

# **Slovakia 2023 Human Rights Report**

## **Executive Summary**

There were no significant changes in the human rights situation in Slovakia during the year.

Significant human rights issues included credible reports of: serious high-level government corruption; crimes involving violence or threats of violence targeting Roma and members of other racial and ethnic groups; and crimes involving violence or threats of violence targeting lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or intersex persons.

The government took credible steps to identify and punish officials who may have committed human rights abuses.

## **Section 1. Respect for the Integrity of the Person**

### **a. Arbitrary Deprivation of Life and Other Unlawful or Politically Motivated Killings**

There were no reports that the government or its agents committed arbitrary or unlawful killings, including extrajudicial killings.

## **b. Disappearance**

There were no reports of disappearances by or on behalf of government authorities.

## **c. Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, and Other Related Abuses**

The constitution and the law prohibited such practices, and there were no credible reports that government officials employed them.

The Bureau of the Inspection Service of the Ministry of Interior dismissed or discontinued most investigations into cases involving injuries allegedly caused by police or by prison and court guards.

### **Prison and Detention Center Conditions**

Overall physical conditions in prisons and detention centers were inadequate. Inmates in some facilities complained about the quality of basic necessities and reported poor sanitary conditions. Facilities at some police stations used for the temporary detention of persons were very small and inadequately equipped.

**Abusive Physical Conditions:** In his annual report released in March, the ombudsperson noted police units sometimes temporarily detained individuals under conditions not always in line with the law, citing the

detention of detainees in poorly equipped rooms. Following an unannounced police station inspection, the ombudsperson reported excessive heat in some police detention facilities. The ombudsperson noted an increase in the number of complaints by detainees, including by persons placed in remanded custody, regarding inadequate conditions, such as small rooms, lack of daylight, and inappropriately placed toilets.

**Administration:** Authorities conducted investigations of credible allegations of mistreatment. Prisoners were able to file complaints without censorship and a prosecutor or ombudsperson was available to review and act on them.

**Independent Monitoring:** The government permitted monitoring and visits by independent human rights observers, the Council of Europe’s Committee for the Prevention of Torture, and the ombudsperson. The ombudsperson conducted unannounced visits to prisons, police detention facilities, and facilities for asylum seekers throughout the year.

In July, the government agreed to a system of regular visits by independent international and national bodies at detention and other facilities where persons were incarcerated.

**Improvements:** In May, the government established a National Preventive Mechanism (NPM) to improve oversight of prisons and detention facilities composed of the ombudsperson (as coordinator), the commissioner for children, and the commissioner for persons with disabilities. In November,

each of these three institutions declared the establishment of specialized monitoring teams to carry out their NPM mandate. Three laws improving prison and detention center conditions went into effect during the year. On January 1, an amendment to the law on pretrial conditions went into effect. The amended law limited the conditions for placing an individual into solitary confinement, mandated an increase in the prison cell area per detainee, expanded the limits for visits and phone calls, and increased the basic remuneration for detainees' work by defining it as a percentage of the minimum wage. In June, an amendment to the law on health care went into effect; it updated the legal definition of means of restraint and specified the conditions for their use in health care to help prevent potential misuse. On July 1, an amendment to the law on the Prison and Court Guard Service narrowed the use of coercive measures by the Prison and Court Guard Service.

Authorities opened the first psychiatric detention center in the country for court-ordered patients and prisoners suffering from mental health conditions. In March, the new center, operated jointly by the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Justice, accepted its first patients.

#### **d. Arbitrary Arrest or Detention**

The constitution and the law prohibited arbitrary arrest and detention and provided for the right of any person to challenge the lawfulness of their

arrest or detention in court. The government generally observed these requirements.

## **Arrest Procedures and Treatment of Detainees**

The law required an arrested suspect be brought promptly before a judicial officer and charged with a crime and those rights were respected. Suspects in terrorism cases could be held for 96 hours without a hearing. In other cases, a court had to grant a hearing to a person accused of a crime within 48 hours (or a maximum of 72 hours in “serious cases,” defined as violent crimes, treason, or other crimes carrying a sentence of at least eight years’ imprisonment) and either released or remanded the individual into custody.

A bail system existed but was rarely used. The law gave detainees the right to consult an attorney of their choice immediately after authorities submitted charges, and authorities were required to inform them of this right. This right, however, was not fully respected, as authorities did not always inform detainees of their right to access a lawyer or right to an ex officio lawyer free of charge immediately after detention. The law allowed attorneys to visit detainees as frequently as necessary and allowed at least one two-hour monthly family visit upon request, with an additional online call of at least one hour with a detainee’s children younger than age 18. The law provided counsel to indigent detainees free of charge.

## **e. Denial of Fair Public Trial**

The constitution and law provided for an independent judiciary, and the government generally respected judicial independence and impartiality. Inefficiency, a lack of integrity and accountability, and some cases of alleged corruption compromised judicial independence and undermined public trust in the judicial system.

Courts employed a computerized system for random case assignment to increase fairness and transparency. Allegations of bribery in exchange for manipulated court decisions and personal influencing of judges prior to 2021 were subjects of a continuing police investigation.

### **Trial Procedures**

The constitution and law provided for the right to a fair and public trial without undue delay, and an independent judiciary generally enforced this right. Investigations into judicial corruption alleged to have occurred prior to 2021, including individual testimonies of former judges, noted that in some cases, judges failed to act impartially and violated basic principles for conducting fair trials.

Cases involving abuse of the right to trial without undue delay continued to dominate the agenda of the Constitutional Court, which noted 239 violations of this right in the first half of the year.

## **Political Prisoners and Detainees**

There were no reports of political prisoners or detainees.

## **f. Transnational Repression**

Not applicable.

## **g. Property Seizure and Restitution**

The ombudsperson reported excessive delays in more than 9,000 estimated unresolved land property restitution proceedings after the fall of the communist regime in 1989. In a 2021 annual report, the ombudsperson pointed to the long-term inactivity of the Slovak Land Fund, an office administering state-owned land and real estate under the purview of the Ministry of Agriculture, that resulted in individual abuses of property rights as well as the right to a hearing without undue delay in restitution and compensation proceedings. In June, the government appointed new leadership to the Slovak Land Fund.

The country endorsed the Terezin Declaration on Holocaust Era Assets and Related Issues. The government had laws and mechanisms for property restitution or compensation in place, and NGOs and advocacy groups reported it made progress on resolution of Holocaust-era claims, including heirless property. NGOs noted that because the laws required Slovak citizenship and permanent residency, most applicants were not entitled to

restitution and instead received compensation.

The Department of State's *Justice for Uncompensated Survivors Today (JUST) Act Report to Congress*, released publicly in July 2020, can be found on the Department's website: <https://www.state.gov/reports/just-act-report-to-congress/>.

## **h. Arbitrary or Unlawful Interference with Privacy, Family, Home, or Correspondence**

The constitution and law prohibited such actions, and there were no reports that the government failed to respect these prohibitions.

## **Section 2. Respect for Civil Liberties**

### **a. Freedom of Expression, Including for Members of the Press and Other Media**

The constitution and law provided for freedom of expression, including for members of the press and other media, and the government generally respected this right. An independent media, an effective judiciary, and a functioning democratic political system combined to promote freedom of expression, including for media members.

