

SLOVAK REPUBLIC 2019 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. Members of some religious groups said stringent registration requirements hindered religious freedom. Some groups registered as civic associations in order to function. Members of parliament (MPs) from both the government coalition and opposition parties continued to make anti-Muslim statements. Authorities criminally prosecuted some members of the People's Party Our Slovakia (LSNS) for defaming minority religious beliefs and Holocaust denial. In November parliament adopted an amendment, effective in 2020, increasing the annual state subsidy to government-recognized religious communities by approximately 10 percent.

In August a court convicted a man of inflicting bodily harm and sentenced him to four years in prison for a December 2018 knife attack against Turkish and Albanian proprietors of a kebab bistro in Banska Bystrica, where he shouted anti-Muslim slurs and threats. The prosecutor appealed for a longer sentence to the Supreme Court. Unregistered religious groups said the public tended to distrust them because of their lack of official government recognition. The Muslim community continued to report anti-Muslim hate speech on social media, which it attributed mostly to inflammatory public statements by politicians portraying Muslim refugees as an existential threat to the country's society. According to a survey by a local think tank, nearly 60 percent of citizens would oppose a Muslim family moving into their neighborhood; for a Jewish family, the corresponding figure was 17 percent. Organizations media described as far right continued to organize gatherings and commemorations of the World War II (WWII)-era, Nazi-allied Slovak state and to praise its leaders. In December unknown persons vandalized two Jewish cemeteries in the towns of Namestovo and Rajec, damaging more than 80 gravestones.

The U.S. Ambassador and other embassy officers repeatedly raised public awareness of the importance of religious freedom, using private and public events to highlight the need for tolerance. The Ambassador and other embassy officers also raised with government officials at the Ministries of Culture and Interior and parliamentarians 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 the increase in anti-Semitism and anti-Muslim sentiment. Embassy officials also met regularly with registered and unregistered religious organizations and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to raise the issue of hate speech and highlight the role of churches and religious groups in countering extremism and promoting tolerance. The embassy provided additional funding for a local NGO that developed a curriculum for secondary schools to foster religious tolerance through interfaith discussions.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 5.4 million (midyear 2019 estimate). According to the most recent census in 2011, Roman Catholics constitute 62 percent of the population, members of the Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession 5.9 percent, and Greek Catholics 3.8 percent; 13.4 percent did not state a religious affiliation. There are smaller numbers of members of the Reformed Christian Church, other Protestants, Jehovah's Witnesses, members of the Orthodox Church, Jews, Bahai's, and Muslims. In the 2011 census, approximately 1,200 persons self-identified as Muslim, while representatives of the Muslim community estimate their number at 5,000. According to the census, there are approximately 2,000 Jews. According to the World Jewish Congress, there are approximately 2,600 Jewish residents.

Greek Catholics are generally ethnic Slovaks and Ruthenians, although some Ruthenians belong to the Orthodox Church. Most Orthodox Christians live in the eastern part of the country. Members of the Reformed Christian Church live primarily in the south, near the border with Hungary, where many ethnic Hungarians live. Other religious groups tend to be spread evenly throughout the country.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution guarantees freedom of religious belief and affiliation, as well as the right to change religious faith or to refrain from religious affiliation. 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 are commonly 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 in order to employ spiritual leaders to perform officially recognized functions. Clergy from unregistered religious groups do not officially have the right to perform civil functions such as presiding at weddings or funeral ceremonies (although they may do so unofficially) or ministering to their members in prisons or government hospitals. 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.

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 or permanent residents and must submit to the Ministry of Culture an "honest declaration" attesting to their membership, knowledge of the articles of faith and basic tenets of the religion, personal identity numbers and home addresses, and support for the group's registration. All groups registered before these requirements came into effect in 2017 were grandfathered as officially recognized religions; 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 churches and religious groups are: the Apostolic Church, Baha'i Community, The Brotherhood Unity of Baptists, Seventh-day Adventists, Brotherhood Church, Czechoslovak Hussite Church, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession, Evangelical Methodist Church, Greek Catholic Church, Christian Congregations (Krestanske

zbory), Jehovah's Witnesses, New Apostolic Church, Orthodox Church, Reformed Christian Church, Roman Catholic Church, Old Catholic Church, and Central Union of Jewish Religious Communities. Registered groups and churches receive annual state subsidies. All but the Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession, Greek Catholic Church, Orthodox Church, Reformed Christian Church, and Roman Catholic Church have fewer than 50,000 members, but they registered before this requirement came into effect.

