the existence of our people and a future for white children”) and a numerical representation of “Heil Hitler,” with “h” being the eighth letter of the alphabet. Witnesses also testified that organizers played the unofficial anthem of the Nazi-allied wartime Slovak state at the ceremony and that the event was held on March 14, the anniversary of the founding of that Slovak state. The court sentenced Kotleba to four years and four months in prison. The defense appealed to the Supreme Court, and the case remained pending at year’s end.

In October, the Specialized Criminal Court approved a plea bargain for Michal Buchta, former LSNS regional chairman and a former leader of the LSNS youth wing Ludova mladez (Popular Youth). The court handed down a three-year suspended sentence and a 600-euro (\$680) fine to Buchta and also ordered him to undergo mandatory psychological counseling for distributing extremist materials. He had been arrested by the National Criminal Agency in 2018, along with two other individuals, including neo-Nazi singer Jaroslav “Reborn” Pagac. The Specialized Criminal Court convicted Pagac in June of producing and distributing clothes and other items bearing extremist symbols and sentenced him to four years in prison.

In April, the Supreme Court upheld the conviction of LSNS regional chairman Anton Grno after he appealed a 2020 verdict of the Specialized Criminal Court that found him guilty of supporting a movement aimed at suppressing fundamental rights and freedoms. During a 2018 Supreme Court hearing, Grno shouted the greeting of the World War II-era Slovak fascist state’s paramilitary force. The court fined Grno 5,000 euros (\$5,700) and sentenced him to six months in prison if he failed to pay. Media reported that Grno’s social media profiles contained several openly racist and antisemitic posts.

On March 14, on the 82nd anniversary of the founding of the wartime Slovak state that deported more than 70,000 of its citizens to Nazi extermination camps, several groups commonly characterized as far right, including the People’s Youth

organization, published commemorative social media posts. On the same date, LSNS chairman Kotleba posted a Slovak flag on his social media account that experts said was an acknowledgement of the anniversary. In December, following an investigation of a case of a street named after Slovak fascist state president Josef Tiso, located in a village of Varin, the National Criminal Agency pressed charges against 10 of 11 local councilors for the crime of expressing sympathies with a movement aimed at suppressing fundamental rights and freedoms. The charged councilors, one of whom was absent, refused to vote in favor of changing the name during an August municipal council meeting, citing plans to call a local referendum once police and the courts closed the case. All councilors objected, and the charges were under the Special Prosecutor's review at year's end. In April, the Central Union of Jewish Religious Communities publicly protested a decision by the city of Ruzomberok to present an award to a historian they said was an advocate of the wartime Slovak state who also relativized the Holocaust.

On September 12, during Pope Francis's four-day visit to the country, President Zuzana Caputova hosted an official welcoming ceremony in the presidential garden for selected guests, including political representatives, representatives of state and public institutions, members of academia and the scientific community, health professionals, media, representatives of minorities and NGOs, and representatives of religious communities, including the Muslim community. The President did not invite representatives from other unregistered churches and religious communities to the event.

In September, President Caputova, Prime Minister Eduard Heger, and several cabinet ministers commemorated the country's Holocaust and Ethnic Violence Remembrance Day at the Holocaust memorials in Bratislava and Sered. They condemned attempts to disparage the Holocaust and its victims, as well what they stated was growing antisemitism. Prime Minister Heger's speech on the occasion noted the 80th anniversary of the "Jewish Code" that was adopted by the World War II Slovak fascist state in 1941 and that led to the deportation of more than 70,000 Slovak Jews and other citizens to Nazi extermination camps. Heger expressed remorse for adoption of the code, apologized for the injustice and deaths it caused, and asked for forgiveness. On September 8, the government adopted a formal resolution apologizing for crimes committed by the Slovak fascist state, and it denounced the adoption of the "shameful" Jewish Code 80 years ago.

