

# **SLOVAK REPUBLIC 2022 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. 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.

Groups that were unable to meet the minimum threshold of adherents to be registered as religious groups continued to consider this requirement discriminatory. In response to discrimination motions filed by one small unregistered religious group, the Public Defender of Rights (ombudsperson) stated in March that the registration requirements were unreasonable, discriminatory, and unnecessary, while the Slovak National Center for Human Rights stated they were in breach of the constitution and the European Convention on Human Rights. The Ministry of Culture refused to initiate a legal change. State authorities continued to prosecute some members of the Kotlebovci – Ludova strana Nase Slovensko (Kotleba’s – People’s Party Our Slovakia) (LSNS) and Republika parties for defaming minority religious beliefs and denying the Holocaust. In April, the Supreme Court confirmed a guilty verdict against LSNS party chairperson and Member of Parliament (MP) Marian Kotleba for an act of antisemitism and sentenced him to a six-month suspended sentence and 18 months of probation, causing the Kotleba to automatically lose his parliamentary seat. In response to calls by representatives of the ruling coalition to dissolve the LSNS party, stating Kotleba’s conviction was proof of the extremist and unconstitutional nature of the party itself, Prosecutor General Maros Zilinka announced in August that he would not attempt to ban the party.

In February, the Constitutional Court ruled the Public Health Authority could require citizens to present proof of COVID-19 vaccination, recovery from the virus, or a negative COVID-19 test to access facilities and public events, including religious services. The government gradually eliminated these restrictions, which some political and religious stakeholders had previously criticized for violating the right to freedom of religion. The Muslim community, which was registered as a civic association, continued to state the lack of recognition as a religious group made obtaining burial spaces and the necessary construction permits for worship sites difficult. Government officials and MPs from both the government coalition and opposition parties continued to make anti-Muslim statements. Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February, several politicians engaged in rhetoric portraying third-country refugees fleeing Ukraine, particularly from "Arab and African countries," as a security threat. In March, parliament adopted a resolution formally condemning the deportations of Slovak Jews to Nazi concentration camps by the Slovak fascist state and apologizing to the members of the Jewish community. Antisemitism experts criticized Obyčajní ľudia a nezávislé osobnosti (Ordinary People and Independent Personalities) (OLaNO) party leader and Finance Minister Igor Matovic for trivializing the Holocaust by repeatedly comparing media criticism of himself to scapegoating of the Jewish population in the 1930s.

In October, a man driven by antisemitic conspiracy theories and hatred towards religious, sexual, and racial minorities shot and killed two persons and injured another in front of a lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and intersex (LGBTQI+)-friendly bar in the center of Bratislava before killing himself. In the aftermath of the attack, civil society and political leaders across the board denounced hate-motivated violence and called for an end to hateful rhetoric in the public domain. In January, a man wearing a jacket with an antireligious inscription struck a priest during a New Year Mass at a Greek Catholic church in Bardejov. Unregistered religious groups said the public tended to distrust them and perceive them as "fringe cults" because of their lack of official government recognition. The Muslim community continued to report anti-Muslim hate speech on social media, which it mostly attributed to inflammatory public

statements by politicians and negative portrayals of Islam and Muslims in the media. The Islamic Foundation in Slovakia reported that 70 percent of media coverage of Islam and Muslims was negative. According to surveys by local nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), a majority of Slovaks disapproved of having Muslim neighbors and almost 25 percent believed that no Muslims should have the right to settle 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.