The Ministry of Culture's Department of Church Affairs oversees relations between religious groups and the state and manages the distribution of state subsidies to religious groups and associations, which it allocates according to the number of clergy each group reports having. The ministry may not legally intervene in the internal affairs of religious groups or direct their activities.

In November parliament adopted a legislative amendment scheduled to take effect on January 1, 2020, increasing the total state subsidy to registered churches and religious communities by approximately 10 percent, to four million euros (\$4.49 million) per year and basing the funding for each group on the number of adherents, rather than the number of clergy. Under the new law, religious groups have more leeway to determine the use of the government subsidies, since these are no longer predominantly earmarked towards covering clergy salaries, and future payments will be adjusted for inflation.

A group without 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. To register as a civic association, three citizens are required to provide their names and addresses and the name, goals, organizational structure, executive bodies, and budgetary rules of the group.

A concordat with the Holy See provides the legal framework for relations 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 11 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 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 content when teaching about other faiths in the Catholic classes. Private and religious schools define their own content for religion courses. In both public and private schools, religion class curricula do not mention unregistered groups or some of the smaller registered groups, and unregistered groups may not teach their faiths at schools. Teachers 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 their 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.

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 post-war communist regimes.

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

Government Practices

The Ministry of Culture again failed to reconsider its 2007 rejection of the registration application of the Grace Christian Fellowship, despite Supreme Court rulings in 2009 and 2012 ordering it do so. The ministry said it based its rejection on an opinion by a religious affairs expert registered with the Ministry of Justice that the group promoted hatred toward other religious groups and shared characteristics associated with “sects” (a term not defined by law).

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

Representatives of the Jewish community 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.

Members of the Muslim community again reported the lack of official registration meant they could not establish a mosque in the country. 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 more difficult. They said the officials would seek technical grounds, such as zoning regulations, to reject their applications or fail to act on them.

The government allocated approximately 47.5 million euros (\$53.37 million) in annual state subsidies to the 18 registered religious groups, compared with 42.5 million euros (\$47.75) in 2018. Up to 80 percent of each group’s subsidy was used to pay the group’s clergy and operating costs as stipulated by law.

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 finances.

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 2018, the ministry allocated 5.1 million euros (\$5.73 million) for these purposes, compared with 3.2 million euros (\$3.6 million) in 2017.

Many political parties, including the largest party represented in parliament, Smer-SD, continued to express anti-Muslim views in their public statements. In a May media interview ahead of European Parliament elections, Richard Sulik, the leader of Freedom and Solidarity, a major opposition political party in parliament, again stated Islam was an "incompatible ideology" with national culture and that his party strictly opposed migration because Arab immigrants posed a risk to that culture. During a parliamentary debate on the UN Global Compact on Migration in December 2018, LSNS leader and MP Marian Kotleba said he would not allow any "mujahideens" to come to the country.

Representatives of the Central Association of Jewish Religious Communities in the Slovak Republic (UZZNO) stated the repeated statements during the year of former prime minister Robert Fico, who was also chairperson of Smer-SD, part of the three-party governing coalition, undermined efforts to combat anti-Semitic comments and hate speech on the internet and social media. Fico, without citing evidence, continued in public statements and via traditional and social media to accuse a well-known Jewish American financier of instigating a coup against his government by organizing public protests that forced him to resign as prime minister in 2018. Fico referred to civil groups that organized the protests as "the [Jewish American financier]'s children" and said they were a "reserve cadre" of opposition parties.

Parliamentary European Affairs Committee Chairman Lubos Blaha (Smer-SD) posted content on social media in which, according to security analysts – including former prosecutors and law enforcement officials – he implied that then presidential candidate Zuzana Caputova was secretly funded by Jews, condoned anti-Semitic hate speech on the internet, and contributed to the spread of anti-Semitic conspiracy theories that Jews secretly manipulate world affairs. In June Blaha released a video on his Facebook page attacking a U.S. diplomat serving in the country, using language that security analysts described as anti-Semitic. The video provoked hundreds of anti-Semitic comments and posts, calling the diplomat a "Zionist" and "agent of the Rothschilds" who should "go back to Israel," with

some of them openly calling for violence. At year's end, the video and Blaha's followers' anti-Semitic responses to it, as well as other material critics described as inappropriate, remained on Blaha's Facebook page.

