

# Notes from the Forum's 16 April 2026 online conference

## Registration issues in Central European countries

The forum successfully convened more than 70 registered participants from multiple continents to examine registration and recognition challenges for religious communities in Central Europe, with particular focus on Austria, Czech Republic, Hungary, and Slovakia. Recent Hungarian elections resulted in opposition victory with potential supermajority, promising to restore religious equality and revise the discriminatory 2011 Church Act 345. Forum will continue with in-person meeting in Bratislava on June 2, 2026

## Registration System Analysis by Country

### Austria

- **Three-tier framework** with membership quotas (300 minimum for confessional community status) and 20-year longevity requirements for full recognition
- 16 recognized religious societies with public law status receive tax benefits, school funding, and public support
- 9 state-registered confessional communities (including Family Federation, Sikhs, Baha'i) have private law status with pathway to recognition
- Federal Sect Agency shifted focus from religious minorities to esotericism/conspiracy phenomena, receiving €700,000 annual budget

### Czech Republic

- **Two-tier system:** basic rights (300 members minimum) and special rights (10-year longevity requirement)
- Special rights tier unlocks marriage ceremonies, public school teaching, and prison/military chaplaincy access
- State positioned as conveyor of rights rather than recognizing inherent religious freedoms
- Pilot survey revealed registration process can take up to 6+ years, involves GDPR-based delays, and includes scrutiny by anti-cult movement experts

### Hungary

- **Four-tier system** with three categories labeled "churches" (potentially uncomfortable for non-Christian groups)
- Highest tier access requires political decision by National Assembly regarding state cooperation
- 2012 European Court of Human Rights condemned Hungary for removing church status and discriminatory re-registration procedures

- Church of Scientology explicitly targeted, with Deputy Prime Minister declaring they would never be recognized under previous administration

## Slovakia

- **Most restrictive threshold in Europe:** 50,000 adult citizens/permanent residents required (1% of population)
- Requires personal data including addresses and identification numbers with GDPR implications
- 18 religious entities currently registered; groups under threshold can register as civic associations without state funding
- Constitutional Court upheld framework in 2010; Parliament rejected liberalization proposals in 2023 and 2024 (reducing threshold to 150)

*Given Slovakia's legal and social culture, as well as the history and circumstances of religious life in the country, an exceptionally broad body of knowledge and experience is required when seeking answers.*

## International Standards and Violations

### OSCE/ODIHR Framework

- 1989 OSCE commitments require all 57 participating states to grant legal personality to religious communities upon request
- Registration must not be compulsory and should not be more difficult than for other associations
- Legal personality necessary for bank accounts, property ownership, educational institutions, media operations, and cemeteries
- Withdrawal of legal status must be last resort after lighter sanctions (warnings, fines, tax benefit removal)

<https://odih.org/osce.org/odih/139046>

### European Court of Human Rights Precedents

- Successfully challenged cases involved: political/religious preferences in registration denial, state interference in internal religious matters, and significant delays in registration process <sup>29</sup>
- Court does not prohibit preferential treatment for historic religious groups or tiered systems per se, but condemns discriminatory implementation

## Recent European Violations

### Documented Cases (2022-2026)

- **Belgium:** Catholic bishops fined for not admitting woman to diaconate training; EU condemned recognition system in 2022 but Belgium has not implemented reforms
- **Finland:** Parliamentarian Pavel Resinen convicted of hate speech for 20-year-old church pamphlet on marriage ethics
- **France:** Catholic abbot sentenced for "psychological subjection"; attempts to ban Jehovah's Witnesses Easter gatherings in Dunkirk and Lille

- **Germany:** Bavarian state explicitly excluded Scientologists from 4,000 public tenders with EU complicity
- **Norway:** De-registered Jehovah's Witnesses in 2022 without valid reasons; appeal court unanimously reversed but state appealed to Supreme Court
- **Switzerland:** Evangelical church banned from Lake of Geneva baptisms after refusing new secularism agreement registration
- **Ukraine:** Hundreds of criminal cases against Jehovah's Witnesses for objecting to military service despite civilian service rights