**Freedom of Expression:** The law prohibited the defamation of nationalities



and race, which was punishable by up to three years in prison. The law also prohibited denial of the Holocaust and crimes committed by the fascist and communist regimes, which carried a prison sentence of six months to three years. These prohibitions also applied to the print and broadcast media, the publication of books, and online newspapers and journals.

**Violence and Harassment:** In May, the Specialized Criminal Court found Alena Zsuzsova guilty of ordering the 2018 murders of investigative journalist Jan Kuciak and his fiancée, Martina Kusnirova, while acquitting codefendant Marian Kocner. The prosecutor appealed the acquittal of Kocner to the Supreme Court. Kuciak regularly reported on allegations of high-level corruption and documented tax fraud schemes.

In a separate case, in August, the Supreme Court upheld a lower court's verdict that found former counterintelligence director Peter Toth guilty of blackmailing and threatening a journalist who wrote about Toth and his son.

**Libel/Slander Laws:** Libel and slander were criminal offenses. Media organizations and NGOs criticized a criminal libel provision in the criminal code as restricting freedom of expression, including freedom of media.

Government officials and financial elites targeted the press in several civil defamation lawsuits, which often required media outlets to pay large sums of money in penalties or legal costs. The International Press Institute and other observers expressed concern that the financial risk and administrative

burden of constantly contesting lawsuits could lead to media self-censorship. In September, Reporters Without Borders (RSF) called on the country's political parties to pledge to implement EU recommendations on protecting journalists and combatting strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPP) ahead of the September 30 elections.

Multiple instances of government officials taking or threatening to take legal action against the media over alleged libel occurred throughout the year. In February, a member of parliament sued a newspaper for two critical pieces (an article and an opinion piece) published in 2022, and demanded the removal of the articles, an apology, and a compensation of €70,000 (\$75,670). In March, the Smer party filed criminal complaints for alleged libel against three commentators who made separate critical statements about the party. In April, a former intelligence director demanded compensation of €200,000 (\$216,200) from a journalist and the withdrawal of the journalist's novel on corruption and organized crime from sale due to alleged libel and defamation through a fictional character in the book.

**Nongovernmental Impact:** Political groups sought to inhibit freedom of expression through threats against journalists and media. In February, a host from public broadcaster Radio and Television of Slovakia (RTVS) received numerous anonymous death, torture, and rape threats following her refusal to let member of parliament Lubos Blaha, the vice chair of Smer, an opposition party at the time, into the studio after he showed up

unannounced to replace another Smer member of parliament for a political radio talk show. Smer leader Robert Fico accused RTVS of censorship and government control, stating Smer “will go after” RTVS Director Lubos Machaj. President Zuzana Caputova and other political and civil society leaders, as well as 25 editors-in-chief of national media and RSF condemned attacks against journalists and expressed their support for the radio host. Police launched an investigation into the threats made against the journalist.

A journalist reporting for online media outlet *Aktuality* faced hundreds of online verbal attacks and threats in reaction to his article reporting on a conversation between Fico and a Slovak YouTuber based outside of the country. The YouTuber, who faced multiple international arrest warrants from Slovak authorities over suspected online harassment and extremism, allegedly incited his followers to react to the journalist’s article.

**Actions to Expand Freedom of Expression, Including for Members of the Press and Other Media:** In February, on the fifth anniversary of the murder of journalist Kuciak and his fiancée, the Investigative Center of Jan Kuciak (ICJK) in cooperation with the Ministry of Culture, police, the Dutch government, and the Dutch PersVeilig platform, launched a “Safe Journalism” online tool for journalists facing harassment. Police pledged to work with Dutch counterparts to train Slovak police specialists in dealing with harassment of journalists and in September, set up focal points at each regional police branch to handle attacks, threats, or intimidation attempts

against journalists. Between February and September 14, the online platform recorded 28 incidents targeting journalists, including 12 threats, five cases of stalking or harassment, three SLAPP lawsuits, three physical attacks, one death threat, and one case of discrimination.

In June, the government introduced a new model for funding public broadcaster RTVS after parliament in December 2022 abolished public license fees, a traditional source of funding for the broadcaster. Under the new funding model, RTVS would receive a yearly portion of the state budget. The government asserted the new funding model would eliminate political control over RTVS while establishing a stable and predictable funding mechanism.

In October, the government established the Platform for the Promotion of Press Freedom and Safety of Journalists, a permanent expert-coordinating body for the implementation of the country's national initiatives on media freedom. The platform was comprised of representatives of government institutions, regulatory and self-regulatory bodies, as well as media and press freedom organizations including the ICJK and RSF.

## **Internet Freedom**

The government did not restrict or disrupt access to the internet or censor online content.

## **b. Freedoms of Peaceful Assembly and Association**

The constitution and law provided for the freedoms of peaceful assembly and association, and the government generally respected these rights.

## **c. Freedom of Religion**

See the Department of State's *International Religious Freedom Report* at <https://www.state.gov/religiousfreedomreport/>.

## **d. Freedom of Movement and the Right to Leave the Country**

The law provided for freedom of internal movement, foreign travel, emigration, and repatriation, and the government generally respected these rights.

## **e. Protection of Refugees**

The government cooperated with the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and other humanitarian organizations in providing protection and assistance to refugees, returning refugees, or asylum seekers, as well as other persons of concern.

**Access to Asylum:** The law provided for the granting of asylum or refugee status, and the government had an established system for providing some

protection to refugees. Some civil society organizations noted that the Migration Office applied a restrictive asylum policy and granted asylum only in a limited number of cases. The majority of asylum seekers left the country before the Migration Office issued a decision on their asylum applications.

A high volume of undocumented migrants, predominantly from Syria, attempted to transit the country via the Western Balkans route to reach Western Europe. The majority of those detained by authorities did not apply for asylum, and some humanitarian NGOs asserted authorities provided migrants only with limited information on their right to seek asylum.

UNHCR and local NGO Slovak Humanitarian Council monitored the access to asylum procedures, including on the country's borders and in detention and accommodation centers. Both the Ministry of Justice's Center for Legal Aid and the Slovak Humanitarian Council provided legal advice to asylum seekers.

**Abuse of Refugees and Asylum Seekers:** NGOs expressed concerns that living conditions in some of the detention centers for asylum seekers and foreign nationals were not adequate. In June, the ombudsperson carried out a three-day inspection at the Secovce detention center in response to mistreatment allegations. According to the ombudsperson, the detainees alleged excessive use of coercive measures by the Bureau of Border and

Foreign Police, including the use of pepper spray, and restricted access to means of communication with family members and human rights institutions.

Human rights organizations criticized authorities for failing to provide adequate support to undocumented migrants, including women and children, for the period following their release from detention after administrative processing until they left the country. Those failures included inadequate access to emergency short-term shelter, food, healthcare, personal hygiene, material needs, and information.

