

## Country Profile

# Slovakia

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This Country Profile provides a brief overview of religious diversity and its governance in the above-named state. It is one of 23 such profiles produced by GREASE, an EU-funded research project investigating religious diversity, state-religion relations and religiously inspired radicalisation on four continents. More detailed assessments are available in our multi-part Country Reports and Country Cases.

**Countries covered in this series:**

Albania, Australia, Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Egypt, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Hungary, India, Indonesia, Lebanon, Lithuania, Malaysia, Morocco, Russia, Slovakia, Spain, Tunisia, Turkey and the United Kingdom.

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Total population: 5.4 million

### Religious affiliation (percent)

Roman Catholic Church	62.0
Evangelical Church of Augsburg confession	5.9
Greek Catholic Church	3.8
Christian Reformed Church	1.8
Orthodox Church	0.9
no religion	13.4
not specified	10.6

Source: 2011 population census

[https://slovak.statistics.sk/wps/wcm/connect/87ee3f0c-54fd-4647-b083-67c399e68bfb/Table\\_14\\_Population\\_by\\_religion\\_2011\\_2001\\_1991.pdf?MOD=AJPERES&CVID=kojGgO](https://slovak.statistics.sk/wps/wcm/connect/87ee3f0c-54fd-4647-b083-67c399e68bfb/Table_14_Population_by_religion_2011_2001_1991.pdf?MOD=AJPERES&CVID=kojGgO)

### Role of religion in state and government

After the collapse of the communist regime in 1989, while Slovakia was still part of the joint Czechoslovak state, the religious rights of the population were restored and communities were once again allowed to publicly engage in religious rituals. New religious communities started forming and seeking to register their organizations. Slovakia became independent in 1993 and inherited much legislation from the previous joint state, including that concerning governance of religion.

Like all other EU member states, Slovakia is officially a secular state. Governance of religious diversity in today's Slovakia stems from its Constitution, the constitutional Bill of Basic Rights and Freedoms, and the Law on Religious Freedom and the Legal Status of Churches and Religious Organizations. The registration of churches and religious societies is further governed by the Law on Religious Freedom and the Legal Status of Churches and Religious Organizations, and the Law on the Registration of Churches and Religious Organizations.

The regime of governance of religion in Slovakia operates on a one-tier principle – all registered religious organizations are treated as equal before the law. While there is no formal distinction between “traditional” or “historical” religious communities and others, the state “recognizes only those churches and religious societies that are registered”. The Roman Catholic Church has a somewhat privileged status, with Slovakia having signed a Concordat with the Holy See.

On the official level, religion plays no role in Slovakia's socio-political affairs, though some politicians and political groupings (both registered parties and informal movements) do stress the fact that Slovakia is a country of Christian (chiefly, Roman Catholic) heritage. Some Christian holidays are recognized as official state holidays and Christian religious symbols are tolerated in the public sector. Population census results suggest that the overwhelming majority of Slovakia's inhabitants nominally identify with Christian heritage. In practice, however, Slovaks are very secularized, with religion playing very little role in their personal lives.

## Freedom of religion

As may be expected of a European Union member state, the Constitution of Slovakia (Art. 24) unequivocally guarantees religious freedom: “1. Freedom of thought, conscience, religion and belief shall be guaranteed. This right shall include the right to change religion or belief and the right to refrain from a religious affiliation. Everyone shall have the right to express his or her mind publicly. 2. Everyone shall have the right to manifest freely his or her religion or belief either alone or in association with others, privately or publicly, in worship, religious acts, maintaining ceremonies or to participate in teaching. 3. Churches and ecclesiastical communities shall administer their own affairs themselves; in particular, they shall establish their bodies, appoint clericals, provide for theological education and establish religious orders and other clerical institutions independent from the state authorities.” The Law on Religious Freedom and the Legal Status of Churches and Religious Organizations (Art. 1) re-confirms these constitutional provisions, establishing mutual autonomy between the state and religious collectivities and their organizations.

However, the Slovakia’s religious diversity governance regime sets strict rules of registration for religious collectivities, which has led to Slovakia being one of the few European states where Muslims do not have a registered Muslim religious organization and are forced to operate through NGOs. This affects religious rituals and other activities. In 2016, in the wake of the so-called “European refugee crisis”, the Law on Religious Freedom and the Legal Status of Churches and Religious Organizations was amended. Though the President vetoed it, arguing that the amendments curtail religious freedoms and rights, his veto was overturned and the amendments were passed with a two-thirds majority in the Parliament in 2017. The most symbolic amendment to the Law was the one that raised the minimum number of members for the registration of a religious organization from 20,000 to 50,000. The amendment further stipulates that those members be Slovak citizens permanently residing in Slovakia. The minor faith communities thus are forced to register according to the Law on Civic Associations of 1990 (which, incidentally, explicitly states that the Law does not cover religious collectivities (Section 1, Point 1c)). These communities must operate as NGOs, thereby denying them many rights that registered religious organizations have, including: building temples and owning property ; establishing institutions of religious education; providing pastoral care; and lobbying for diet, religious feasts and clothing-related rights.

Legislation governing religion has prevented not only Muslims but also a plethora of other minority faith communities (particularly those that are new to the country) from registering their religious organizations. Having no religious organizations, these faith communities have been effectively marginalized in the religious market as they do not enjoy tax exemptions, do not have their clergy’s salaries paid by the state, may not provide religious instruction to children in public schools and may not seek any assistance from the state.

