

Country Visit: Slovakia
Report of the Personal Representative of the OSCE Chair-in-Office on
Combating Anti-Semitism, Rabbi Andrew Baker, September 6-9, 2009
(Prepared October 22, 2009)

Background:

Prior to the Holocaust the Jewish population of Slovakia was estimated to be about 135,000. In September 1941, anti-Jewish legislation adopted by the Government of Jozef Tiso separated Jews from the rest of society, set in motion the systematic looting of their property and the eventual deportations of 70,000 to Nazi death camps. Today the Jewish population numbers only a few thousand. They were among those who celebrated the “Velvet Revolution” of 1989 and rejoiced in the reestablishment of a democratic Czechoslovakia. With the division four years later and the creation of an independent Slovak Republic, these Jews expressed a certain anxiety. They had felt more comfortable in a pluralist state of Czechs, Slovaks, Hungarians and others, and were now unnerved by the populist appeals that led to the separation. Some of those same voices also promoted the rehabilitation of Tiso as a hero of Slovak nationalism, ignoring his crimes against the Jews. But these concerns were tempered by Slovakia’s orientation toward the West and efforts to secure membership in NATO and the EU. During this time the Government also established a commission to evaluate the material losses of the Jewish community under the wartime Slovak state and agreed to fund a foundation administered by the community that would help support its welfare and cultural needs.

Discussion with Civil Society and the Jewish Community:

Jewish community leaders are quick to state that any problems of anti-Semitism in Slovakia are overshadowed by anti-Roma and anti-Hungarian sentiments in society. In 2008, an anti-Semitic remark in Parliament by a previous Justice Minister was quickly rebuked by other political leaders, including the Prime Minister. The presence of the populist Slovak National Party in the Government coalition has been a troubling factor, and its leader, Jan Slota, is not shy about giving voice to his anti-minority sentiments. New text books are being prepared, and as the Education Ministry is in the hands of the Slovak National Party there is concern that students will be presented with a “softer view” of the Tiso-era state.

One observer spoke despairingly of reliving an earlier period, with a decline in civil public discourse, increased use of the “nationalist card” by politicians, and a hopeless situation confronting the country’s Roma population. Within this mentality, he maintained, anti-Jewish and anti-Western conspiracy theories can take root. Another said anti-Semitism in Slovakia is like the water running

beneath the surface of a river with anti-Roma and anti-Hungarian sentiments being most visible.

Especially troubling has been the establishment of the Slovak Brotherhood (Slovenska Postpolitost), a right-wing extremist group that espouses racial and nationalist hatred, directed primarily at Roma and the Hungarian minority. Some have suggested it is a Slovak version of the "Hungarian Guard" although authorities have been vigorous in combating it. Even the Prime Minister concedes that the current economic crisis and continuing social problems provide a "good soil" for such groups.

The Union of Jewish Religious Communities does not formally collect data on anti-Semitic incidents in the country. It is not aware of any significant problems or violent acts against Jews, although it has received word of cemetery desecrations. In contrast to some other European countries, anti-Semitic outbursts are not observed at sporting events. In early 2009, the conflict in the Middle East did not spawn any strong, anti-Israel or anti-Semitic demonstrations.

Holocaust Remembrance:

Prime Minister Robert Fico is given high marks for leading efforts in Slovakia to commemorate the Holocaust. As an opposition member in Parliament he proposed the designation of an official day of remembrance and as Prime Minister he has presided at official ceremonies. The occasion of our visit coincided with a special dedication by the Prime Minister of a memorial park in Zvolen, which commemorates those Slovaks who helped rescue Jews at the time of the Slovak National Uprising in 1944. The small park is adjacent to the mass grave of 59 Jews and one Slovak rescuer killed by the Nazis.

Plans are also underway for a Holocaust Museum and Education Center that will be built in Sered and housed in the remaining barracks of a former Nazi labor camp.

Legislation was recently passed by Parliament which now criminalizes Holocaust denial.

Ministry of Interior:

The Minister believes that the fight against anti-Semitism has been largely successful. He places this in the context of Slovak society acknowledging the history of the Holocaust in the country, and he reflects on how the numbers of those who observe the official commemoration has grown exponentially. Among the criminal cases that have been brought for extremist activities, only a very small percentage involves anti-Semitism.

New legislation provides for punishment of three years imprisonment for anyone who in public, “denies, questions, approves or excuses the Holocaust.” So far no one has yet been charged.

More difficult has been combating anti-Roma and anti-Hungarian extremists. Police have taken a very harsh approach to the activities of the Slovak Brotherhood, physically removing their uniforms (which have been banned by court order) and arresting their leaders. As a result, according to the Minister, the group is now more careful about what it says and also draws far fewer people to its rallies. However, there is a difficulty in explaining the need for these harsh measures to many average Slovaks who associate problems of crime and social unrest with the Roma minority.

