



Religion

Population

Area

- Christians : **85.1%**
- Agnostics : **11.6%**
- Atheists : **3.1%**
- Others : **0.2%**

5.429.000

49.035 Km²

Legal framework on freedom of religion and actual application

Article 24 of the constitution guarantees freedom of religious belief and affiliation, as well as the right to change religious faith or to have no religious affiliation.^[1] The constitution states that the country is not tied to any particular faith and religious groups are at liberty to manage their own affairs independently of the state, including providing religious education and establishing clerical institutions. It guarantees the right to practise one's faith privately or publicly, either alone or with others. It states that religious rights may only be restricted by measures that are deemed "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".^[2]

Legally, if a religious group wants clergy to perform officially recognised services, they must register with the Department of Church Affairs, which is part of the Ministry of Culture. Clergy from unregistered religious groups cannot officially celebrate marriages or minister to their faithful in prisons or public hospitals.^[3]

According to the law on religious freedom (article 12),^[4] religious societies and Churches that want to register must have at least 20,000 adult members, either citizens or permanent residents. The latter must submit a declaration about their membership, show some basic understanding of their religion, include their personal identity numbers and home addresses, and express their support for their group's registration with the Ministry of Culture. The law does not differentiate between Churches and religious societies; it recognises as Churches those groups that call themselves Churches.^[5]

Additional benefits come with registration, such as financial support from the state. Non-registered religious societies and Churches are, as a result of a decision by the Constitutional Court, entitled to form different kinds of legal entities, especially civic associations.^[6]

In the absence of registration, reports showed that the Muslim community was unable to formally hire an imam. Muslim community leaders continued to complain that prisons and detention facilities frequently prevented their spiritual representatives from gaining access to their members.^[7] Muslim groups also reported that the lack of official registration made it more difficult for them to obtain building permits for prayer rooms and mosques, even though there is no law that prohibits unregistered groups from obtaining a permit.

In November 2016 the Slovak parliament approved legislation, introduced by the Slovak National Party (SNS), to increase the number of members required by groups seeking registration as religious societies. The membership limit was raised to 50,000 members and the law was due to take effect at the beginning of 2017.^[8] The bill was seen as clearly aimed against Islam. SNS leader Andrej Danko declared that the objective was to ensure that no mosques would be built in the country. A proposal by the opposition far-right People's Party – Our Slovakia to raise the bar to at least 250,000 followers was turned down.^[9]

On 20th December 2016 President Kiska vetoed the proposed law, stating that it interfered too much with fundamental rights and freedoms. The president's veto was in turn overturned in a second parliamentary vote in January 2017 and the law came into effect in March 2017.^[10] In April 2017, a bill presented by opposition MP Milan Krajniak banning the construction of mosques, was defeated.^[11]

In June 2016 the Ministry of Interior issued a statement that called for an end to online hate speech. According to the Committee for the Elimination of Racism, Xenophobia, Anti-Semitism, and Other Forms of Intolerance, which is part of a government advisory body on human rights and national minorities, hate speech often results in physical violence.^[12]

On 9th September 2016 Prime Minister Fico, Speaker of Parliament Andrej Danko, and other senior-level leaders commemorated the Day of the Victims of the Holocaust and of Racial Violence at the Holocaust Memorial in Bratislava.^[13]

Incidents

A number of non-governmental organisations as well as the Islamic Foundation in Slovakia reported more incidents of violence and online hate speech against Muslims and refugees on the part of extremist groups and politicians. Compared to previous years, Muslims expressed greater fear. The Islamic Foundation monitored online anti-Muslim hate speech, noting many calls for deadly violence against Muslims and refugees.^[14]

In one case, a Somali woman refugee said that she experienced six physical and verbal attacks in the Slovak capital of Bratislava. On two occasions, she was with her child. On two occasions, someone tried to remove her hijab while shouting anti-refugee and anti-Muslim insults at her. The Slovak Ministry of Interior eventually issued a press release condemning the attacks as well as racial and religious hatred.^[15]

According to a report by the *New York Times*, negative attitudes towards Muslims can be felt even in the quiet spa town of Piestany, which for several decades has been a popular tourist destination for wealthy Arabs. In former times, Muslim visitors were welcome; now they seem to have become victims of verbal attacks.^[16]

Some far-right groups continued to praise Slovakia's World War II-era fascist regime, which sent thousands of Slovak Jews to Nazi death camps. Likewise, some groups displayed symbols of the fascist state at their meetings. Online adverts for such events often included pictures with World War II emblems.^[17]

There were more attacks against Christian symbols and locations than during the last period under review. Most involved acts of vandalism and desecration rather than physical or verbal abuse of individuals. **In October 2016 there was an attack on chapels and a church in Turzovka, home to a popular Marian shrine. One of the chapels and the main door of the church were set on fire. The fire did not spread inside the church as the door was fireproof.**

[18]

On 6th January 2018, a statue of Saint Bernadette was stolen for a second time in the city of Zavod. Four days later, in nearby Marianka, two religious statues were desecrated at the local Marian shrine. The hands of the statue of Our Lady of Lourdes were broken off and a statue of Saint Bernadette was broken in pieces and the face disfigured^[19]

The Catholic church in the village of Bab was vandalised in November 2017. Various sacred objects were damaged. The same church had been the target of vandalism and robbery only one month before^[20] Pornographic videos were recorded inside two Roman Catholic churches and one Greek Catholic church in city of Presov^[21] In April 2018, a young man stoned and damaged a statue of Virgin Mary and the Child Jesus in the village of Nemcinany^[22] The Calvary in Partizanske was destroyed and set in fire. Local police said Satanists may have carried out the attack in which wooden crosses were torn down and burnt alongside Calvary paintings.^[23]

Prospects for freedom of religion

In the wake of the refugee crisis, there has been a clear deterioration of religious freedom for the Muslim minority, at both the political and societal level. This hostility is not universal; in most instances, government officials have opened investigations and strongly condemned hate speech, vandalism and physical violence. There is also opposition to proposed legislative measures directed at Muslims. However, as the refugee crisis intensifies, the situation seems to be worsening. For the other religious groups, the level of religious freedom remains unchanged.

Endnotes / Sources

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[12] Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, op. cit.

[13] Ibid

[14] Ibid

[15] Ibid.

[16] Rick Lyman, 'A long-tolerant spa town feels the chill of Slovak populism', The New York Times, 12th September 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/12/world/europe/piestany-arabs-slovak-nationalism.html>, (accessed 23rd March 2018).

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