The U.S. Ambassador, Chargé d’Affaires, and other U.S. embassy officers raised with government officials the treatment of religious minorities and the difficulties those groups faced regarding registration, as well as the need for measures to counter what religious groups and others described as widespread antisemitism and anti-Muslim sentiment. The Ambassador, Chargé, and other embassy officers also repeatedly used private and public events, as well as social media, to highlight the importance of religious freedom and tolerance in society and the importance of countering hate speech and violence towards religious, sexual, and ethnic minorities. 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.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 5.4 million (midyear 2022). 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, 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 (Church of Jesus Christ), and Baha'is. In the 2021 census, approximately 3,900 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 2,000 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, which courts have interpreted to include Nazis and neo-Nazis, as well as "demonstrating sympathy" with such groups. 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 these 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 but does not allow this exemption for 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, Church of Jesus Christ, 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. Under the law, state subsidies to registered groups are based on the number of adherents reported in the most recent census. The state adjusts these annual subsidy payments based on 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, such as determining its own religious teachings and practices or providing spiritual services, which from a legal perspective are reserved for registered religious groups only; violators 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. Four corollaries cover the operation of Catholic religious schools, the teaching of

Catholic religious education as a subject in public schools, the service of Catholic priests as military chaplains and police, and the exercise of conscientious objections. 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.

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 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 production of 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 at public schools normally teach 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. Religious groups also appoint theology lecturers at public universities. The government pays the salaries of religion teachers in public schools and of university theology lecturers.

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 in prison, 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, World War II-era fascist and postwar communist regimes.

The Public Defender of Rights (ombudsperson) and the Slovak National Center for Human Rights, the country's national human rights and equality body, are independent public institutions that consider complaints of religious discrimination and infringement on religious liberty.

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

### **Government Practices**

On December 9, the Specialized Prosecution Service indicted Marian Magat, a former LSNS candidate labeled by media as a far-right extremist and admirer of Adolf Hitler, for "extensive and long-term extremist criminal activity," which carries a maximum sentence of eight years in prison. The National Criminal Agency arrested Magat in January and charged him with more than 30 counts of

extremism. These included founding, supporting, and promoting a movement suppressing basic rights and freedoms, producing and disseminating extremist materials, collecting Nazi paraphernalia, and promoting Holocaust denial in a book, *Jewocracy*, that he authored in 2020. On February 16, the Supreme Court rejected Magat's appeal against an earlier decision of the Specialized Criminal Court, which had placed him in pretrial custody. The Specialized Criminal Court subsequently extended his custody from August until February 2023. In a related case, Magat had instructed his girlfriend to post the antisemitic book online for free as a gift to his fans; authorities filed extremism charges against both Magat and his girlfriend in that case. Both cases were pending at year's end.

Media outlets reported that on April 5, the Supreme Court found LSNS party chairman Kotleba guilty of extremism and sentenced him to a six-month suspended sentence and 18 months of probation. The court, however, overruled an earlier verdict of the Specialized Criminal Court, which had sentenced Kotleba to four years and four months in prison for "founding, supporting, and promoting a movement suppressing basic rights and freedoms" in relation to a 2017 charitable ceremony featuring neo-Nazi symbols. The Supreme Court convicted him of the lesser crime of "expressing sympathies for a movement suppressing basic rights and freedoms." The April verdict was final and could not be appealed, and, as a result of the criminal conviction, Kotleba automatically lost his parliamentary seat. In response to calls by representatives of the ruling coalition to dissolve the LSNS, claiming that Kotleba's conviction was proof of the extremist and unconstitutional nature of the party itself, Prosecutor General Maros Zilinka announced in August that he would not attempt to ban the party. According to Zilinka, LSNS was too weak to pose an imminent risk to democracy and had low public support.

Media reported that in October, the Specialized Criminal Court in Banska Bystrica convicted Jan Pastuszek of extremism. Pastuszek, who unsuccessfully ran on the LSNS ticket in the 2020 parliamentary elections, was a parliamentary assistant to Republika party MP Milan Mazurek. Confirming its judgment from August, which Pastuszek appealed, the court gave him a three-year suspended sentence and

three years' probation for selling t-shirts depicting the Slovak fascist state president Jozef Tiso. The court also ordered Pastuszek to pay a €3,000 (\$3,200) fine for a website affiliated with the Republika party called "Kulturblog" that experts said produced extremist content and where Pastuszek sold his t-shirts. Pastuszek announced he would appeal the verdict to the Supreme Court.