**Freedom of Movement:** NGOs criticized as excessive the legal provisions that allowed placement of asylum seekers in immigration detention centers upon applying for asylum for up to 28 days before becoming eligible for a transfer to an accommodation facility with lower restrictions on freedom of movement in place. The Bureau of Border and Foreign Police stated it detained undocumented individuals only for the time necessary for administrative processing. In September, the ombudsperson criticized the Border and Foreign Police for restricting the freedom of movement of undocumented migrants at a provisional administrative processing site in the town of Velky Krtis. According to the ombudsperson, during an inspection of the site multiple individuals claimed police held them in detention for four to seven days without the possibility to leave. The ombudsperson claimed the area was fenced off and patrolled by police.

Border and Foreign Police officers claimed they held the individuals in detention for only up to 24 hours and any persons who remained at the location longer did so of their own accord. The Ministry of Interior closed the site in October.

**Access to Basic Services:** NGOs reported schools generally did not make use of available government support for language and integration assistance for foreign students.

Human rights organizations stated that integration of approved asylum seekers in the country was hampered by the absence of a comprehensive government-funded and operated integration program. These services were provided by NGOs and funded through a patchwork of domestic and international sources.

Human rights organizations reported asylum seekers placed in immigration detention did not have adequate access to quality health care, contributing to the spread of contagious diseases in detention facilities. There were allegations by human rights NGOs that persons granted subsidiary protection had only limited access to health care. The Ministry of Interior issued health coverage documentation directly to persons with subsidiary protection allegedly without clear explanation of benefits.

**Temporary Protection:** The government provided temporary “subsidiary protection” to individuals who did not qualify as refugees but could not



return to their home countries, granting it to 36 persons as of October. Subsidiary protection was initially granted for one year, with possible two-year extensions. NGOs asserted this approach created uncertainty regarding the individuals' status in the country and significantly hindered employment and overall integration prospects.

The government continued to provide temporary protection to individuals fleeing Russia's unprovoked war against Ukraine who did not qualify as refugees, including Ukrainian citizens and their immediate families or persons living in the same households, those who held legal permanent residence in Ukraine but could not safely return to their country or origin, or individuals who had been granted asylum or international protection in Ukraine before February 24, 2022. The government issued temporary protection status to more than 24,000 persons during the year and, since February 2022, there were more than 110,000 status holders.

## **Section 3. Freedom to Participate in the Political Process**

The constitution and the law provided citizens the ability to choose their government in free and fair periodic elections held by secret ballot and based on universal and equal suffrage.

## Elections and Political Participation

**Abuses or Irregularities in Recent Elections:** National elections, held on September 30, were widely reported to be fair and free of abuses and irregularities.

### **Participation of Women and Members of Marginalized or Vulnerable**

**Groups:** No laws limited the participation of women and members of minority groups in the political process. Experts cited the prevailing societal perception of politics as a male-dominated activity as one of the key reasons why women were largely underrepresented in national politics. Women constituted less than 26 percent of all candidates in the September parliamentary elections and won 33 out of 150 parliamentary seats. Six Romani candidates were elected to parliament. Persons with disabilities rarely sought elected public office and were underrepresented in the political process at the local and national level. Politicians, public officials, or persons seeking elected office rarely identified openly as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or intersex (LGBTQI+).

## Section 4. Corruption in Government

The law provided criminal penalties for corruption by officials, and the government generally implemented the law effectively. There were reports of alleged government corruption during the year.

**Corruption:** Rule of law, the fight against corruption, and transparency remained among the government's priorities during the first half of the year, and there was some progress in terms of both reform efforts and efforts to hold corrupt actors to account. As of the end of September, the government had proceeded with several reforms, including the adoption of legislative measures to increase the efficiency of financial investigation and asset seizure, increasing police capacities and effectiveness in fighting corruption, and a "court map" reform launched in June, to increase efficiency and integrity of the judicial system.

In their evaluations during the year, however, the European Commission (EC) and the Group of States Against Corruption (GRECO) noted slow progress in the fight against corruption in the country. The EC stated in its *2023 Rule of Law Report* that the country did not make progress on improving the coordination among corruption investigators and prosecutors, as well as on the regulation of lobbying. In an evaluation report released in June, GRECO assessed that the country did not implement any of its recommendations aimed at preventing corruption and promoting integrity in the central government, while it was relatively successful in implementing anti-corruption measures targeting prosecutors and judges.

The government continued efforts to crack down on high-level corruption. Police investigations resulted in the prosecution of former high-profile officials, notably at the police, the Financial Administration (the tax and

customs authority) and the Agriculture Ministry organizations administering subsidies, as well as entrepreneurs. Several cooperating defendants supported allegations of a corruption “system” and testified regarding the involvement of political figures in corruption cases.

In August, police charged head of the Slovak Intelligence Service Michal Alac, his predecessor Vladimir Pcolinsky, head of the National Security Authority Roman Konecny, and others, with working to hamper a corruption investigation. President Caputova dismissed Alac as the investigation continued.

Police continued a series of at least 15 interconnected, high-level, and unprecedented corruption investigations, leading to the arrest of more than 50 sitting and former officials as well as notable members of the business community since 2020. As of October, more than 40 individuals were convicted since 2020, including those who pleaded guilty and cooperated with authorities.

Investigations into judicial corruption continued, largely based on encrypted telephone conversations of several judges and prosecutors with convicted criminal Marian Kocner, accused also of masterminding the 2018 killing of investigative journalist Jan Kuciak and his fiancée. As of October, multiple investigations into judicial corruption and abuse of office were pending, with some judges confessing to being part of a corruption scheme. The Supreme Administrative Court during the year heard disciplinary cases against judges

and prosecutors.

For additional information about corruption in the country, please see the Department of State's *Investment Climate Statement* for the country, and the Department of State's *International Narcotics Control Strategy Report*, which includes information on financial crimes.

## **Section 5. Governmental Posture Towards International and Nongovernmental Monitoring and Investigation of Alleged Abuses of Human Rights**

A variety of domestic and international human rights groups generally operated without government restriction to monitor or investigate human rights conditions or cases and published their findings. Government officials were sometimes cooperative and responsive in their views.

**Government Human Rights Bodies:** The justice minister headed the Government Council for Human Rights, National Minorities, and Gender Equality, an advisory body including government officials and civil society representatives.

The Office of the Public Defender of Rights was headed by the ombudsperson who submitted an annual report on human rights to parliament on March 31. Human rights activists noted the ombudsperson acted with political independence and without reluctance on politically

divisive human rights matters.

Parliament had a Human Rights and National Minorities Committee that held regular sessions during the year. NGOs consistently criticized the committee for failing to address serious human rights concerns as well as the absenteeism of some of its members.

The Slovak National Center for Human Rights acted as the country's national human rights institution and as the dedicated equality body. Experts noted the institution's expanded work on key human rights topics in the country after years of criticism for inactivity.

## **Section 6. Discrimination and Societal Abuses**

### **Women**

**Rape and Domestic Violence:** The law prohibited rape of women and sexual violence, which carried a penalty of five to 25 years in prison. The law did not specifically define spousal rape, rape of men, or so-called corrective rape of LGBTQI+ persons, but the criminal code covered the offenses under the crime of rape and the crime of sexual violence. The government did not enforce the law effectively. NGOs and survivors criticized police for often failing to enforce the law effectively and for failing to communicate appropriately with survivors. They noted courts often issued suspended sentences to convicted perpetrators. Rape and domestic violence survivors

had access to shelters and counseling offered by NGOs and government-funded programs. The government funded a network of 10 intervention centers that provided legal and counseling support to domestic violence survivors across the country. Experts reported a shortage of available shelters and their unequal distribution across regions.

