

# RECOGNITION & REGISTRATION ISSUES IN CENTRAL EUROPE

Analysis of Key Issues in Austria, Czech  
Republic, Hungary and Slovakia

Central Europe Forum for Freedom of Religion or  
Belief Event – 16 February 2026

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# INTRODUCTION

- To examine how legal systems of registration and recognition shape the practical freedom of religious groups in Austria, Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovakia.
- While each country formally protects freedom of religion or belief, they differ sharply in how they distribute legal personality, public benefits and access to institutional life.
- The key question is whether religious groups can function on equal terms once systems of recognition and registration begin to sort some communities into higher and lower legal categories.

# AUSTRIA

- Austria operates a three-level framework.
- To become a confessional community, a group must have at least 300 members.
- To become a legally recognised religious society, groups not already historically recognised must generally show membership equal to 0.2% of the population and at least 20 years of existence, including 10 years as a confessional community.
- Recognition matters because it gives access to public-law status, greater institutional security and educational privileges, including religious instruction in state schools.



**Legally recognised  
churches and religious  
societies**



**State-registered  
confessional  
communities**



**Ordinary  
associations**

# AUSTRIA



- The central Austrian issue is not total exclusion, but legal hierarchy.
- Religious groups may practice as associations, and some can become confessional communities, but full recognition remains difficult.
- This means that newer, smaller or internally diverse religious movements can remain stuck in lower-status categories for long periods.
- The system therefore produces a distinction between tolerated religion and fully recognised religion.

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# AUSTRIA



- The system also incentivises the state to assess whether a group is sufficiently distinct from other recognised or registered communities.
- That raises neutrality concerns, because the state is pushed into deciding not just administrative matters but questions of religious identity.
- The 2024 *Föderation der Aleviten Gemeinden in Österreich v. Austria* concerned Austria's refusal to register an Alevi association as a religious community, largely because of similarities between its statutes and those of another group.

**Legally recognised  
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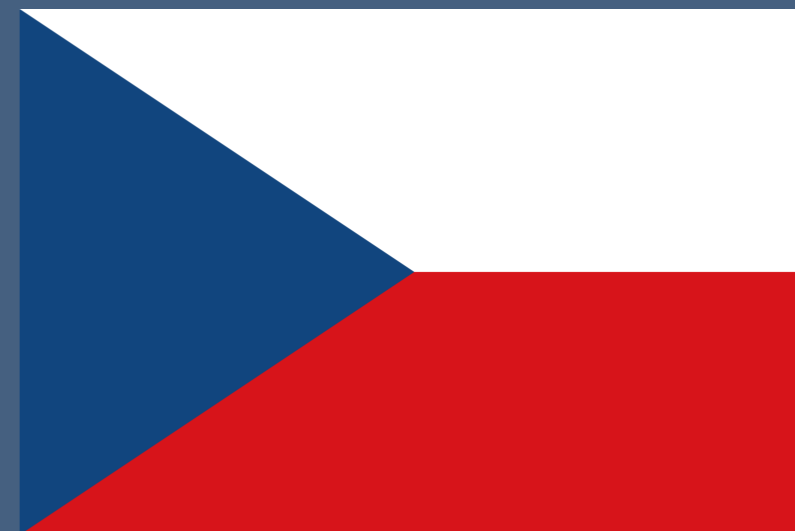


**State-registered  
confessional  
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# CZECH REPUBLIC



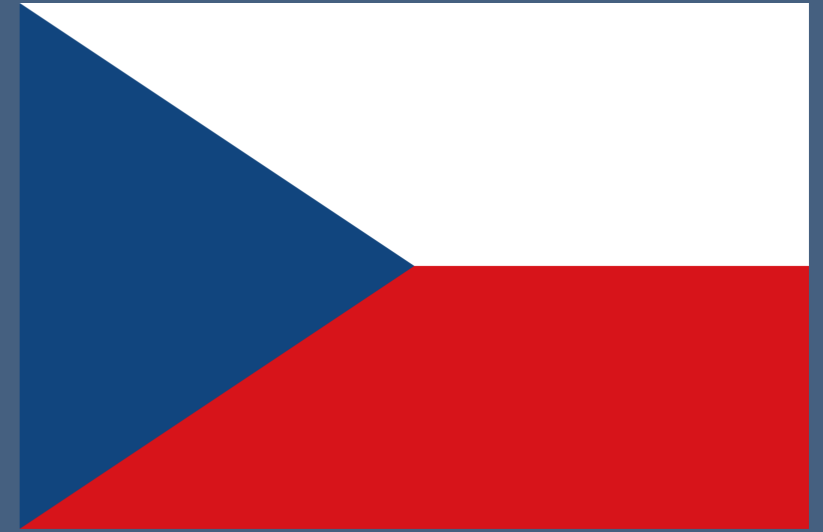
- The Czech Republic has a two-tier registration system.
- First-tier registration requires at least 300 signatures from adult members permanently resident in the country.
- Second-tier registration requires a group to have been registered for 10 years and to demonstrate membership equal to at least 0.1% of the population, roughly around ten thousand persons.
- Second-tier status unlocks “special rights”, including conducting marriages, teaching religion in public schools and providing chaplaincy in prisons and the military.