In September, the Office of the Prosecutor General filed a criminal complaint against the village council of Varin for naming a street after Slovak fascist state president Tiso in 2011, an act the prosecutor said violated the law that bans naming streets after representatives of the Slovak fascist regime of 1939-1945. Against the prosecutor's earlier recommendation, village councilors in July for the second time refused to change the controversial street name, voting instead to hold a local referendum on the matter, which took place on October 29. In the referendum, a majority of the 47 percent of participating voters rejected renaming the street, but because the necessary 50 percent voter turnout did not occur, the referendum was invalid. The case before the Supreme Administrative Court remained pending at the year's end. The National Criminal Agency had previously pressed charges against 10 of 11 local councilors for expressing sympathies with a movement aimed at suppressing fundamental rights and freedoms after they refused to vote in favor of changing the name during a municipal council meeting in August 2021; the special prosecutor dismissed those charges in January.

Despite calls from unregistered religious groups and national human rights bodies, the government did not address legal provisions that require an organization to have a minimum of 50,000 adult adherents to register as a religious group. In July, the Slovak National Center for Human Rights issued a statement saying the provisions were in breach of the constitution and the European Convention on Human Rights. The statement came in response to a motion filed in May by the Old Catholic Delegation of the Utrecht Union in Slovakia, an unregistered religious group established in 2020, which challenged the law as discriminatory and restricting religious freedom. Acting upon the same motion filed by the group in January, the ombudsperson in March formally

notified the group and the Minister of Culture that she found the registration requirements to be “unreasonable, discriminatory, and not necessary in a democratic society.” She requested the Minister of Culture initiate a legal change in line with international agreements, findings of the European Court of Human Rights, and recommendations of international institutions. The ministry responded that different opinions on the matter existed among the groups cited by the ombudsman. The ministry pointed to a 2010 verdict of the Constitutional Court that ruled that the constitution ensured fundamental rights and freedoms of members of both registered and unregistered religious groups equally and that lawmakers were entitled to set a registration threshold.

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 had said it based its rejections on assessments by several religious affairs experts that the group promoted hatred toward other religious groups. In 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, and the case remained pending before the Supreme Administrative Court, which had not set a hearing date as of year’s end.

Several religious groups again criticized the government for continuing to restrict access to religious services due to the COVID-19 pandemic. On February 2, leaders of the Ecumenical Council of Churches, Central Union of Jewish Religious Communities, and Conference of Slovak Bishops, together representing 10 registered religious groups, addressed a joint letter to Prime Minister Eduard Heger. The groups requested the government ease restrictions against those who were not fully vaccinated or had not yet recovered from COVID-19 from attending religious services. These provisions had been in place since November 2021. According to the religious leaders, the government had prevented access of those worshippers to religious services, which they stated was an essential fundamental right, for an unduly long period of time.

In February, the government gradually began eliminating pandemic-related restrictions on freedom of movement and public assembly, as well as several hygienic measures concerning religious practices it had imposed in 2021. In March, the government increased capacity limits for religious services up to 500 persons or 50 percent of the capacity of the place of worship, irrespective of the worshippers' COVID-19 and vaccination status. In April, the government lifted the remaining antipandemic measures, including compulsory use of face masks.

In February, the Constitutional Court ruled against a motion filed by the opposition Slovak Social Democracy (Smer-SD) party in 2021 that challenged as discriminatory and unconstitutional the Public Health Authority's order imposing on citizens an obligation to present proof they were vaccinated, had recovered from the virus, or had tested negative as a requirement to access facilities and public events, including religious services. A religious freedom rights violation case that 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, had submitted to the European Court of Human Rights in 2021 remained pending as of year's end. According to Figel, government measures were illegal and disproportionate and in practice prevented individuals from exercising constitutionally protected rights to religious freedom and to manifest their religious beliefs publicly.

In July, the Slovak National Center for Human Rights published its annual human rights report. The report noted that the extent of government restrictions on public assembly in 2021 was at times disproportional to the epidemiological situation and questioned the necessity of the measures taken to achieve public health objectives. The report said less stringent means of restricting freedom of religious expression were available to the government.