Domestic violence was punishable by three to eight years' imprisonment. The government did not enforce the law effectively. NGOs and survivors asserted domestic violence was widespread, and activists claimed official statistics failed to capture the magnitude of the problem, as an estimated 85 percent of women did not report incidents to police. Some domestic violence caseworkers argued the low reporting rate was due to a poor perception of police efforts, based on negative past interactions with police. These included instances in which police failed to remove the abuser from the household, downplayed incidents as minor offenses rather than serious crimes, or issued only a verbal warning to the perpetrator. NGOs also asserted the courts frequently issued lenient sentences. The lack of affordable public housing or rent-controlled housing often forced victims to return to abusive households.

In June, the National Criminal Agency (NAKA) launched an investigation into a domestic violence case involving the speaker of parliament and leader of the Sme Rodina party, Boris Kollar, after his former partner accused him of assaulting her during a domestic argument that took place in 2012. Claiming

he acted in defense of his infant son, Kollar admitted to slapping the woman a “few times” during the incident but refused to apologize to her or step down from his role. Then Prime Minister Ludovit Odor denounced any form of domestic violence as “unacceptable” in reaction to the case. The case remained pending as of October.

In July, President Caputova called on the public to be more attentive to signs of domestic violence and noted that multiple women had died in domestic violence cases in recent years despite their families or neighbors often knowing of the abuse. She did so in response to a string of cases of domestic and gender-based violence against women, including an attack in Nitra a few days before she made the statement, in which a man stabbed his partner multiple times in the face and neck area. Police charged the man with attempted murder and the court remanded him into pretrial custody. The case was pending as of October.

**Discrimination:** The law provided the same legal status for women as for men. Discrimination against women remained a problem, particularly in the labor market. Despite having attained higher levels of education than men, women earned on average 21 percent less than their male colleagues, according to the *2022 Gender Equality Index* by the European Institute for Gender Equality. According to a *March Women in Business* report by the company Dun & Bradstreet, women held only 15 percent of the management positions in more than 31,000 analyzed companies. Experts



noted motherhood negatively affected career prospects due to long maternity and parental leave and a lack of preschool facilities and flexible work arrangements. There was no mandated paid paternal leave, which put a disproportionate care burden on women.

**Reproductive Rights:** During the year there were no reports of coerced abortion or involuntary sterilization on the part of government authorities.

In November, after being in effect for eight months, the Ministry of Health announced the reversal of the medical standards of care for transgender individuals. Previous medical standards implemented in March had effectively ended the years-long practice of authorities requiring that persons seeking a legally recognized sex change undergo permanent sterilization. Minister of Health Zuzana Dolinkova stated the junior coalition Slovak National Party (SNS) requested she cancel the provisions, which offered persons seeking legal transition an option to choose one-year-long hormone therapy instead of undergoing a surgical medical transition, and said she complied for the sake of the “stability of the ruling coalition.” Representatives of LGBTQTI+ rights organizations, including Iniciativa Inakost (Initiative Otherness) and Saplinq, expressed outrage over the political interference in the highly sensitive medical area as well as grave concerns about the decision’s impact on transgender individuals’ reproductive rights, access to special healthcare, and wellbeing.

Human rights organizations criticized the quality and practices used in

childbirth care services, and NGOs reported that Romani women, especially from marginalized communities in the eastern region of the country, were particularly discriminated against. Romani women faced multiple forms of discrimination in reproductive health care, including segregation in maternity departments, verbal harassment, and mistreatment by medical personnel.

While emergency contraception and postexposure prophylaxis were widely available as part of the clinical management of rape, NGOs reported that a lack of reimbursement from the national health system constituted a significant barrier to access, especially for young and vulnerable populations.

The country did not have a national sexual and reproductive health program to provide dedicated access to sexual and reproductive health services for survivors of sexual violence. Survivors typically approached their general practitioners, emergency rooms, or, less frequently, their gynecologists. Survivors generally had access to emergency over-the-counter contraception. The government ran a 24/7 national multilanguage helpline for women experiencing gender-based violence, and the Coordinating Methodical Center for Prevention of Violence against Women offered emergency help to survivors of sexual violence.

## **Systemic Racial or Ethnic Violence and Discrimination**

The constitution provided for fundamental rights and freedoms to everyone regardless of sex, race, color, language, belief or religion, political affiliation, or other conviction, national or social origin, nationality or ethnic origin, property, descent, or any other status, and it allowed no person to be discriminated against or favored on any of these grounds. An antidiscrimination law forbade unequal treatment on the grounds of one's race or belonging to a national or ethnic group, which was subject to civil penalties. The criminal code defined "extremist" crimes such as founding, supporting, and expressing sympathy toward movements aimed at suppressing fundamental rights and freedoms; producing or disseminating "extremist" materials; defamation of a nation, race, and belief; or incitement to national, racial, or ethnic hatred. Crimes committed with a specific motive, which included hatred against a group or individuals for their actual or alleged race, nationality, or ethnic affiliation, were punished with strict sentences.

While experts noted increased investigation and prosecution of "extremist" crimes, they recognized that public authorities often failed to identify a special aggravating motive, and courts often handed down lenient sentences to convicted criminals. According to human rights organizations, racial discrimination, especially against Roma, persisted, despite implementation of the antidiscrimination law, and court proceedings in

racial discrimination cases continued to be excessively lengthy, impeding victims' effective access to justice.

Segregation and societal discrimination against the Roma community were common. There were reports of harassment of members of ethnic minorities during the year and reports of excessive use of force by members of the police force against Romani citizens. Experts reported a decline in incidences of police violence against Roma, although they highlighted inadequate police investigation of such cases was a persistent problem and noted most cases of police violence were likely not reported by the Roma due to fear and lack of trust.

In February, the ECHR delivered a verdict in favor of a group of six Romani men from the Lunik IX Romani community in Kosice, who suffered police abuse and brutality in 2009. The men, ages 11 to 15 at the time of the incident, claimed police officers brought them to the local police station and subjected them to abusive, violent, and degrading treatment. The Kosice Regional Court acquitted the accused officers in 2020. The ECHR ruled that Slovak courts failed to effectively investigate the incident, including the possibility of a racial motive, and awarded each of the men compensation in the amount of €20,000 (\$21,620). In May, the country's Constitutional Court overturned the acquittal of the police officers and returned the case to the Kosice Municipal Court for reconsideration. The case was pending as of October.

The public defender of rights concluded in a formal June decision that the police conduct against several Romani individuals in a 2019 raid in the village of Milhost was disproportionate and violated the victims' human rights and recommended disciplinary action against the involved officers. According to the European Roma Rights Center, an NGO that submitted the complaint to the ombudsperson on behalf of some of the victims, police officers subjected the victims to excessive violence and humiliating and degrading treatment, including severe beatings, pressing a gun against one of the victims' foreheads, and locking several women victims in men's toilets and a cleaning cupboard for hours at a police station.