The Slovak police have also developed a cadre of 300 “Roma specialists” who speak the Romani language and who can work with the Roma communities. As a result, it is reported, the crime rate in these communities has dropped by 36-46 percent in the last three years. Recently some of these specialists were seconded to Glasgow to assist Scotland’s police in dealing with Roma there.

The Minister points with pride to the change in recording hate crime data. Between 1997 and 2002, only 19-30 cases were recorded annually, while in 2008 the official number was 213. The reason for this is that today hate crimes are treated more seriously and incidents of offensive graffiti and hateful public discourse are also counted. Most of these 213 were dealt with in summary procedure, while about thirty led to criminal investigations.

Ministry of Justice:

In September 2009, new amendments to the legal code (also designed to align the law with European norms) expanded the range of criminal offenses covered under hate crime legislation to include groups that oppose human rights or promote racial or religious intolerance or slander or defame others on racial or religious grounds. The new laws also include the denial (or voicing approval) of genocides and war crimes, including the Holocaust. Anti-Semitic crimes are also given special attention, we are told, although there are no specific figures available, and the legislation does not include any definition of anti-Semitism. However, officials did admit that they were aware of some anti-Semitic manifestations which included cases of physical attacks and the desecration of gravestones.

ODIHR’s representative explained the importance of data collection and disaggregating figures according to victim groups.

Ministry of Education:

Slovak educational efforts to combat racism, xenophobia and anti-Semitism can be found in two general areas of study—"Man and Values" and "Man and Society." They are included in the subject topics: Ethics, Civic Education, History and Geography. Intercultural education is an optional subject left to individual schools. (Critics say that this subject is rarely taught as teachers lack the training.) Some programs also include visits to concentration camps.

The Ministry of Education has given its official approval to education materials on combating anti-Semitism that were developed by ODIHR in cooperation with the Milan Šimečka Foundation. Limited availability of these materials has by necessity restricted their use, but the Foundation is engaged in evaluating a pilot program of study.

Recommendations:

The efforts by Slovak leaders in promoting Holocaust remembrance and education deserve special credit and can serve as an example for other countries which have taken a more tentative or ambiguous approach to addressing this sometimes difficult chapter in national history. As senior officials point out, this can also directly contribute to reducing manifestations of anti-Semitism. The modest, additional funds necessary to allow for the widespread distribution and use of the ODIHR teaching materials should be allocated.

In Twentieth Century Europe Jews were sometimes described as the 'canary in the cage' whose persecution proved to be a warning of more widespread dangers to come. In a post-Holocaust era this may now be reversed. There are stark differences between Slovakia's Jewish community, whose numbers are so small as to make it almost invisible, and the much larger Roma population and geographically distinct Hungarian minority who are frequently targeted. But the well-being of the first is nevertheless tied to the treatment of the country's other two visible minorities. Those who embrace racist and xenophobic hatreds rarely think kindly of Jews. Thus, educational and social programs that seek to promote tolerance and understanding and police efforts to deal swiftly and seriously with incidents of group hatred should be encouraged and reinforced.

The current policy of the Interior Ministry to record all hate crime incidents is the correct one. It should make use of ODIHR guidelines and recommendations to identify victims and perpetrators where possible.

All too often political debates, particularly in an election season, will appeal these base fears, and responsible leaders need to avoid playing on such themes. To the contrary, political leaders should speak out and condemn all forms of anti-Semitic, racist and xenophobic hatred.

Program:

Accompanied by Mr. Norbert Hinterleitner, Advisor on Anti-Semitism Issues in ODIHR's Tolerance and Non-Discrimination Department

6 September

Meetings with Representatives of Civic Society and Jewish Community Leadership

7 September

Office of the Prime Minister:

Prime Minister Robert Fico

Office of the Ministry of Interior:

Róbert Kaliňák - Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Interior

Alena Pipová – Director of Directorate of International Relations and European Affairs

Michal Svetsky – Head of Department of Foreign Relations and Protocol

Michaela Loboša – Department of Fight Against Extremism, Police Force

Ministry of Culture:

Ivan Sečík – State Secretary

Pavol Mešťan – Museum of Jewish Culture, Director

Nora Slováková - State Counsellor

Ministry of Justice:

Daniel Hudák – State Secretary

Peter Baňas – General Director of Directorate of International and European Law

Libor Duľa – Director of Legislative Directorate

Ministry of Education:

Peter Juráš - General Director of Directorate of Regional Education

Mária Slugeňová – Director of Department of Bilateral Cooperation

Katarína Ondrášová – Department of National Minorities School and Education of Roma Community

Meeting with Representatives of the Milan Šimečka Foundation

8 September

Meeting with Representatives of the Nation's Memory Institute