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SLOVAKIA: Why can't smaller Protestant Churches or Muslims gain legal status?

By Felix Corley, Forum 18 News Service <<http://www.forum18.org>>

Leaders of smaller Protestant Churches, Muslims and Hare Krishna devotees have complained about a bizarre provision of the country's law that renders new religious communities with fewer than 20,000 members ineligible to gain legal status as religious communities. "Unregistered communities have no legal status and cannot build places of worship," Jan Juran, director of the Culture Ministry's church affairs office, explained to Forum 18 News Service. "We want to register. This is not freedom," Pastor Gabriel Minarik, leader of the Christian Fellowships, told Forum 18. Bratislava imam Mohamad Safwan Hasna complained that the denial of registration and the inability of the community to build mosques is "very humiliating".

On the tenth anniversary of Slovakia's accession to the Council of Europe, a bizarre provision of the country's law that renders new religious communities with fewer than 20,000 members ineligible to gain legal status as religious communities is under fire from minority faiths, especially some smaller Protestant Churches, Muslims and the Hare Krishna community. "We asked for registration this year but the religious affairs office explained we can't have it," Pastor Ivan Zustiak, leader of the Brethren Unity Protestant church told Forum 18 News Service on 2 July. "I think it is wrong," Pastor Gabriel Minarik, leader of the Christian Fellowships, agreed. "We want to register. This is not freedom," he told Forum 18 from Poprad on 2 July.

Jan Juran, director of the church affairs office at the Ministry of Culture, insisted that his office can only uphold the law, which specifies the 20,000-member threshold. "Unregistered communities have no legal status and cannot build places of worship," he told Forum 18 from the capital Bratislava on 30 June. "They only have the possibility to follow their religion alone or with others in private homes."

The Muslim community is equally adamant that it should be allowed to register on a par with other communities. Mohamad Safwan Hasna, the Syrian-born imam who is now a Slovak citizen, complains that the denial of registration and the inability of the community to build mosques is "very humiliating". "We don't have a suitable and stable place to pray, meet and explain Islamic culture," he told Forum 18 from Bratislava on 30 June. He said the 150 or so practising Muslims in the city have to gather for prayers in rented premises, as do the smaller communities in Martin and Kosice.

Hasna estimates that there are in total about 5,000 Muslims in Slovakia, most of them in Bratislava. He said the community is made up of Arabs, Albanians, Turks and Bosnians, as well as about 150 Slovak converts.

The Bratislava community, which has had to register as a charitable organisation, has been trying to build an Islamic centre, including a prayer hall and meeting rooms, for many years. Hasna said it bought a plot of land in the city's Old Town three years ago, but the local mayor has denied building permission. "They have no logical reasons to withhold permission," he insists. "The mayor is against human rights and religious freedom." He attributes opposition to mosques to popular sentiment. "The Slovak people are very conservative."

Martin Huncar, assistant pastor of the Word of Life Protestant church in Bratislava, says his church has not even tried to register as a religious community because it knows it will be refused. "Of course we want registration, we want our normal rights," he told Forum 18 from the city on 2 July. "But with only about 100 members we don't have enough people." He said the church has been forced to register with the Interior Ministry as an organisation conducting social work and Christian work with young people. "We cannot have the word Church in our legal documents, but this is wrong. Spiritually we are a church."

Huncar complains that without registration the church cannot conduct legally-valid weddings or funerals and is not allowed to work in schools or prisons. He insisted that his church is not seeking the financial support from the state that other approved religious communities receive. "For us it is not a question of money."

Huncar puts the number of other Protestant churches in Bratislava that are unable to gain legal status as religious communities at three or four. "All new churches that have arisen since 1990, especially Pentecostal churches, face this difficulty." However, some of those denied registration are much older, including the Nazarene Church.

Pastor Zustiak, whose church in the northern Slovak town of Liptovsky Mikulas faced pressure from local police and officials in 2001 and the threat that its legal status as a civil association would be revoked, says the Culture Ministry's church department has put a stop to this pressure. But he says the uncertain legal position makes buying a permanent church for his 100-strong congregation and other congregations in the country impossible. "We cannot pay our employees either," he complained.

Ragunatha Priya (Roman Pazdika), leader of the Hare Krishna community, told Forum 18 from the community's farm in Abranovce near Presov that it has registration only as a civil organisation. "We tried for many years to get registration as a religious community, but this is not possible," he reported on 2 July. "The law is very bad." He said there are up to about a thousand devotees in three communities.

Asked whether the denial of registration to newer religious groups did not constitute discrimination, Juran responded: "This is one possibility, but this is the situation. Until now it has not been criticised in the Slovak parliament or by the Helsinki Committee." However, he insisted that the problem "will be solved". "We will have a new law, but for that there must be political will." Asked if that political will was there, he declared: "I don't know. I'm not a politician. If we're told to draw up a new law we will do so."

Juran declined to say if pressure not to allow new religious groups to register came from the dominant Catholic Church. "We have no eyes for this. The state is neutral."

Fifteen religious communities that had legal status during the communist era were able to retain that status in 1991 when the religion law was adopted, even though nine of them, including the Pentecostal Church with only 4,000 members, would not have passed the 20,000 threshold. Only the Jehovah's Witnesses have been able to gain legal status as a religious community since the law was adopted.

Yet there is little wider support for the ending of these restrictions. Martin Skamla of the Slovak Helsinki Committee, a human rights group in Bratislava, told Forum 18 on 1 July that his committee has not dealt with this issue.

Even some Protestants oppose giving equal rights to other religious communities. Jan Kerekety, general secretary of the Slovak Evangelical Alliance and a Lutheran layman, told Forum 18 on 1 July that as a "Christian state", Slovakia "doesn't need" Muslims - or even the smaller Protestant churches. "People have sixteen religious communities to choose from." He believed Forum 18 should not write about the issue. "You can't make things better."

Jan Lacho, bishop of the Pentecostal Church, was ambivalent about any change to the law. "It would be wrong if we allowed these groups to register," he told Forum 18 on 2 July. "If we have a new registration system it would allow all these Eastern religions to register, with all the changes in society that would come with other religions."

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