Police generally responded quickly to gatherings targeting the Romani community and prevented crowds from entering Romani communities or inciting confrontations.

There were instances of public and elected officials defaming minorities, inciting violence, and making derogatory comments concerning the Romani community. On September 3, the Roma Plenipotentiary publicly called on representatives of two political parties to take down their election campaign billboards that portrayed members of the Romani community as a threat and "parasites." The Roma Plenipotentiary asserted the billboards strengthened anti-Roma stereotypes and racism in the society.

In August, President Caputova, Culture Minister Silvia Hroncova, Defense Minister Martin Sklenar, Education Minister Daniel Butora, and other

government officials commemorated the Nazi genocide of Romani and Sinti communities. President Caputova stated in a social media post that, “hatred targeting entire communities has not yet been erased from a man’s soul” and noted that “no one should become a victim of anger, segregation, or violence just because of who they are.”

Widespread discrimination against Roma continued in employment, education, health care, housing, loan practices, restaurants, hair salons, religious services, and public transportation.

The government continued to implement projects to increase the skills of unemployed Roma, including women and youth, to help them find jobs and support their integration in the labor market. A 2022 Roma Plenipotentiary report showed disproportionately lower employment levels among working-age Roma living in marginalized communities compared to the overall working age population, with significant differences in employment of marginalized Roma in comparison to the overall population with the same education level.

NGOs working with Roma from marginalized communities reported that, while job applications by Roma were often successful during the initial phase of selection, employers often rejected the applicants once they learned they were Roma. Rejected job applicants rarely pursued discrimination cases through the courts, and if they did, the proceedings resulted in excessive and undue delays; even successful cases awarded

minimal financial compensation.

Local authorities continued to use regulatory obstacles, such as withholding of construction permits, to discourage the legal establishment of Romani settlements.

Segregation of Romani patients in the health-care system, particularly of Romani women in maternity wards, was common. Hospitals regularly claimed they grouped persons according to their levels of hygiene and adaptability, not by ethnicity. NGOs continued to express concerns regarding the way medical personnel obtained informed consent from Romani patients, often not fully explaining its meaning, or requesting a signature under time pressure.

The government's Council on Human Rights, National Minorities, and Gender Equality operated a Committee for the Prevention and Elimination of Racism, Xenophobia, Anti-Semitism, and Other Forms of Intolerance. "Extremist" crimes fell under the purview of the National Counterterrorism Unit at the NAKA and were prosecuted by the Specialized Prosecution Service at the Specialized Criminal Court. Experts credited these specialized law enforcement and prosecution agencies with an increased number of cases and higher conviction rate for perpetrators of "extremist" crimes as well as for raising the profile of the problem in society.

## Children

**Birth Registration:** There were no reports of birth registration denial, and birth registration was provided on a nondiscriminatory basis. Failure to register resulted in denial of public services.

**Education:** Romani children from socially excluded communities faced educational discrimination and segregation. A 2022 report by the Roma Plenipotentiary asserted that Romani children received an inferior education compared with their non-Romani peers. According to the report, a disproportionately high share of Romani children from marginalized communities were enrolled in “special” schools for children with intellectual disabilities.

There were reports of racial discrimination and inappropriate language being used against members of the Romani minority at all levels of the education system. In December 2022, the Supreme Court ruled in favor of a 2015 public antidiscrimination lawsuit filed by the NGO Center for Civil and Human Rights, in which the organization claimed education of Romani children in a Roma-only elementary school in the town of Stara Lubovna amounted to discrimination based on ethnicity. The court ruled that the situation at the school constituted illegal segregation and, in a first-of-its-kind verdict, found the state and the town responsible for failing to prevent the segregation from occurring, ordering them to adopt effective corrective



measures.

In April, the European Commission filed a lawsuit against Slovakia at the Court of Justice of the European Union, arguing that the government had not taken sufficient steps to effectively address the segregation of Romani children in the educational system following the commission's 2015 notification that Slovakia failed to fully follow the European Union's racial equality legislation. The case was pending as of November.

In November, the Presov District Court found the national government guilty of discrimination against a primary school Romani student on the basis of her socioeconomic background and ethnicity. The court ruled the state failed to take adequate measures to ensure the student, who had no access to the internet and digital technologies and lacked digital skills, could participate in distance learning during school closures due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The court ordered the government pay the plaintiff compensation in the amount of €3000 (\$3,243). According to the NGO Center for Civil and Human Rights, which represented the student, it was the first-ever verdict in a case of a "digital gap."

As part of the government's effort to provide inclusive education, an education law entered into force in September. The law entitled all children with a broad range of special educational needs access to necessary supportive measures, reformed the counseling and prevention system, and introduced a definition of segregation. Experts praised the law for providing

tools to support children, especially those from marginalized Romani communities, but noted it was too early to assess its implementation and effectiveness.

**Child Abuse:** The law did not specify a separate criminal offense for child abuse, but the criminal code covered such offenses under domestic abuse crimes, including the crime of “abuse of a close person or a ward,” which carried a penalty of three to eight years’ imprisonment. The government did not enforce the laws effectively and child abuse remained a problem, according to child advocates. Government bodies provided financial support to crisis centers for abused children and to NGOs that worked on child abuse. The Labor and Social Affairs Office had dedicated departments for overseeing childcare and operated a national coordination body for dealing with violence against children, which collected data, provided information on domestic violence and abuse of children, helped refer victims to service providers, and operated a national helpline.

**Child, Early, and Forced Marriage:** The legal minimum age for marriage was 18 and it was effectively enforced. In exceptional cases, based upon request of one of the members of the marrying couple, a court could allow marriage of a person as young as 16 if both parents consented. Children of Romani descent were vulnerable to forced “traditional” marriage, often by their legal guardians seeking financial benefit.

**Sexual Exploitation of Children:** The law prohibited the sale, grooming, or

use of children for commercial sexual exploitation, including sex trafficking, and prescribed penalties of four to 10 years' imprisonment. The law prohibited child pornography or other forms of online child sexual exploitation and abuse. Penalties for the production, distribution, or possession of child pornography ranged from two to 20 years' imprisonment. Authorities enforced the laws against child sex trafficking, although NGOs questioned the thoroughness of this enforcement, but did not enforce the laws against child pornography effectively. Rape and sexual violence against a child carried basic penalties of seven to 15 years' imprisonment. The law established 15 as the minimum age for consensual sex. Experts stated that sexual exploitation of children went largely underreported and that convicted perpetrators often received lenient and suspended sentences.

In August, the Trencin District Court found a local tennis instructor guilty of repeatedly sexually abusing a student over a period of four years and sentenced him to a two-year suspended sentence with mandatory therapy. In justifying the lenient verdict, the judge argued the instructor did not have a previous criminal record. The survivor criticized the police for their lengthy, insensitive, and traumatizing investigation of the case and criticized the sentence as insufficient. Both the prosecutor and defendant appealed the verdict, and the case was pending trial as of August.