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

In July the Supreme Court upheld the July 2018 Specialized Criminal Court acquittal of LSNS MP Stanislav Mizik of extremism charges in a case concerning a January 2017 Facebook post in which he criticized then president Andrej Kiska for giving state awards to persons of Jewish origin and to defenders of "gypsies and Muslims." The Supreme Court accepted the argument there was insufficient evidence to prove Mizik wrote the statement.

In April the Supreme Court dismissed a motion the prosecutor general submitted in 2017 to dissolve the LSNS. The prosecutor alleged party members' programs, activities, and statements violated the constitution and other laws prohibiting support for groups and movements aimed at the suppression of fundamental rights and freedoms and defamation of race, nation, or religious belief. The Supreme Court ruled the prosecution failed to present sufficient evidence. The prosecutor general did not appeal the verdict to the Constitutional Court.

In May police arrested Mizik's defense attorney, Frantisek Polak, and six other persons on extremism charges after uncovering a large collection of Nazi paraphernalia during a search of their homes. Authorities released the individuals, who were not indicted, pending the results of an investigation that was ongoing at year's end. In October the Specialized Criminal Court convicted LSNS Trencin regional chairman Anton Grno for publicly demonstrating sympathy toward a movement aimed at suppressing fundamental rights and freedoms by shouting the greeting of the WWII-era Slovak fascist state's paramilitary force during a Supreme Court hearing in 2018. The court issued a criminal order (an expedited court decision without trial) requiring Grno to pay a fine of 5,000 euros (\$5,600) or serve a six-month prison sentence. Grno appealed the criminal order, and the case was scheduled to go to full trial in February 2020. Media reported Grno's social media profiles contained several openly racist and anti-Semitic posts.

In November the Specialized Criminal Court opened proceedings and scheduled the first court hearing for January 29, 2020, in a case against LSNS leader Kotleba

for his donation of 1,488 euros (\$1,700) to three families at a 2017 event marking the founding of the Nazi-allied WWII-era Slovak state. The indictment cited official experts on extremism and modern history registered with the Ministry of Justice, who stated the amount of the donation was a symbolic representation of a 14-word white supremacist phrase and the numeric representation of a salute to Hitler.

In February the special prosecutor's office withdrew an indictment for Holocaust denial and supporting groups aimed at suppressing fundamental rights and freedoms against Marian Magat, a 2016 LSNS parliamentary candidate, for comments he made on social media. The prosecutor did not provide a reason for withdrawing the indictment.

In March, on the 80th anniversary of the founding of the Nazi-allied WWII-era Slovak state, which deported more than 70,000 of its citizens to Nazi extermination camps, the LSNS party issued a press release lauding the wartime Slovak state as an "island of sought-after calm and prosperity." The statement said Slovaks could be "rightfully proud" of the founding, which it called a defining moment. The party also organized a celebration of the anniversary in the northern town of Ruzomberok, where LSNS Chair Kotleba and other party members praised the wartime Slovak state. Kotleba said he wanted to recognize the "true patriots that protected the Slovak people during the difficult times of WWII." Ruzomberok Mayor Igor Combor stated LSNS representatives misled the local government and withheld information about the true aim of the event by claiming they were organizing a political rally ahead of presidential elections.

In April on the anniversary of the execution of Jozef Tiso, the president of the wartime Slovak state, one of the city boroughs of Bratislava played the unofficial national anthem of that regime through a public speaker system. Local councilor Radoslav Oleksak, whom media labeled as a far-right extremist, organized the broadcast. UZZNO strongly condemned the broadcast.

In January then president Kiska met with representatives of the Roman Catholic, Augsburg Lutheran, Greek Catholic, and Reformed Christian Churches and UZZNO to discuss the state of religious freedom and tolerance in society and to thank them for their service to the religious community and their charitable work.

