

FOREF: Inside Bratislava Parliament - Religious Freedom Breakthrough in Central Europe

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June 3, 2026

Inside Bratislava’s Parliament: A Breakthrough for Religious Freedom in Central Europe

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JUN 3



Group photo from the CEForb conference on religious freedom inside Slovakia’s parliament in Bratislava, June 1, 2026.

High-level Slovak leaders, international experts, and victims of discrimination gather to confront registration barriers and hate speech — and point toward reform

On June 1, 2026, the National Council of the Slovak Republic in Bratislava became more than a legislative chamber. It transformed into a rare space of conscience and accountability. Nearly 90 participants — 45 gathered in person inside the parliament building itself, with the rest joining online from across Europe, Africa, Asia, and the Americas — came together for the **Central Europe Forum for Freedom of Religion or Belief (CEForb)**, organized under the auspices of **Human Rights Without Frontiers**.

The focus was urgent and specific: the legal exclusion of minority religious communities, the rising tide of hate speech, and the urgent need for reform in one of the European Union’s most restrictive environments.

The choice of venue carried unmistakable weight. Hosting the conference inside parliament sent a clear signal that freedom of religion or belief is not a marginal issue but a

fundamental test of democratic maturity. For Slovakia — which maintains the EU’s strictest religious registration threshold of 50,000 adult signatures, a bar no new community has successfully cleared since the law tightened in 2017 — the event marked a potential turning point.

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A System That Creates Second-Class Believers

Slovakia’s registration law has produced a two-tier society with concrete, daily consequences. Communities unable to meet the threshold are denied legal personality. They cannot construct houses of worship, offer chaplaincy services in hospitals and prisons, have their marriages recognized by the state, access government support for clergy, or benefit from tax exemptions available to registered bodies. The result is structural invisibility: groups exist in society but remain legally and civically marginalized.



Willy Fautré, Chair of Human Rights Without Frontiers International and the Central Europe Forum for Freedom of Religion or Belief, speaks at the conference inside Slovakia’s National Council in Bratislava.

Both the Slovak Ombudsperson and the National Center for Human Rights have formally concluded that the 50,000-signature requirement is discriminatory and unconstitutional.

The **OSCE’s Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights** has documented incidents of hate targeting religious minorities, including Jehovah’s Witnesses. State-affiliated bodies have produced reports labeling certain groups as “sects” or “cults,” material that frequently feeds media narratives framing minorities as social threats. This cycle — official suspicion, sensational coverage, public stigma — leads to real harms: social ostracism, employment difficulties, family conflict, and in some cases harassment or violence.

When the state withholds recognition, it does not remain neutral. It signals to the broader society that these communities are somehow suspect or illegitimate, stripping them of the presumption of good faith that registered churches enjoy automatically.

Voices of Authority and Moral Clarity

The conference stood out for the caliber and diversity of its speakers. **Eduard Heger**, who served as Prime Minister from 2021 to 2023, brought personal depth rooted in his family’s experience of communist-era religious persecution. A member of Bratislava’s Charismatic community, he called for looking “inward, not only outward” when defending religious freedom and warned of the dangerous progression “from belief to extremism to hate speech to hate crime.” His intervention underscored that post-communist democracies still have work to do to secure genuine pluralism.



Hans Noot of Human Rights Without Frontiers International and **Dr. Ján Figel'**, former EU Special Envoy for Freedom of Religion or Belief and President of FOREF Europe at the CEFoRB conference inside Slovakia's National Council in Bratislava.

Branislav Škripek, a former Member of the European Parliament (2014–2019) and current Member of the National Council, and **Marián Čaučík**, MP from the Christian Democratic Movement and a veteran of the underground church during communism, opened the proceedings with parliamentary perspectives grounded in both faith and historical memory. Čaučík, recipient of the Pribina Cross II and co-founder of the eRko children's movement, drew on decades of activism to caution against legislation that might inadvertently constrain legitimate religious witness.

Dr. Ondrej Prostredník, an evangelical priest, theologian, university lecturer at Comenius University, and MP for Progressive Slovakia, offered one of the day's most intellectually rigorous contributions. He has consistently argued that the registration threshold creates unconstitutional inequality between communities. His message was clear: the state's duty is to guarantee equal conditions for all religious groups, not to privilege those with historical majorities.

Dr. Ján Figel', former EU Special Envoy for Freedom of Religion or Belief and a prominent Slovak voice on these issues, brought international stature and quiet moral authority. "Rights do not exist without obligations," he reminded the room. "Common in human dignity, different in personal identity." He spoke of the need for values that are genuinely possessed rather than performed for show, and closed with a simple, powerful ethic: "Love to everybody, hatred to none."