**Second-tier (“special rights”)**



**First-tier (basic rights)**

# CZECH REPUBLIC



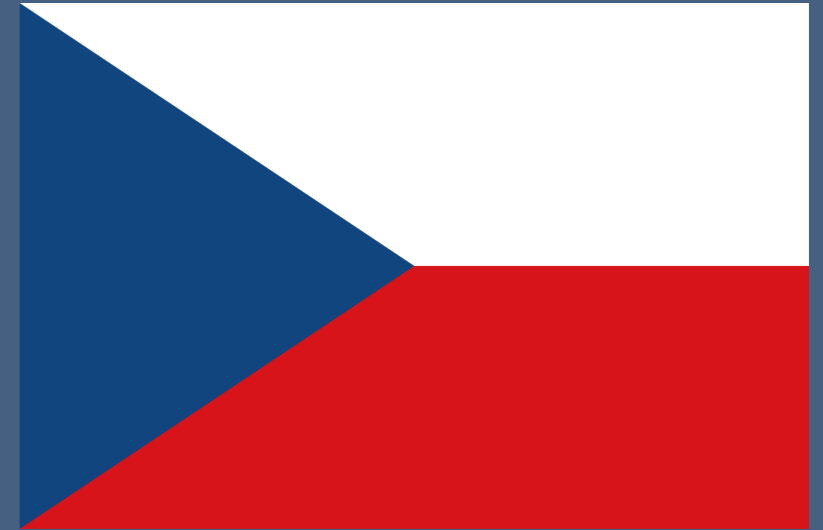
- A group may exist legally for years yet remain unable to perform marriages, access chaplaincy roles or teach in public schools.
- This means that the state distinguishes between basic religious existence and fuller public religious participation.
- The system is therefore less exclusionary than Slovakia's, but it still conditions some of the most socially visible aspects of religious life on longevity and scale.

**Second-tier ("special rights")**



**First-tier (basic rights)**

# CZECH REPUBLIC



- The Czech Republic illustrates a softer version of recognition inequality.
- The lower threshold reduces absolute exclusion, but the ten-year delay and population requirement for second-tier rights still privilege established communities over smaller ones.
- It is also civic and symbolic: who may solemnise marriages, who may enter prisons and the military as chaplains, and who may teach religion in public institutions.
- The Czech model is therefore more liberal than Slovakia's and less politicised than Hungary's, but it still demonstrates how registration systems can stratify religion by allocating public functions unevenly.

**Second-tier ("special rights")**



**First-tier (basic rights)**

# HUNGARY

- Hungary's current framework is formally four-tiered.
- The law allows taxpayers to direct 1% of their income tax to communities in any tier, but only the top two tiers are eligible for an additional state subsidy supplementing those allocations.
- The system therefore combines formal legality for all groups with a clearly unequal distribution of material benefits and public partnership.
- Hungary's framework follows the controversial 2011 Church Act and later amendments.



**Established churches**



**Registered churches**



**Listed churches**



**Religious associations**

# HUNGARY

- In *Magyar Keresztény Mennonita Egyház and Others v. Hungary*, the European Court of Human Rights held that the 2012 reforms had violated the applicants' rights after they lost their church status under a re-registration process the Court described as politically tainted.
- The Court criticised Hungary for removing church status, using a questionable re-registration procedure and treating applicant communities differently in access to cooperation and benefits.
- Even after later reforms, the structure remains strongly stratified, and the highest category still involves a political decision by the National Assembly regarding cooperation with the state.



**Established churches**



**Registered churches**



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# HUNGARY

- The Hungarian problem is the combination of categorisation and political discretion.
- Different legal tiers can be in theory compatible with freedom of religion, but in Hungary, status has been tied to state cooperation, public funding and symbolic legitimacy in ways that have historically disadvantaged some minority communities.
- The 2024 action report in the Strasbourg supervision process shows that the consequences of the 2014 judgment are still being debated, which suggests that legal reform has not fully resolved the structural problem.
- The deepest issue is that recognition shapes which are relegated to a more marginal legal and financial position.