In September Prime Minister Peter Pellegrini and several cabinet ministers commemorated Slovak Holocaust and Ethnic Violence Remembrance Day by laying wreaths at the Holocaust memorial in Bratislava. In his speech on the

occasion, Pellegrini said politicians had a responsibility to fight to educate youth against “those who contort the truth about the Holocaust and World War II . . . , humanize the fascist regime, and deny the existence of concentration camps.” The prime minister stated that a recent survey showing 4 percent of youth considered the Holocaust and extremism “a good thing” was a “shocking discovery and a great warning.” President Caputova and government representatives, including the prime minister, also participated in a wreath-laying ceremony organized by the Jewish community in Sered and a victim name-reading ceremony in Bratislava.

During a press conference in September, Prime Minister Pellegrini criticized Smer-SD Party Chair Fico for his statements in a social media video earlier that month defending LSNS politician Milan Mazurek, convicted of making remarks against the Roma. Pellegrini said it was unacceptable to defend anyone who denies the Holocaust or promotes terror against anyone because of religion, race, or belief.

In February the government organized an international conference on anti-Semitism as part of its 12-month chairmanship of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe. The conference included a series of expert panels on the security of Jewish communities, Holocaust remembrance initiatives, anti-Semitism in traditional and social media, and cooperation with civil society.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

In August the Specialized Criminal Court convicted and sentenced a citizen to four years in prison for a December 2018 knife attack on the Turkish and Albanian proprietors of a kebab bistro in Banska Bystrica, where he shouted anti-Muslim slurs and threatened to kill all Muslims. The prosecutor charged the man with attempted murder aggravated by a deliberate extremist motive, punishable by a prison sentence of up to 21 years; the court downgraded the incident to inflicting bodily harm. The prosecutor appealed the verdict to the Supreme Court, and the case remained pending at year’s end.

Two NGOs, the Islamic Foundation in Slovakia and Forum of the World’s Religions - Slovakia, said they continued to encounter difficulties altering negative public attitudes toward smaller, unregistered religious organizations because of the social stigma associated with not having the same legal benefits accorded to registered religions. Representatives of unregistered religious groups said the public tended to view their activities with mistrust and perceive them as “fringe cults” because of their lack of official government recognition as religious communities.

The Islamic Foundation 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 public statements by local politicians portraying Muslim refugees as an existential threat to the country's society and culture. Hate speech, mostly on social media, included frequent portrayal of Muslims as “barbarians,” “terrorists,” and a “threat to European culture and way of life.” This also included calls for violence against refugees and migrants from the Middle East and Africa, many of whom were believed to be Muslim, attempting to reach Europe. Muslim community leaders said they perceived increased anti-Muslim sentiment, and they continued to maintain a low profile regarding their activities and prayer rooms to avoid inflaming public opinion.

Police reported seven cases of defamation of race, nation, or religious belief and eight cases of incitement of national, racial, and ethnic hatred in the first 10 months of the year, compared with three cases of defamation and seven cases of incitement of hatred in all of 2018. Police provided no further details.

In May the European Commission (EC) carried out a study in each member state of the European Union (EU) on perceptions of anti-discrimination and published the results in September. According to the findings, 13 percent believed discrimination on the basis of religion or belief was widespread in Slovakia, while 74 percent said it was rare; 84 percent would be comfortable with having a person of a different religion than the majority of the population occupy the highest elected political position in the country. In addition, 93 percent said they would be comfortable working with a Christian, and 88 percent said they would be with an atheist, 82 percent with a Jew, 75 percent with a Buddhist, and 64 percent with a Muslim. Asked how they would feel if their child were in a “love relationship” with an individual belonging to various groups, 94 percent said they would be comfortable if the partner were Christian, 82 percent if atheist, 70 percent if Jewish, 53 percent if Buddhist, and 40 percent if Muslim.

A survey conducted in February by the Public Affairs Institute, a local think tank, found nearly 60 percent of respondents would oppose a Muslim family moving into their neighborhood, and 17 percent would object to a Jewish family moving there.

In January the EC published a special Eurobarometer survey of perceptions of anti-Semitism based on interviews it conducted in December 2018 in each EU-member

state. According to the survey, 20 percent of residents believed anti-Semitism was a problem in Slovakia, was as follows: Holocaust denial, 32 percent; on the internet, 26 percent; anti-Semitic graffiti or vandalism, 24 percent; expression of hostility or threats against Jews in public places, 21 percent; desecration of Jewish cemeteries, 29 percent; physical attacks against Jews, 19 percent; anti-Semitism in schools and universities, 18 percent; anti-Semitism in political life, 22 percent; and anti-Semitism in the media, 21 percent.