In October, Prime Minister Heger participated in the Malmo International Forum on Holocaust Remembrance and Combating Anti-Semitism, where Slovakia pledged to take concrete steps in the fight against antisemitism and anti-Roma

attitudes and to continue to address the legacy of the Holocaust. Specific steps included completion of a Holocaust museum, use of International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) working definitions, and application of IHRA recommendations for enhanced teaching and learning about the Holocaust, including targeted awareness-raising efforts among youth regarding the Holocaust and the dangers of distorting it.

On July 13, President Caputova attended an opening ceremony for a renovated Jewish cemetery in the city of Namestovo that had been vandalized in 2019 when unknown persons knocked over more than 75 gravestones. In her speech, she remarked, “If we are not considerate of our past, it may happen that our future will not be considerate of us.”

On September 8, the government created the new position of Plenipotentiary for Freedom of Religion or Belief, established in response to the “growing seriousness of the problem of violations of freedom of thought, conscience, and religion in the world” that the government identified in its manifesto. The government appointed a coalition MP, Anna Zaborska, to the position the same day. The new plenipotentiary will act as an advisor to the government, functioning as part of the Government Office, and will have a mandate to protect religious freedom abroad and at home. Duties will include proposing and implementing selected government measures, submitting legislative and nonlegislative proposals to state authorities pertaining to education and training of members of religious groups, monitoring the status of religious freedom in the world, and engaging with religious groups and communities and other state institutions.

In the 2021 census, individuals could for the first time select Islam, Hinduism, or Buddhism as their religion. The census also applied to persons with temporary residence in the country for the first time, a measure that was praised by the Muslim community. Previous censuses had counted only persons with permanent residence, while Islam could be declared only under the “other religions” category.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

A representative of the Islamic Foundation in Slovakia stated the Muslim community continued to encounter difficulties in countering negative public attitudes partly because of the social stigma associated with not having the same legal benefits accorded to registered religious groups. Representatives of other unregistered religious groups also stated that the public tended to view their

activities with mistrust and perceive them as “fringe cults” because of their lack of official government recognition as a religious community.

The Islamic Foundation in Slovakia again reported continued online hate speech toward Muslims and refugees, which it attributed mostly to the social controversy ensuing from the 2015 European migration crisis and inflammatory anti-Muslim public statements by local politicians. In October, in response to an invitation to a public discussion on Muslim history in the country, the organization received several hateful social media comments and direct messages. One of the comments called for ban on “pedophilic, unconstitutional Islam, mosques, and prayer rooms” and for putting all sympathizers and organizations cooperating with Muslims on trial, while another message read, “Tick tock you...scabs.” Muslim community leaders said they continued to perceive increased anti-Muslim sentiment compared with 2015 and earlier, and leaders continued to maintain a low profile regarding their activities and prayer rooms to avoid inflaming public opinion.

Police reported six cases of defamation of race, nation, or religious belief and four cases of incitement of national, racial, and ethnic hatred during the year, compared with 13 cases of defamation and 11 cases of incitement of hatred in 2020. Police provided no further details. According to the NGO Human Rights League, foreigners, refugees, and Muslims very rarely report hate-motivated incidents to police or to civil society organizations.

According to a survey regarding hate crimes against refugees and migrants in the country conducted from April to August by the Islamic Foundation in Slovakia and published in an August report by the Human Rights League, more than 65 of respondents believed it was more likely they would become victims of hate-motivated incidents than before the 2015 migration crisis. Almost 60 percent of the 127 predominantly Muslim respondents surveyed said they or their family members had been victims of a hate crime, discrimination, bullying, threats, or intimidation because of their national origin or faith. Half of them stated these incidents happened often. Almost 20 percent of the respondents said they had encountered hate-motivated incidents in the past month. According to the survey, only 59 percent of the respondents said they felt safe in the country.