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.

Representatives of the Muslim community continued to state 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.

Although the community had registered as a civic association, it continued to state that the lack of recognition as a religious group made it difficult to obtain the necessary construction permits for establishing a mosque or other sites for religious worship, such as prayer rooms. The group said officials in the past had cited technical grounds, such as zoning regulations, to reject their applications or fail to act on them. A representative of the Muslim community expressed disappointment that despite several attempts, they had not been able to meet with the mayor of Bratislava for the last four years to discuss their grievances, including hate crimes against the Muslim community, inability to establish a mosque, and issues with burial grounds.

Despite a 7.6 percent decrease in the overall number of adherents to registered religious groups reported in 2021 in comparison with the previous census, the decrease remained below the 10 percent threshold required by the law to trigger a downward adjustment in state subsidies. The government allocated approximately €52.8 million (\$56.4 million) in annual state subsidies to the 18 registered religious groups, compared with €52 million (\$55.6 million) in 2021 and €51.7 million (\$55.2 million) in 2020. As in prior years, 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. 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 continued to fund upkeep for religious monuments and cultural heritage sites owned by religious groups under its cultural grant program.

During the year, the ministry allocated approximately €5.7 million (\$6.1 million) for these purposes, compared with approximately €4.2 million (\$4.5 million) in 2021 and €5 million (\$5.3 million) in 2020.

Many political parties continued to express anti-Muslim views in their public statements, and leaders from across the political spectrum engaged in rhetoric opposing Islam and portraying Muslim migrants and refugees as threats to society. In February and March, during the height of the refugee crisis following Russia's February 24 invasion of Ukraine, representatives of the LSNS and Republika parties repeatedly warned of security risks posed by thousands of non-Ukrainian refugees, predominantly from African and Muslim-majority countries, who were fleeing Ukraine via Slovakia. In a video the LSNS posted on February 28 on the party's official YouTube channel, LSNS party chairman Kotleba stated that most refugees fleeing the border were from Asia and Africa, whether they were "Arabs, Muslims, or Buddhists," and not Ukrainian mothers with children. Kotleba demanded the end of their "uncontrolled" influx. The video attracted more than a half million views as of year's end and incited extensive commentary supporting the contentions in the video. In response to these statements, police warned against disinformation and fearmongering that portrayed refugees of African and Arab origin as illegal economic migrants and a security threat. In a February 28 post on its official Facebook page, the national police force wrote, "Not only native Ukrainians were stuck in Ukraine, but also foreigners who lived, worked, were on vacation, or studied there... The movement of people of different nationalities is completely normal when fleeing a war zone."

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.

On March 14, the 83rd 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 by experts and media as far-right published commemorative social media posts. The People's Youth organization, the youth wing of the LSNS, posted on Facebook a message celebrating the creation of the fascist state in 1939 as "the most important date in our history." LSNS chairman Kotleba shared on his social media account a video of a man claiming Nazi-era president Tiso saved his life and the lives of 800 other children – a move that experts said was an attempt to glorify Tiso.

Antisemitism experts accused OLaNO party leader and Finance Minister Matovic of trivializing the Holocaust when in June he stated the media had made him "a Jew of the 21st century" in response to a poll that found him the country's least trustworthy politician. Matovic refused to apologize, calling his statement "a cruel but apt metaphor" and comparing current media criticism of himself to scapegoating of the Jewish population in the 1930s. In a September 9 social media post commemorating the country's Holocaust and Ethnic Violence Remembrance Day, he again compared the actions of his critics to the "total dehumanization" of Jews by fascists in the past. Prime Minister Heger called the comparison "inappropriate."

In May, President Zuzana Caputova apologized for having bestowed earlier that month an in-memoriam presidential award on three members of the Catholic anticommunist resistance group Biela Legia (White Legion), whom the communist regime executed in 1951 for their anticommunist activities. She issued the apology after historians and experts noted the awardees had been supporters of the Nazi-allied wartime Slovak state and that two of them actively collaborated with the regime in suppressing the Slovak National Uprising in 1944 by providing intelligence reports to the Nazi-allied authorities. In her statement, the President acknowledged a mistake in vetting the awardees, who had been nominated by the Anton Tunega Foundation led by Jan Figel, and she promised to ensure similar "controversies" did not happen again.