David Burrowes, former UK MP and Prime Minister's Deputy Special Envoy for Freedom of Religion or Belief, speaks at the CEFoRB conference inside Slovakia's National Council in Bratislava on June 1, 2026.

David Burrowes, former UK MP and Prime Minister's Deputy Special Envoy for FoRB, delivered the conclusions, drawing on years of global advocacy to press for proportionate, rights-compatible reforms.

"Rights do not exist without obligations. Common in human dignity, different in personal identity."

Dr. Ján Figel', former EU Special Envoy for Freedom of Religion or Belief

The Human Cost: Testimony That Demands Response

The emotional and moral center of the day came during the victims' testimonies panel, moderated by Eva Miškelová. ****Dr. Juraj Lajda**** and ****Doc. Pavel Hlavinka**** spoke with measured courage about the lived reality of exclusion. Dr. Lajda, who himself endured imprisonment for his faith under the communist regime in what was then Czechoslovakia, drew a direct and powerful line between past persecution and present-day barriers.

"Having lived through imprisonment for my beliefs, I know the state's failure to protect religious freedom wounds not only individuals but the very soul of democracy. Today's registration laws may wear a different face, but they continue to marginalize communities and echo the exclusion of earlier times."

— **Dr. Juraj Lajda**, victim testimony panel

Their accounts transformed policy debates into human reality. Children facing stigma in classrooms, families denied ordinary civic participation, the quiet despair and documented psychological toll — these were not abstract complaints. They were testimonies that cut through rhetoric and insisted on a response. The absence of legal recognition, they made clear, is never neutral; it compounds vulnerability and deepens division.

A Regional Contrast That Offers Hope

While the focus remained on Slovakia, participants also heard that different policy choices are possible. **Anja Tang of OIDAC Europe** contributed sharp insights on the need to raise journalistic standards and observed that majorities, too, can become targets of hate speech. **Peter Zoehrer of FOREF Europe highlighted Austria's significant evolution over two decades** — from being viewed as the EU's *enfant terrible* on religious freedom to a country that has built platforms for genuine interreligious dialogue and achieved more balanced media coverage of minority faiths. Austria's registration pathway, requiring roughly 300 members for initial recognition, stands in sharp contrast to Slovakia's 50,000-signature barrier. Concrete successes, including the Sikh community's registration in 2020 and the Unification Church's full recognition in 2015, demonstrate that persistence, dialogue, and constructive engagement can overcome prejudice and lead to integration.



Hans Noot and **Peter Zoehrer** during the Central Europe Forum for Freedom of Religion or Belief conference in Bratislava’s National Council

Zoehrer also laid out the broader regional challenge: rising hate speech, media sensationalism that frames minorities as threats, and the damage caused when state institutions abandon ideological neutrality. The solution, he argued, lies in strict state neutrality, responsible journalism, and clear, fair pathways to legal recognition that confer stability, protections, and legitimacy.

The conference’s reach extended well beyond the region. Participants included representatives from the **U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom**, the **U.S. Embassy in Slovakia**, **ADF International**, **Bitter Winter**, **CESNUR**, the **Ahmadiyya Muslim community**, the **Unification Movement**, **Sikh Dharma**, and academic institutions from Messina to Pécs. Their presence confirmed that Slovakia’s challenges — and the search for solutions — resonate across continents.

Seeds of Change Planted in Parliament

What made June 1, 2026, a breakthrough was not any single speech or proposal but the convergence itself: sitting parliamentarians willing to listen, victims willing to testify publicly, experts willing to offer comparative models, and a shared conviction that administrative exclusion is neither inevitable nor just. CEFoRb’s deliberately country-

specific, evidence-based approach has already begun generating concrete recommendations for legislative and policy reform across **Austria, Czechia, Slovakia, and Hungary.**



Willy Fautré, Eva Miškelová, Hans Noot, Peter Zoehrer, and David Burrowes enjoy a sightseeing moment together after the CEFoRB conference, with Bratislava Castle in the background.

The Bratislava conference did not pretend to resolve everything in a single afternoon. But it achieved something rarer and more valuable: it created space inside the heart of democratic power for truth-telling, mutual respect, and practical hope. Reform — beginning with a significantly lower and more proportionate registration threshold — is achievable. **When the rights of the smallest and newest communities are protected, the freedom of everyone is strengthened.**

Slovakia now faces a clear choice. The voices that filled its parliament chamber on June 1 offered not only critique but a path forward. The question is whether its leaders will walk it.

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