## Japan Dissolution Case Study

- Family Federation was dissolved in March 2026 without any criminal conviction. This was triggered by a media campaign blaming the group for Prime Minister Abe's assassination. The court later announced there was no substantial causal link between the killer's family being members of the group and the murder.
- **Immediate impact:** 300+ church facilities seized within hours, tens of thousands lost worship access, funeral rites disrupted, employment and housing discrimination reported
- Dissolution model expanding to Jehovah's Witnesses and smaller esoteric groups; public calls made against United Church of Christ after unrelated accident
- Pattern emerging as template for other democracies in Asia and Africa where media narratives create pressure, laws are reinterpreted, and state takes action without criminal conviction

## Survey Findings (Czech Republic Pilot)

### Preliminary Results (3 responses, 2 declined)

- Registration considered important for formal recognition and property ownership, but **safer not to register under current conditions**
- Process described as complex, discouraging, and distressing with significant time/energy requirements and uncertain outcomes
- Two of three respondents previously attempted registration unsuccessfully; some chose NGO/association structures instead
- One respondent stated: "We are not a group of fishermen. We are a religious society and would like to be one officially"

### Key Challenges Identified

- **Administrative barriers:** Unclear requirements, procedural traps, repeated resubmission requests for minor formalities
- **Expert scrutiny:** High-level examination of beliefs/practices by anti-cult movement affiliates
- **Privacy violations:** Authorities directly contacting members to confirm participation beyond initial application
- **Threshold vicious circle:** Non-registration makes attracting new members harder, preventing threshold achievement

# Media Engagement Strategies

## Traditional Media Best Practices

- Journalists operate under economic pressures, tend to be less religious than general population, and are incentivized to publish high-engagement clickbait stories
- **Effective approach:** Research-based storytelling with clarity (be concise, tell story, provide data) and connection (develop journalist relationships)
- Become a source and resource by offering compelling, research-based stories; many journalists post direct email addresses
- Resources available: Global Faith and Entertainment Study, Faith and Wellness Study, Faith in News Study, Faith and Media Connect platform

## Self-Publishing Platforms

- Religious and spiritual individuals and communities are their own media; use personal platforms to tell benefit-to-society stories
- Humanize religion through own words and narratives, as traditional media may have difficulty finding platforms for positive stories

**Faith & Media Initiative: a Brighter Future Together** <https://www.faithandmedia.com/>

**Faith & Media Connect: Connecting Media and Faith Experts** <https://faithandmediaconnect.org/>

## Proposed Solutions

### Immediate Reforms

- Registration should begin from principle that religious freedom does not depend on state approval
- Processes must be clear, fast, inexpensive, and non-discriminatory
- Update OSCE guidelines (now over decade old) to reflect recent developments
- Eliminate membership and longevity quotas; strengthen anti-discrimination processes; simplify registration to U.S./Netherlands models
- Faith- non-faith and belief groups are their own media. Educate them how to do this.

### Systemic Changes

- States must act as impartial guarantors with even-handedness toward all religious communities
- Restrictions only permissible if prescribed by law, proportionate to legitimate aim (public health/safety/order, morals, others' rights—not national security), necessary, and non-discriminatory
- Lighter sanctions (warnings, fines) must precede legal personality withdrawal
- Effective right to appeal and access to remedy required for all decisions

## Action Items

- **Austria focus group:** Convene speakers to discuss follow-up dialogue with Alexander Rieger (Special Representative) and Federal Chancellery

- **Survey expansion:** Pilot survey in Austria before Slovakia meeting; expand to additional countries with translation support
- **Slovakia preparation:** Organize in-person parliament hosting for June 2 forum to discuss registration amendments
- **Political caucus:** Generate cross-party politician support for cultural, legal, and constitutional changes
- **Identify Chapter presidency:** Each country will create its own chapter, led by two individuals who organize their own budget, advocacy, activities, network and develop best-practices to be shared with others. Two leaders of each chapter become automatically members of the board of CEFoRB, and will help decide the direction the forum will take, including its meetings, activities, negotiations, publications, speakers, and other forms of (inter)actions. HRWF leads these board meetings.

## **Next Forum (Slovakia+Czechia)**

**Date:** June 2, 2026

**Location:** Bratislava, Slovakia (hybrid: in-person and online)

**Key Topic:** Hate Speech

**Focus:** Slovakian registration reform advocacy with parliamentary engagement