On March 25, President Caputova, Prime Minister Heger, and other government officials commemorated the 80th anniversary of the first deportations of Jews from the Slovak state. On the same day, parliament opened its session with a minute of silence in memory of the victims of the first transport. It subsequently adopted a resolution condemning the “particularly reprehensible forced deportations,” expressing regret, and apologizing to the Jewish community for the actions of the Slovak fascist state. All LSNS and Republika MPs were absent during the vote on the resolution.

In August, the Council for Media Services – an independent government media regulator – assumed new functions of addressing illegal and harmful content on social media, including content defined by the law as “extremist,” such as Holocaust denial and inciting national, racial, or ethnic hatred. In December, the council launched administrative proceedings against the owner of the *Hlavne Spravy* (Main News) website, which experts said was a notorious disinformation outlet, for an online blog post, “Jewish Woman from Tel Aviv Reveals Falsification of the Holocaust Story,” that claimed the Holocaust was a fraud and a manipulation. While the case remained pending, the website took down the blog post following the launch of the council’s investigation.

In September, President Caputova, Speaker of Parliament Boris Kollar, Prime Minister Heger, and several cabinet ministers commemorated the country’s Holocaust and Ethnic Violence Remembrance Day at the Holocaust memorial in Bratislava. President Caputova used the occasion to warn against “relativizing evil,” while Prime Minister Heger called the memory of the antisemitic Jewish code adopted by the Slovak state in 1941 and the subsequent deportation of more than 70,000 Slovak Jews and other citizens to Nazi extermination camps a “scar that has marred our history.”

In October, the Plenipotentiary for Freedom of Religion or Belief organized an international conference on contemporary religious freedom policies and challenges in the world that included representatives of the International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance and the country’s registered and

unregistered religious groups. In his opening remarks at the event, Prime Minister Heger expressed the government's dedication to human dignity and the need to learn to live the freedoms that come with democracy. During the same month, in response to reports of increasing persecution and oppression of religious believers in the world, parliament adopted a resolution to protect religious freedoms and beliefs in which it expressed concerns involving growing intolerance on the basis of faith or belief and denounced hate-motivated violence against believers.

### **Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom**

During the year, there were cases of violence and threats of violence motivated by antisemitism. On October 12, 19-year-old high school student Juraj Krajcik shot and killed two persons and injured another person in front of an LGBTQI+-friendly bar in the center of Bratislava. Krajcik, found dead on October 13 after what authorities believed was a suicide, had been posting antisemitic, anti-LGBTQI+, and neo-Nazi content on social media and published a 65-page antisemitic manifesto inciting violence against minorities hours before the shooting. The first three words of the manifesto, written in English, read, "it's the jews." He also outlined his beliefs in the antisemitic "Zionist occupation government" conspiracy theory, expressed deep hatred towards religious, sexual, and racial minorities, and called for "total eradication of all jews, to the last man, woman, and child." Authorities investigated the case as an act of terrorism. In response to the attack, civil society actors organized a series of commemorative events across the country that attracted thousands of people who protested against hatred and intolerance, and they called on the government to improve the protection and human rights situation of LGBTQI+ and other vulnerable minorities. Leaders across most of the political spectrum condemned the attack and President Caputova and Prime Minister Heger called for the end of hateful rhetoric in the public sphere which media and experts said was a facilitating factor leading to the attack. Parliament adopted on October 18 a resolution concerning growing expressions of hatred against LGBTQI+ and Jewish communities, in which an overwhelming majority of MPs strongly condemned the attack, expressed

serious concerns over attempts to restrict the rights and freedoms of minorities, called on politicians, publicly active individuals, and the media to refrain from any kind of expressions of hate, and demanded the adoption of measures to restrain hate speech in the public domain. The government began discussing steps to prevent violent extremist attacks from happening again, including increasing the ability of authorities to track and prosecute online extremism, regulating illegal content on social media, and focusing on education at schools.