The Center for the Research of Ethnicity and Culture released a study in May that showed an increasingly negative public attitude toward migrants in the country, including Muslim migrants. A majority of respondents believed foreigners contributed to higher crime rates (65 percent) and worsened safety (62 percent). According to the study, a majority also held negative attitudes toward a “refugee

from Syria” (68 percent) and a “Muslim family” (64 percent). A majority (54 percent) stated foreigners could practice their faith but should do so in private only, while 28 percent said non-Christian religions should not be allowed in the country. Almost 82 percent of respondents perceived Islam as different, suspicious, or dangerous, with 43 percent, citing the religion as “very dangerous,” believing it should be banned.”

A survey conducted in July by pollster Focus Agency for the Milan Simecka Foundation, a local NGO, found that more than 56 percent of respondents believed that no Muslims from other countries should be allowed to move to or live in the country, with more than 46 percent believing the same for Hindus, while approximately 20 percent considered it “very important” that foreigners who move to Slovakia come from a Christian background. According to an October survey among youth ages 15-29 and commissioned by the Youth Council of Slovakia, 42 percent of respondents would not like to have a Muslim as their neighbor, while 13 percent would not like their neighbor to be a Jew.

Sociologists and Jewish community leaders said antisemitism was increasing, citing repeated references by public officials to antisemitic conspiracy theories, consistent electoral support for extremist parties, hate speech on social media, and polling trends that found a steadily growing share of the population would have a problem with a Jewish family moving into their neighborhood.

In September, the Brussels-based NGO Action and Protection League issued the results of its European antisemitism survey based on data from December 2019 to January 2020. According to the survey, 20 percent of 1,000 respondents ages 18-75 in Slovakia said they had negative feelings towards Jews, and 25 percent said they would be “totally uncomfortable” or “uncomfortable” with having Jewish neighbors. The survey cited stereotypical statements regarding Jews and asked respondents the degree to which they agreed or disagreed. The proportion who responded “strongly agree” or “tend to agree” with the following statements were: “The interests of Jews in this country are very different from the interests of the rest of the population” (29 percent); “there is a secret Jewish network that influences political and economic affairs in the world” (34 percent); “Jews have too much influence in this country” (21 percent); “Jews will never be able to fully integrate into this society” (22 percent); “Jews are more inclined than most to use shady practices to achieve their goals” (28 percent); “many of the atrocities of the Holocaust were often exaggerated by the Jews later” (19 percent); “Jews are also to blame for the persecutions against them” (19 percent); “Jews exploit Holocaust victimhood for their own purposes” (26 percent).

In October, the Supreme Court confirmed a verdict of the Specialized Criminal Court, which in 2019 found Tibor Eliot Rostas, editor in chief of *Zem a vek* (*Earth and Age*) magazine, guilty of defamation of race and nation for his antisemitic article titled, “Wedge of Jews Among Slavs.” The court upheld the original 4,000 euro (\$4,500) penalty, which Rostas paid in December, thus avoiding a three-month prison sentence. Both Rostas and the prosecutor had appealed originally in 2019. In the article, published in 2017 in *Earth and Age*, which several international supermarket chains removed from shelves following an initiative by local experts that labeled it a “conspiracy magazine,” Rostas wrote about centuries-long efforts of Jews to drive wedges among Slavs and destroy their traditions, culture, and values, using selected antisemitic quotes of prominent political figures from the country’s history.

Organizations the media characterized as far right – including the civic organization Museum of the Slovak Armed Forces 1939-1945 – continued to publish material and issue statements praising the antisemitic, Nazi-allied Slovak state government. In July, members of the Associations of Slovak Intelligence – Roots, an umbrella platform for several nationalist civic associations that regularly praises government officials associated with the World War II Slovak state, rebutted criticism of the wartime state. The group, whose Facebook page features a photograph of the wartime state president Jozef Tiso, organized a commemorative cleaning of Alexander Mach’s grave. The associations also honored Mach, a supporter of Nazi Germany – who served as an interior minister in the wartime Slovak state government and was a commander of the Hlinka Guard, a paramilitary organization of the Hlinka Slovak People’s Party that was also directly involved in deportations of Jews from the country – as “one of the most important Slovak nationalists in modern history.”