The NGO Ochran ma (Protect Me), led by a former police investigator,

criticized authorities for failing to act against domains hosting child pornography based in the country, which in a 2022 study, Internet Watch Foundation reported were numerous. The country was not a member of the International Association of Internet Hotlines and did not operate a dedicated hotline for reporting and removing child pornography content from the internet.

## **Antisemitism**

According to the 2021 census, there were 2,000 Jews living in the country, although the Central Union of Jewish Religious Communities in the Slovak Republic estimated the Jewish population at 5,000 persons.

Organized neo-Nazi groups with an estimated 500 active members and several thousand sympathizers spread antisemitic messages. Antisemitic stereotypes characterizing Jews as greedy or secretly influencing world affairs were widespread, even beyond neo-Nazi groups and their sympathizers. Disinformation experts and watchdog organizations criticized the leaders of the senior coalition party Smer, including the party chairman and, since October 25, Prime Minister Fico, and leaders of the junior coalition Slovak National Party (SNS) for repeatedly participating in online and in-person conversations with a United Kingdom-based far-right extremist and antisemitic blogger during the months ahead of the September election. Critics claimed that by engaging with the blogger, who

faced three international warrants by Slovak authorities over suspected online harassment and extremism, the parties helped legitimize and amplify hateful and harmful rhetoric which included openly antisemitic statements and conspiracy theories.

On May 2, the Specialized Criminal Court acquitted neo-Nazi singer Jaroslav “Reborn” Pagac and overruled his 2021 conviction of extremism for production and distribution of clothes and other items bearing extremist symbols, such as a black sun and runes that supporters of neo-Nazi groups often used. In justifying the decision, the judge argued the symbols Pagac had used were not illegal and that their potential extremist meaning had to be assessed in isolation from Pagac’s personal beliefs and actions. The prosecution appealed the May verdict.

While direct denial of the Holocaust was relatively rare, expressions of approval of the World War II-era Slovak fascist state, which deported tens of thousands of Jews, Roma, and others to death camps, occurred frequently. On February 1, the Central Union of Jewish Religious Communities issued a public statement in which it expressed disappointment over parliament’s failure to pass a law mandating municipalities to rename streets bearing names of representatives of the Slovak fascist and communist regimes, including the street named after the Slovak fascist state president in the village of Varin, and called on those who voted against or abstained not to attend Holocaust remembrance events in the future.

During the campaign ahead of the September 30 parliamentary elections, leaders of the Republika party downplayed the actions of the Slovak fascist state. Party Chairman and member of the European Parliament Milan Uhrik and Deputy Chairman and member of the Slovak Parliament Milan Mazurek refused to denounce the Slovak fascist state and its president, Jozef Tiso, during pre-election television debates in September, arguing the Nazi-collaborating regime secured the territorial unity of the country despite “bad, unpleasant things” happening. Throughout the year, far-right groups commemorated dates associated with the Slovak fascist state. On March 14, People’s Party Our Slovakia (LSNS) Chairman Marian Kotleba shared on his social media account a video of the national anthem playing during an opening ceremony of parliament’s session that day, claiming it was in commemoration of the 78th anniversary of creation of the fascist state in 1939 and adding, “This warms my heart and the memory will never fade!”

In January, political leaders, including President Caputova, the speaker of parliament, the prime minister, and other government officials commemorated International Holocaust Remembrance Day. Political leaders also commemorated the country’s Holocaust and Ethnic Violence Remembrance Day in September.

For further information on incidents in the country of antisemitism, whether or not those incidents were motivated by religion, and for reporting on the ability of Jews to exercise freedom of religion or belief, please see the

Department of State's *International Religious Freedom Report* at <https://www.state.gov/religiousfreedomreport/>.

## Trafficking in Persons

See the Department of State's *Trafficking in Persons Report* at <https://www.state.gov/trafficking-in-persons-report/>.

## Acts of Violence, Criminalization, and Other Abuses Based on Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity or Expression, or Sex Characteristics

**Criminalization:** Consensual same-sex conduct was legal. The age of consent was equalized. The law did not criminalize cross-dressing, or other sexual or gender characteristic-related behavior. Seemingly neutral laws were not disproportionately applied to LGBTQI+ persons.

**Violence and Harassment:** NGOs reported cases of violence, hate speech, and online harassment targeting LGBTQI+ persons. According to a 2022 survey on the lives of LGBTQI+ individuals in the country published by NGO Initiative Otherness in January, 80 percent of respondents ages 15 to 75 who identified as LGBTQI+ reported fearing for their safety in public spaces because of their identity. More than one-fifth of respondents reported having experienced domestic violence, while 13 percent experienced sexual violence, and almost 60 percent reported experience with verbal

harassment and hatred.

In March, police charged a man for physically assaulting a woman and a man (one of whom wore a rainbow pin) while on a train from Bratislava to Trnava in October 2022. According to Amnesty International Slovakia, during the incident, which took place one day after a deadly anti-LGBTQI+ shooting in front of the “Teplaren” bar in Bratislava, the man shouted, “I will shoot up Teplaren again.” After the couple protested, the perpetrator allegedly kicked the woman in the face and hit the man, and a group of persons accompanying the attacker verbally assaulted the two victims until they got off the train. Police charged the man with disorderly conduct, a crime that carried a sentence of up to three years in prison but did not initially treat the assault as a hate crime. The case was pending as of October.

Some government agents condoned or tolerated violence or harassment against LGBTQI+ individuals. On March 28, parliament overwhelmingly passed a “counter-resolution” rejecting an earlier resolution of the European Parliament that called on the Slovak government to step up protection of LGBTQI+ persons following the killing of two LGBTQI+ persons in the 2022 “Teplaren” shooting. The resolution, which did not have any legal effect, denounced the European Parliament’s assessment as “unfair, untrue, and misleading.”

Throughout the year, representatives of multiple political parties campaigned on anti-LGBTQI+ platforms, presenting LGBTQI+ persons as



“sick” and “perverted” and a threat to “traditional” values and family. In January, then Finance Minister and leader of the Ordinary People and Independent Personalities party (renamed the “Slovakia” party in October) Igor Matovic published several posts on his widely followed social media account, in which he criticized transgender “propaganda” and ridiculed transgender persons. In a July 22 social media post mocking the Bratislava Pride event, Smer party spokesperson Jan Mazgut wrote, “A mother is a mother, father is a father. A woman is a woman, and a man is a man. An undecided it or that are not.” The posts, which human rights advocates labelled as transphobic, attracted extensive anti-LGBTQI+ commentary. The LSNS Party organized small counterprotests during the July and August annual LGBTQI+ Rainbow Pride parades in Bratislava and Kosice, bringing together dozens of supporters who allegedly engaged in hate speech and in some instances attempted to block the marchers. On September 3, during a television debate ahead of the September 30 parliamentary elections, chairman of the Christian Democratic Movement party Milan Majersky stated that just like corruption, LGBTQI+ persons were a “misery” for any country and a “pest” that could destroy an entire nation. In the face of public backlash and criticism from some political leaders, Majersky issued an apology, and explained that he did not mean to refer to LGBTQI+ individuals but to same-sex partnerships and the LGBTQI+ “ideology.” The public defender of rights called on political parties to refrain from attacking human rights in the election campaign while President Caputova expressed regret

that LGBTQI+ persons were again exposed to attacks.