Media reported that on May 13, following a multinational investigation, the National Criminal Agency arrested an unnamed man who operated in international far-right extremist online circles under the nickname “Slovakbro,” where he spread neo-Nazi militant accelerationist ideology, approved of violence against minorities, including religious minorities, and called for the overthrow of the democratic political system through violent attacks and subversion. After the man confessed to the crimes, the Specialized Criminal Court accepted his plea bargain on November 10 and sentenced him to six years in prison for participating in terrorism and committing a range of extremist crimes, including dissemination of extremist material, Holocaust denial, and founding, supporting, and promoting a movement to suppress basic rights and freedoms.

Media outlets reported that in January during a New Year Mass in a Greek Catholic church in the town of Bardejov in the eastern part of the country, a man assaulted the local priest who was performing service. Wearing a jacket with an “[expletive] your God” inscription on the back, the man approached the lectern and hit the priest on the shoulder while yelling, “Go [expletive] yourself!” before several worshippers removed the assailant from the church. Police detained the man and charged him with disorderly conduct, which carries a sentence of up to three years in prison. The case was pending as of year’s end.

Representatives of unregistered religious groups again stated the public tended to view their activities with mistrust and to perceive some of them as “fringe cults” because of their lack of official government recognition as religious communities.

During the year, Muslim community leaders again 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, including the use of prayer rooms, to avoid inflaming public opinion.

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, inflammatory anti-Muslim public statements by local politicians, and the overwhelmingly negative portrayal of Islam and Muslims in the media. In April, the foundation published a report on portrayals of Islam and Muslims in domestic media, according to which 70 percent of analyzed news articles were negative and more than half dealt with themes of conflict, including terrorism and extremism, war, political struggles, and trials and imprisonments. According to the report, migrants and refugees were, after the Roma, the most frequent targets of hateful content on social media platforms in the country in 2021.

In September, the Austria-based Leopold Weiss Institute published a report titled *European Islamophobia Report 2021*. In it, Jozef Lenc of the University of Saints Cyril and Methodius in Trnava stated that when speaking of Islam and Muslims, local media focused on “terrorism, extremism, and war conflicts in Muslim states.” Lenc said far-right parliamentarians made speeches that spread an anti-Muslim narrative and that Muslims were associated with terrorism, illegal migration, and security threats to the country in political discourse. This, he stated, “also influences people’s behavior and their attitudes towards Muslims.” According to Lenc, history textbooks that described the period of the Ottoman Empire’s occupation of the territory in 1530-1699 as “a dark period of our history, full of oppression and violence on the part of the Turks” also promoted a negative view of Islam in Slovak society.

Police reported five cases of defamation of race, nation, or religious belief and two cases of incitement of national, racial, and ethnic hatred as of November, compared with six cases of defamation and four cases of incitement of hatred in

2021. Police provided no further details. According to the NGO Human Rights League, foreigners, refugees, and Muslims very rarely reported hate-motivated incidents to police or to civil society organizations; it cited as main reasons concerns over their legal status, language barriers, fear of repercussions, belief that such crimes were common and that the police would not investigate them adequately, fear of secondary victimization, and lengthy and bureaucratic proceedings.

In a July study on extremism, the Institute for Public Affairs found that 66 percent of the population disapproved of having Muslim neighbors, a more than 100 percent increase since 2008, while a 2021 study by the Center for the Research of Ethnicity and Culture showed an increasingly negative public attitude toward migrants in the country, including Muslim migrants. Both studies attributed the increase to extremist and mainstream political parties alike adopting antimigrant and anti-Muslim rhetoric and the overwhelming framing of political discourse on migration in security terms following the 2015 European migration crisis.