Sociologists and Jewish community leaders said they perceived anti-Semitism was increasing, citing repeated references by public officials to anti-Semitic conspiracy theories, the increased polling support for LSNS, and desecration of Jewish cemeteries in December.

Organizations the media characterized as far right – including the civic organizations Museum of the Slovak Armed Forces 1939-1945 and the Slovak Historical Society, as well as the state-funded but independent cultural heritage organization the Historical Institute of the Matica Slovenska – continued to issue statements praising the anti-Semitic, Nazi-allied Slovak state government and organize gatherings where participants displayed symbols of that government. Organizers often included photographs showing WWII symbols, such as the double-barred equal-armed cross or photographs of President Tiso in online posts promoting their events. On March 14, two civic organizations, Heritage of our Fathers and the Andrej Hlinka Society, organized a conference to commemorate the 1939 founding of the wartime Slovak state. Media reported the LSNS, including elected officials, was well represented at this event. According to media, speakers praised the wartime Slovak state for protecting the citizenry and improving living standards, without mentioning the mass deportation of Jews to Nazi extermination camps during that period. Commenting in major media outlets, historians of the 20th century and the wartime Slovak state accused some of the speakers at the conference of historical revisionism and denying the crimes of the Slovak state. One of the main speakers was Martin Lacko, a historian who was dismissed from the Nation's Memory Institute and who, according to press reports, had expressed support for LSNS leader Kotleba and described the United States as the aggressor in WWII.

On December 16, the Specialized Criminal Court convicted Tibor Eliot Rostas, editor-in-chief of *Zem a Vek* (Earth and Age) magazine, for “defamation of a nation, race, or belief” for a 2017 article titled “The Jewish Wedge Among Slavs.” The court ordered Rostas to pay a 4,000-euro (\$4,500) fine or spend three months in prison. Rostas’ court hearings were attended by former supreme court justice

and 2020 parliamentary candidate Stefan Harabin, who was escorted from the courtroom after the court found him in contempt for disturbing the proceedings by shouting comments that observers described as anti-Semitic, including calling the judge a “pug of [a prominent Jewish financier].”

Media reported on December 17 that unknown persons knocked over 60 gravestones in the Jewish cemetery in the city of Namestovo. On December 23, media reported the vandalism of a second Jewish cemetery in the town of Rajec, approximately 70 miles from Namestovo, where unidentified persons damaged approximately 20 gravestones. Police opened a criminal investigation.

The Parliament of the World’s Religions, a local NGO, continued to organize a series of public debates and school lectures with a variety of religious leaders to promote interfaith dialogue and tolerance.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The Ambassador and other embassy officers repeatedly raised the treatment of religious minority groups and the continued presence of anti-Muslim sentiment and anti-Semitism with government officials, including officials from the culture and interior ministries, the speaker of parliament, and lawmakers from across the political spectrum. 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 enjoying the rights and benefits accruing from official recognition.

The embassy provided additional funding for NGO Forum of the World’s Religions - Slovakia to design a special curriculum for secondary school teachers to build religious tolerance through interfaith discussions.

In December the embassy funded the travel of a group of prosecutors and police investigators to Budapest, Hungary for specialized training on countering bias-motivated crimes, including religious bias, at the U.S.-funded International Law Enforcement Academy.

The embassy used its social media channels to commemorate Slovak Holocaust Remembrance Day and International Religious Freedom Day. In December the embassy issued a statement on its social media accounts condemning acts of vandalism against Jewish cemeteries.

On February 5, the Ambassador spoke out against anti-Semitism at an international conference on combating anti-Semitism in the region hosted by the government in its capacity as chair of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe.

Embassy officers met with registered and unregistered religious organizations, including the Islamic Foundation, the Seventh-day Adventist Church, and civil society groups, including the Center for Research of Ethnicity and Culture, to raise the issue of hate speech directed against Muslims, anti-Semitism, and the negative impact on religious minorities of membership and other registration requirements. In January the Ambassador met Roman Catholic Archbishop Stanislav Zvolensky, addressing religious freedom and the quality of interfaith relations in the country.