Though several faith communities are legally deprived of the right to have a religious organization, it is widely believed that the draconian legislation was designed to prevent followers of Islam from institutionalizing their religion in the country as both the country's political elite and the population are decidedly Muslimophobic. In this context it is worth noting that there are only around 5,000 people of Muslim background in Slovakia and no signs of Muslim religious radicalisation have ever been reported.

As of mid-2019, there were 18 registered religious organizations in Slovakia, of which only two were non-Christian: Judaism (2,000 followers) and Bahaim (just over 1,000 followers). While Judaism is a historical religion in Slovakia, Bahaim is a recent appearance. Bahais succeeded to attain registration of their religious organization in 2007 after they had managed to collect 28,000 signatures of supporters (the then applicable legislation required 20,000 signatures). Mormons also managed to garner support from over 20,000 Slovaks to gain official registration in 2006. Since then, however, no other religious collectivity was registered.

### **Religiously inspired radicalisation**

Religious radicalisation among members of non-Christian faith communities has not been observed in Slovakia. Nonetheless, the country's Secret Services often refer to some unregistered religious collectivities (chiefly of New Religious Movements type) as "dangerous sects". The Church of Scientology and the similar non-registered groups usually fall under the category of "harmful sectarian groupings".

An ethnic Slovak convert to Islam was tried for plotting a violent act in the Czech capital Prague in which he was resident. But as he did not have any known relations with the Slovak Muslim community, his case of religious radicalisation is confined to Czech and not Slovak territory. Slovak intelligence services admit that the country faces practically no threat of terrorism (understood to be stemming solely from jihadis).

On the other hand, though Slovak society is rather secularized, there is potential for radicalisation along nationalist lines, with religious (Christian) identity possibly playing a role. Religion may be instrumentalized for political purposes. There are already some signs of certain segments of the Slovak society being radicalised. This particularly applies to paramilitary groups like Slovenskí Branci (Slovak Levies) and others. Members and supporters of the parliamentary extreme far-right political party Kotleba – People's Party Our Slovakia have expressed Muslimophobic (as well as anti-Roma) views in numerous statements and public protests. Far-right political radicalism has already translated into violent actions against people perceived to be of immigrant background, and particularly against Arabs/ Muslims.

### **Religious diversity governance assessment**

Though largely is secular, Slovak society is composed of people professing numerous faiths, and the religious governance regime favors those religious communities that have been historically institutionalized. Legislation ultimately prevents any newly emergent religious collectivities from institutionalizing unless they pass a suffocating threshold of 50,000 citizen-members. Though the rationale behind such a high minimum is to prevent pseudo-religious groupings (“dangerous sects” and business enterprises) from getting recognition by the state, there have been no instances of religious radicalisation on the side of new religious communities. On the strategic level, Slovakia does not see violent religious radicalisation among challenges and threats to its national security. On the other hand, security services in their annual reports do include religious radicalisation among (possible) threats.

Despite the fact that there have been no instances of Muslim religious radicalisation in Slovakia, since the onset of the so-called “European refugee crisis”, Islam and Muslims have been increasingly securitized on both social and political level. Though initially Slovakia agreed to accept several hundred refugees within the framework of the EU refugee distribution quota system, it then reversed its decision, arguing that accepting refugees presumed to be chiefly of Muslim background would increase the country’s vulnerability and decrease its national security.

On the other hand, there are clear signs of growing nationalist radicalisation on the side of the (Christian) Slovak population which increasingly supports far-right para-military organizations and political parties, some of which present themselves as defenders of “traditional national Christian values and way of living”. They see themselves protecting their country against encroaching “Brussels values” and alien ways of living, represented by immigrants and above all Muslims.

Rising nationalist, far-right and neo-fascist radicalisation with its religious undertones is of increasing concern to the Slovak authorities. Already in the late 2000s, there was a number of extreme far-right, nationalist and neo-fascist groupings and even registered political parties. Government institutions sought to ban and prosecute some of them and their members, in some cases successfully. Since the early 2010s, with the rise of the Slovenski Branci and Kotleba – People’s Party Our Slovakia, the situation has worsened. This is acknowledged by the intelligence services and top Slovak political figures . The General Prosecutor has attempted, albeit unsuccessfully, to ban Kotleba – People’s Party Our Slovakia (though a party headed by Marian Kotleba was banned a decade ago).

In conclusion, it may be said that while the Slovak state appears to be preoccupied with policies to prevent Muslims (and numerous other minor religious collectivities) from institutionalizing in the country, these policies are adversely affecting religious diversity and the peaceful co-existence of different confessional (and sometimes ethno-confessional) communities. Rising far-right nationalism, with its religious undertones, further diminishes practical religious rights of minority (especially, non-registered) religious groups. The Slovakian regime of governing religious diversity can hardly be seen as exemplary in the world, let alone Europe.

### About the GREASE project

Radicalisation, Secularism and the Governance of Religion: Bringing together European and Asian Perspectives (GREASE)

Involving researchers from Europe, North Africa, the Middle East, Asia and Oceania, GREASE is investigating how religious diversity is governed in over 20 countries. Our work focuses on comparing norms, laws and practices that may (or may not) prove useful in preventing religious radicalisation. Our research also sheds light on how different societies cope with the challenge of integrating religious minorities and migrants. The aim is to deepen our understanding of how religious diversity can be governed successfully, with an emphasis on countering radicalisation trends.

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