A September poll conducted by pollster Focus Agency for the local NGO Milan Simecka Foundation found that almost 25 percent of respondents believed that no Muslims from other countries should have the right to settle in the country, while approximately 16 percent considered it “very important” that foreigners who move to Slovakia come from a Christian background. According to a Friedrich Ebert Foundation research study among youth ages 14-29, 31percent of respondents said they would keep social distance from Muslims living in their neighborhood.

Sociologists and Jewish community leaders again said antisemitism was increasing; they cited 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. According to a July study of extremism by the Institute for Public

Affairs, the portion of people who would disapprove of Jews as their neighbors had increased from 11 percent in 2008 to 27 percent in 2022.

In April, the Budapest-based NGO Tom Lantos Institute issued the results of its study of antisemitic prejudice in the four Visegrad countries (Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia), based on survey data collected in June 2021. According to the study, 56 percent of 1,789 survey respondents ages 18-74 in Slovakia could be classified as moderately or strongly antisemitic. The study cited stereotypical statements regarding Jews and asked respondents the degree to which they fully agreed, rather agreed, neither agreed nor disagreed, did not know, rather disagreed, or fully disagreed. The proportion who responded they “fully agree” or “rather agree” with the following statements were: “Jews have too much influence in Slovakia” (14 percent); “Jews seek to extend their influence on the global economy” (34 percent); “Jews are more inclined than others to use shady practices to achieve their goals” (19 percent); “it would be reasonable to limit the number of Jews in certain occupations” (7 percent); and “it would be best if Jews left this country” (7 percent). Conversely, the proportion who responded they “fully agree” or “rather agree” with the following statements were: “More should be taught in school about the Holocaust and the persecution of the Jews so that this does not happen again” (62 percent); “We should defend the Jews of our country against the antisemites” (42 percent).

Organizations the media characterized as far-right continued to publish material and issue statements praising the antisemitic, Nazi-allied Slovak state government. Throughout the year, the Associations of Slovak Intelligence, a nationalist civic organization whose Facebook page featured a photograph of then president Tiso, continued to praise leaders of the Slovak state. In January, the group published on its website a letter addressed to a municipal councilor in the village of Varin who campaigned for changing the name of a village street currently named after Tiso; the letter defended Tiso and denied his involvement in the Holocaust. On Facebook, the group continued to promote a biography it published in 2021 of Alexander Mach, interior minister in the Slovak state government, who was directly involved in deportations of Jews from the country.

In February, media reported that the Slovak Historical Society, a civic association that experts said had links to the LSNS party, attempted to purchase a part of a house where Tiso was born in the city of Bytca, claiming plans to open a historical library there. After the city council and the NGO Slovak Union of Antifascist Fighters called on the city parliament to reject the group's offer, the group, which maintains a plaque on the house commemorating Tiso, withdrew its application.

In September, the Supreme Court overruled an earlier verdict of the Specialized Criminal Court, which in June 2021 had convicted neo-Nazi singer Jaroslav "Reborn" Pagac of conspiring with others to produce and distribute clothes and other items bearing extremist symbols and sentenced him to four years in prison. Pagac claimed the symbols used were not extremist. Following Pagac's appeal, the Supreme Court remanded the case to the lower Specialized Criminal Court for further examination of the nature of Pagac's relations with other individuals involved in the case, asking the lower court to rule on whether production and distribution of the materials constituted founding an extremist group or were merely the product of a purely business relationship. The Supreme Court did not overrule the lower court's findings that the materials and symbols themselves were extremist. The case was pending as of October. Pagac had been arrested by the National Criminal Agency in 2018, along with former LSNS district chairman Michal Buchta, who took a plea bargain in October 2021, and Jakub Skrabak, head of the neo-Nazi Slovenska pospolitost (Slovak Togetherness) civic group.

In a separate case, the Special Prosecutor's Office in January charged Skrabak, whose group was a successor to an eponymous political party founded by LSNS leader Kotleba and banned in 2006 by the Supreme Court for violating the constitution, with several crimes, including producing and distributing extremist materials, that carried a sentence of up to eight years in prison. Skrabak's trial at the Specialized Criminal Court was ongoing as of year's end.