Representatives of the Roman Catholic Church continued an effort revived in 2019 for the beatification of Jan Vojtassak, a Slovak bishop whom the communist regime imprisoned and tortured. Several experts and historians highlighted Vojtassak’s collaboration with the World War II fascist Slovak state, his active involvement in the Aryanization of Jewish property, and his antisemitic views. A previous case for Vojtassak’s beatification, which was stopped by the Vatican in 2003, also led to protests by several Israeli historians and the Slovak Jewish community.

In July, President Caputova officially opened a renovated Jewish cemetery in Namestovo after volunteers from the local Pamataj (Remember) civic association completed their work on its restoration, following a 2019 incident during which

unknown persons knocked over 75 gravestones. The restoration was partially financed by funds volunteers collected through a crowdsourcing campaign.

On September 13, Pope Francis met with representatives of the Jewish community at the site of the Holocaust memorial in Bratislava, along with representatives of the Roman Catholic Church. During the event, participants stressed the importance of continuing mutual dialogue of the two faiths in the country.

The Parliament of the World's Religions, a local NGO, together with the Islamic Foundation in Slovakia, continued to organize a series of public debates and school lectures across the country with a variety of religious leaders from the Jewish, Muslim, Augsburg Lutheran, and Roman Catholic communities to promote interfaith dialogue and tolerance. A public discussion took place on September 22 in the city of Martin for students of the local evangelical high school with an evangelical priest, rabbi, and imam as speakers.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The Ambassador and other embassy officers repeatedly raised with government officials and lawmakers from across the political spectrum the treatment of religious minority groups and the continued presence of anti-Muslim and anti-Jewish sentiment. Embassy officers continued to express to government officials their concerns that requiring religious groups to have 50,000 members in order to register impeded these groups from having the rights and benefits accruing from official recognition.

In January, the Ambassador commemorated International Holocaust Remembrance Day and laid a stone at the Holocaust memorial in Bratislava, with the embassy highlighting the occasion on its social media accounts.

In July, the Ambassador met with representatives of a local Jewish community, including several Holocaust survivors, in the city of Trencin. The Ambassador encouraged the community in its efforts to renovate the local synagogue and expressed the need to stand up against hate and antisemitism.

The embassy used its social media channels to commemorate the country's Holocaust Remembrance Day and International Religious Freedom Day. In September, the Ambassador laid a wreath at the Holocaust Memorial in Bratislava and participated in a commemorative event at the Sastin-Straze Synagogue, while an embassy officer attended a remembrance event at the Sered Holocaust Museum

alongside Holocaust survivors. Through its social media channels, the embassy emphasized that hatred and anger among persons can lead to inhuman acts, and it called on individuals to actively engage in the fight against evil and hatred.

In September, the Ambassador attended events organized as a part of Pope Francis's visit, including the official welcome event in the presidential garden and the Pope's Mass in the pilgrimage city of Sastin-Straze, and she highlighted the Pope's message on interfaith tolerance and cooperation through embassy social media.

During the year, embassy officers met with registered and unregistered religious organizations, including the Islamic Foundation in Slovakia, and civil society groups, including the Forum of World's Religions, to raise the issue of hate speech directed against Muslims, antisemitism, the impact of COVID-19 on religious services, and the negative impact on religious minorities of membership and other registration requirements.

The embassy continued to support efforts aimed at combating anti-Islamic sentiment and antisemitism and at increasing tolerance. It financially supported a project by the Human Rights League aimed at empowerment of migrant women and awareness raising on hate crimes against migrants as well as a project by the Milan Simecka Foundation educating teachers how to teach Holocaust history. Several NGOs continued implementing projects supported by the embassy in 2020 aimed at helping migrants in the country throughout the year.