Police repeatedly denounced violence and hateful rhetoric toward LGBTQI+ persons, cases of widespread online anti-LGBTQI commentary, and the incitement of violence against LGBTQI+ persons.

**Discrimination:** The law prohibited discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity in employment, education, state social services, health care, and access to goods and services, and identified sexual orientation, but not gender identity, as a motivating factor in hate crimes that warranted stiffer sentences. NGOs reported the government did not always actively enforce these laws, and experts claimed that authorities rarely identified sexual orientation in hate crimes to avoid charges that would entail harsh sentences. The law did not explicitly recognize LGBTQI+ couples and their families, apart from cases in which a different EU member state had already officially recognized a parental relationship between a same-sex couple and a child. Men who had sex with men during the previous 12 months could not donate blood, a restriction some LGBTQI+ advocates asserted was discriminatory.

Same-sex marriage was not provided for in the country, although same-sex marriages established abroad were recognized. In May, a group of more than 30 members of parliament, in cooperation with NGO Initiative Otherness, submitted a motion to the Constitutional Court challenging several existing laws and parliament's inaction on recognizing same-sex

couples as unconstitutional and in breach of international human rights obligations. The group did so after parliament repeatedly voted down proposals to introduce same-sex partnerships. The Slovak National Center for Human Rights submitted an *amicus curiae* (friend of the court) brief to the Constitutional Court in August, arguing the absence of legal recognition of same sex couples violated the constitution and was discriminatory. The case remained pending as of October.

**Availability of Legal Gender Recognition:** The law allowed registry offices to issue persons new birth certificates reflecting the name with which they identified and to include a gender identity marker in alignment with their gender identity. The law permitted the use of male or female gender identity markers only. Individual self-identification was not sufficient under the law. Following a November 21 decision of the Ministry of Health to revoke medical guidance from March that had introduced hormone therapy as an alternative, registry offices resumed requiring individuals seeking legal gender recognition to submit confirmation by a doctor attesting they underwent a permanent sterilization.

Except in the case of university diplomas, the law did not allow educational establishments to reissue educational certificates with a new first name and surname to transgender individuals after they transitioned. Experts noted that because of inability to acquire new educational certificates, transgender persons often experienced discrimination in the labor market

and ridicule from potential employers.

**Involuntary or Coercive Medical or Psychological Practices:** So-called conversion therapy practices were not banned. Several religious organizations promoted conversion therapy as a method of changing a person's sexual orientation or gender identity or expression, but there were no reports of individuals being forced to undergo conversion therapy during the year. Surgeries were not performed on nonconsenting adult intersex persons or children. The president of the Slovak psychiatric association publicly criticized organizations and health care workers who advocated for conversion therapy as an alternative to legal gender transition.

**Restrictions of Freedom of Expression, Association, or Peaceful Assembly:**

The law did not restrict freedom of expression, association, or peaceful assembly of LGBTQI+ individuals. LGBTQI+ rights organizations operated without restrictions and could freely convene public events such as Pride festivities. LGBTQI+ individuals were free to attend these events and LGBTQI+ content was allowed in the media. LGBTQI+ organizations, however, cited fear of stigmatization, increased anti-LGBTQI+ intolerance, and a widespread hateful rhetoric, including from public officials, as common.

## **Persons with Disabilities**

Persons with disabilities could not access education, employment, health

services, public buildings, and transportation on an equal basis with others, despite laws requiring such access. The law prohibited discrimination against persons with physical, sensory, intellectual, and mental disabilities in employment, education, access to health care, the judicial system, transportation, or the provision of other public services. The government did not enforce the law effectively. Government information and communication on disability concerns was not provided in accessible formats. The antidiscrimination law did not qualify the denial of reasonable accommodation as discrimination based on disability.

According to the government's commissioner for disabled persons, while a portion of children with disabilities participated in mainstream education, a majority were educated separately in "special" schools that further contributed to their social isolation and stigmatization. Among the main reasons cited for the separate schooling of children with disabilities were physical barriers at state schools, lack of qualified support staff, reluctance from teachers and parents of children without disabilities, and long-term absence of laws promoting inclusion in education. In June, media reported that a local primary school in the village of Velke Kostolany refused to enroll a wheelchair using student with a physical disability, citing a lack of barrier-free access and necessary support staff. According to the boy's mother, the school director recommended that she place her son in a "special" school instead. The Ministry of Education and the disability commissioner intervened in the case, and the school enrolled the student in September.

The government implemented inclusive education reform and an amendment to the education law entered into force in September, legally entitling all children with a broad range of special educational needs, including children with disabilities, with access to necessary “special supportive measures.” Children disability rights organizations praised the law, but noted its full implementation would likely require additional time and effort.

Broadcasters rarely complied with laws requiring television stations to provide audio descriptions for viewers who were blind or had impaired vision.

While the law defined mandatory standards for access to buildings, NGOs noted they were not fully implemented, although access to privately owned buildings improved more rapidly than access to public buildings. Civil society organizations, the ombudsperson, and the disability rights commissioner noted that navigating most cities with a visual impairment or in a wheelchair remained difficult due to the many obstacles and barriers on sidewalks and in public transport.

Laws did not limit the rights of persons with disabilities to participate in civic life, and persons with disabilities were permitted to vote in the company of an assistant or remotely via mobile ballot boxes. Representatives of the Slovak Blind and Partially Sighted Union, an NGO, complained that voting with an assistant could in some cases breach vote secrecy and called for

electronic elections as a more accessible alternative for persons with disabilities. In her survey of the October 2022 country-wide municipal and regional elections published in April, the disability rights commissioner noted approximately two-thirds of polling stations lacked barrier-free access and noted that frequent use of mobile ballot boxes, in almost half of the cases involving immobile voters, raised questions of election transparency. Experts criticized the government for insufficient action and limited progress in improving independence and social integration of persons with disabilities, including for failing to address restrictions on the legal capacity of persons with intellectual disabilities that hampered their full participation in civic life.

**Institutionalized Children:** Outpatient services remained the predominant form of care for children with disabilities, although in specific cases, including when mandated by courts, children with disabilities were placed in state-run institutions or social care homes. NGOs attributed a substantial share of institutionalizations to the lack of government support and services available to the families of the children. Children's rights and disability rights commissioners regularly monitored the situation in institutions where children with disabilities lived, citing insufficient funding, inadequate physical conditions, lack of specialized material and technical equipment, and shortages of specialized staff and care as the most pressing problems.

## Other Societal Violence or Discrimination

NGOs reported online hate speech and threats of violence toward migrants and refugees, and a worsening trend in public attitudes towards non-Christian migrants in the country.

In its 2022 study on right-wing extremism, the NGO Institute for Public Affairs found that 66 percent of the population would disapprove of Muslims as their neighbors. According to a September 2022 Focus Agency poll commissioned by the NGO Milan Simecka Foundation, almost 25 percent of respondents stated it was “very important” that Muslims not have the right to settle in the country. For 16 percent it was “very important” that those with the right to settle in the country were white and came from a Christian background.