Representatives of the 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 expropriation of Jewish property, and his antisemitic views. A previous case for Vojtassak's beatification, which the Vatican halted in 2003, also led to protests by several Israeli historians and the Slovak Jewish community.

The local NGO Forum of the World's Religions, in cooperation with the Islamic Foundation in Slovakia and with the involvement of registered and unregistered religious groups, continued to organize a series of public debates and school lectures across the country with a variety of religious leaders from the Jewish, Muslim, and Catholic communities to promote interfaith dialogue and tolerance. On June 4, the group hosted a public discussion in Trnava during the Catholic "Lumen Festival" with Roman Catholic and Old Catholic priests, a representative from the Jewish community, and an imam as speakers.

#### **Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement**

The Ambassador, Chargé d'Affaires, 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. During a meeting in July with Anna Zaborska, Government Plenipotentiary for Freedom of Religion or Belief, a senior embassy officer expressed concern 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. The officer also raised problems with anti-Muslim sentiment and antisemitism and underscored interfaith dialogue efforts as an important means of increasing religious tolerance.

During the year, embassy officers regularly met with registered and unregistered religious groups and civil society organizations working on religious tolerance, including the Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession, Old Catholic Delegation of the Utrecht Union in Slovakia, Islamic Foundation in Slovakia, Center for Research of Ethnicity and Culture, Human Rights League, and Institute for Public Affairs. In July, the Chargé convened a roundtable at the embassy with

religious freedom experts and practitioners representing the Jewish and Muslim communities and recognized and unrecognized Catholic religious groups to discuss religious freedom efforts, the negative impact on religious minorities of membership and other registration requirements, the issue of hate speech directed against Muslims, and antisemitism. Following the meeting, the Chargé posted to the embassy's Facebook page, "Freedom of speech, conscience, and religion is one of the basic rights and freedoms in a democratic society. People can live fully only in societies where everyone can freely choose and practice their religion."

The embassy continued to support efforts aimed at combating anti-Muslim sentiment and antisemitism and at increasing tolerance. The NGO Human Rights League continued implementing a project first supported by the embassy in 2021 aimed at empowering predominantly Muslim migrant women and raising awareness of hate crimes against migrants and Muslims.

The embassy used its social media channels to commemorate Holocaust remembrance and religious freedom days. In January, the Ambassador commemorated International Holocaust Remembrance Day and laid a stone at the Holocaust memorial in Bratislava. In April, on Holocaust Remembrance Day Yom HaShoah, the Chargé hosted a delegation of the American Jewish Committee, an occasion that the embassy used to raise awareness about the Holocaust and to combat hate against minorities. The embassy highlighted both occasions on its social media accounts, while in October, the embassy marked International Religious Freedom Day with a social media post emphasizing the importance of the right to observe one's own religion and of respect for people of all faiths. In September, the Chargé laid a wreath at the Holocaust Memorial in Bratislava during an event commemorating the country's Holocaust Remembrance Day, and in a subsequent Facebook post, the embassy called for renewed dedication to remembering the stories of victims and survivors of the Holocaust "so that such acts of evil will never happen again." In September, the Ambassador met with representatives of the local Jewish community at the Holocaust Memorial in Bratislava, located on the site of a former synagogue

demolished during the communist era. The Ambassador discussed local Jewish history and antisemitism and emphasized the importance of religious tolerance.

On October 13, one day after a shooter motivated by antisemitic and anti-LGBTQI+ hatred killed two persons and wounded another in front of an LGBTQI+-friendly bar in Bratislava, the embassy drafted and released a joint statement condemning the attack, warning against hate-fueled rhetoric, and supporting the LGBTQI+ community. The embassy prepared the statement in coordination with the Embassy of the Netherlands, and 32 other diplomatic missions signed it.

On October 24, the Ambassador met with the leadership of the National Coalition Supporting Eurasian Jewry to discuss the current state of religious tolerance and human rights. The Ambassador used the opportunity to denounce hate-motivated violence and to call for protection of human rights of minorities in the wake of the deadly October 12 shooting.