Government officials at all levels and leaders from across the political spectrum engaged in rhetoric portraying refugees and Muslims as a security and public order threat, and several political parties used antimigrant rhetoric in the lead-up to the September parliamentary elections. In a September 3 press conference following a visit to a provisional migrant processing site in Velky Krtis, chairman of the Smer party and, since October 25, Prime Minister Fico suggested some of the undocumented migrants could come from a “terrorist” background. The party’s deputy-chairman and, since October 25, Deputy Speaker of Parliament Lubos Blaha warned on



his Telegram account the same day that the migrants could be criminals, spread diseases, and rape local women. The Hlas party used “Stop the Migrants” as a slogan on its billboards and in the days ahead of the election, party leader and, since October 25, Speaker of Parliament Peter Pellegrini demanded a “show of force” by the authorities to “deter” the undocumented migrants, including detaining “some” migrants “in a dramatic way.” A group of 10 humanitarian organization in October publicly called for authorities to uphold basic rights of migrants. In November, Interior Minister Sutaj-Estok pledged to fight undocumented migration to prevent migrants from forming “no-go areas” and “ghettos” and to prevent terrorist attacks. Police President Stefan Hamran repeatedly criticized politicians for spreading disinformation and fearmongering against undocumented migrants.

Several vigilante groups seeking to prevent undocumented migrants from transiting the country operated along the border with Hungary. In October, media reported on a case, captured on video that later appeared on social media, which showed a vigilante group of four women and a man intercepting a group of approximately 20 undocumented migrants, including women and children, who claimed they were from Syria. Armed with tasers, the women verbally harassed and threatened to attack the migrants using their dog. The video showed the man hit one of the migrants before the group managed to escape. In response to the media reports, police confirmed it was investigating the case and warned that restricting

individuals' freedom without a legal basis constituted a crime. The director of the Migration Office publicly expressed feeling "anger and shame" over the group's actions and denounced the "humiliating" treatment of the migrants.

## **Section 7. Worker Rights**

### **a. Freedom of Association and the Right to Collective Bargaining**

The law provided for the right of workers, except for members of the armed forces, to form and join independent unions of their choice. The law also provided for unions to conduct their activities without interference, including the right to organize and bargain collectively, and workers exercised these rights. The law recognized the right to strike with advance notice, both when collective bargaining failed to reach an agreement and in support of other striking employees' demands (a solidarity strike). Health and social care sector workers, nuclear power plant, pipeline, and telecommunication service operators' workers, air traffic controllers, judges, prosecutors, and members of the armed forces and firefighting and rescue services did not have the right to strike. The law prohibited dismissing workers who legally participated in strikes but did not offer protection if a strike was illegal or unofficial. The law prohibited antiunion discrimination. The law did not state whether reinstatement of workers fired for union

activity was required.

In May, the Constitutional Court announced it accepted for review a 2021 motion the former ombudsperson had submitted, in which she challenged the law banning members of the armed forces from forming and joining trade unions as unconstitutional. The case was pending as of October.

The government effectively enforced applicable laws and remedies protecting freedom of association, collective bargaining, and the right to strike for workers. Penalties for violations were commensurate with penalties for other laws involving the denial of civil rights. These procedures were, however, occasionally subject to delays and appeals. Penalties were sometimes applied against violators.

Workers and unions generally exercised these rights without restrictions. The government generally respected their rights.

## **b. Prohibition of Forced or Compulsory Labor**

See the Department of State's annual *Trafficking in Persons Report* at <https://www.state.gov/trafficking-in-persons-report/>.

## **c. Prohibition of Child Labor and Minimum Age for Employment**

The law prohibited all the worst forms of child labor. By law the minimum

age for employment was 15, although younger children could perform light work in cultural or artistic performances, sports events, or advertising activities if it did not affect their health, safety, personal development, or schooling. The National Labor Inspectorate (NLI) and the Public Health Office approved, determined the maximum hours, and set conditions for work by children younger than 15. The law did not permit children younger than 16 to work more than 30 hours per week on average and restricted children younger than 18 to 37.5 hours per week. The law applied to all children who were high school or full-time university students. The law did not allow children younger than age 18 to work underground, work overtime, or perform labor inappropriate for their age or health. The government effectively enforced applicable laws. The violation of child and juvenile labor laws was punishable by penalties, which were commensurate with those for other serious crimes. Penalties were regularly applied against violators. There were no confirmed reports during the year of the worst forms of child labor. Regional inspection units, which were under the auspices of the NLI, received and investigated child labor complaints. Apart from regional inspection units, the state Social Insurance Company was also responsible for monitoring child labor law compliance. If a unit determined that a child labor law or regulation had been broken, it transferred the case to the NLI, which could also impose fines on employers and individuals that failed to report such incidents adequately. Resources, inspections, and remediation were generally adequate.

## **d. Discrimination (see section 6)**

## **e. Acceptable Conditions of Work**

**Wage and Hours Laws:** The law provided for a minimum wage that exceeded the minimum living standard (an official estimate of the poverty income level).

The law mandated a maximum workweek of 48 hours, including overtime, except for employees in the health-care sector, whose maximum workweek was 56 hours, including overtime. Worker overtime generally could not exceed 150 hours per year, except for health-care professionals who, in specific cases and under an agreement with labor unions, could work up to 250 hours overtime. Employees who worked overtime were entitled to a 25 percent premium on their hourly rate. Employees who worked under conditions that endangered their health and safety were entitled to “relaxation” leave in addition to standard leave and an additional 35 percent of their hourly wage rate. Employees who worked during government holidays were entitled to an additional 100 percent of their hourly rate. Alleged violations of wage, hour, or overtime laws were common in the construction and hospitality sectors.

**Occupational Safety and Health:** The law established occupational safety and health (OSH) standards that were appropriate for main industries. The government did not proactively identify unsafe conditions but did respond

to workers' OSH complaints. Workers could generally remove themselves from situations that endangered health or safety without jeopardy to their employment, and authorities effectively protected employees in this situation. Alleged violations of OSH standards were common in industrial production, transport, warehouse, and wholesale industries.

**Wage, Hour, and OSH Enforcement:** Trade unions, local employment offices, and the Ministry of Labor, Social Affairs, and Family monitored observance of the wage, hour, and OSH laws and determined the NLI – the authority charged with enforcing them as well as for conducting wage, hour, and OSH inspections – did so generally effectively. The number of labor inspectors was sufficient to verify compliance with the laws, and inspectors had authority to make unannounced inspections. The NLI had authority to enforce wage, hour, and OSH laws and impose sanctions. Penalties were commensurate with those for similar crimes and were regularly applied against violators. Authorities, including the labor offices and NLI, provided key information on legal employment, employment rights, and wage, hour, and OSH laws to Ukrainian refugees in the Ukrainian language to raise awareness and prevent labor law violations and trafficking in persons. NLI implemented a limited awareness campaign aimed at workers and employers in seasonal industries to prevent illegal employment and violations of wage, hours, and OSH laws.

Experts estimated the size of the informal sector in the range of up to 15

percent of the country's gross domestic product. Workers in the informal economy were covered under wage, hour, occupational safety and health laws and inspections; however, the government did not enforce labor laws in this sector.