**Established churches**



**Registered churches**

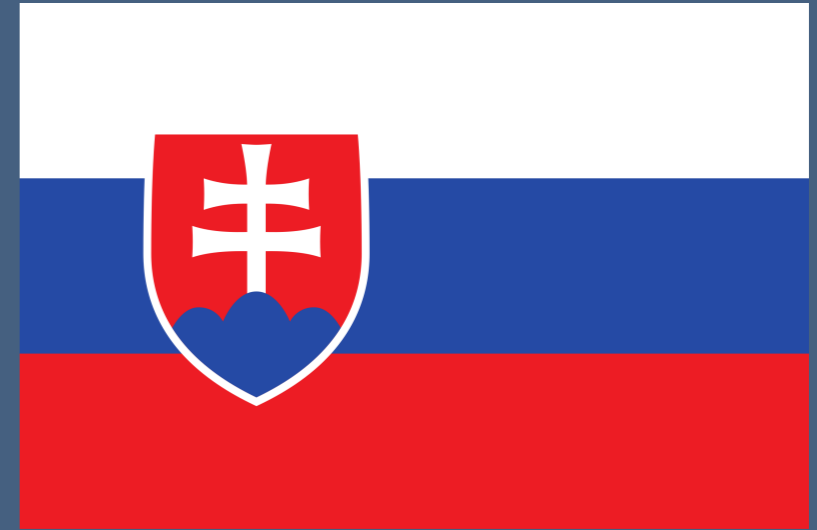


**Listed churches**



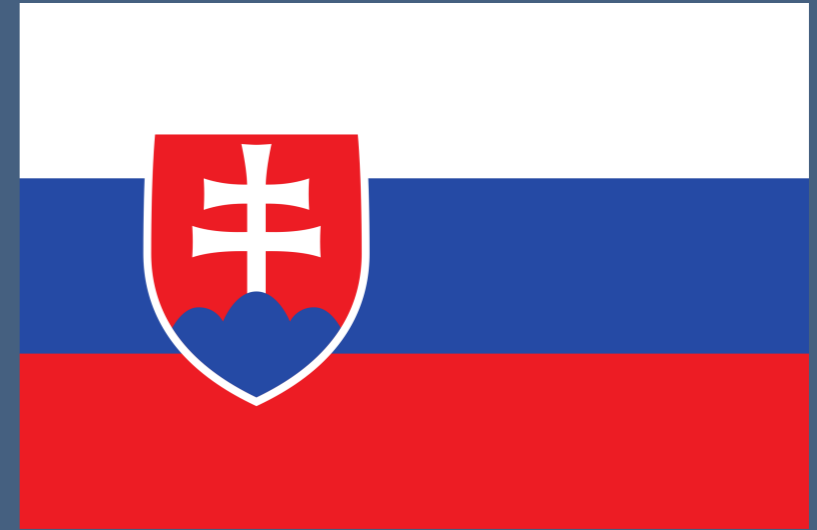
**Religious associations**

# SLOVAKIA



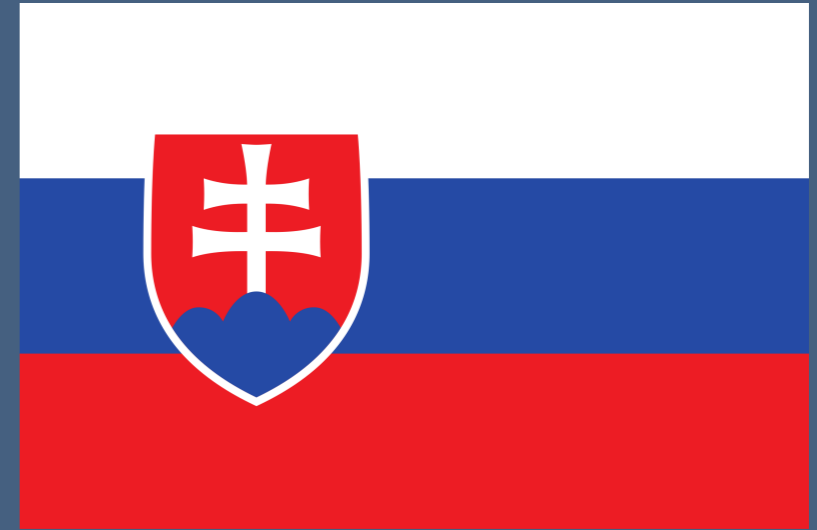
- Slovakia has one of the most restrictive registration thresholds in Europe.
- To register as a religious group, an organisation must show 50,000 adult adherents who are citizens or permanent residents, and must submit declarations including personal data, addresses and support for registration.
- Registered groups receive annual state subsidies, while unregistered groups lack legal status and may not establish religious schools or receive state funding.
- Clergy from unregistered groups do not officially have the right to minister in prisons or government hospitals. In practical terms, registration is therefore the gateway to institutional religious life.

# SLOVAKIA



- The most obvious Slovak problem is exclusion by scale.
- A threshold of 50,000 adherents is extremely difficult for newer, smaller or migrant-linked religions to meet. This turns registration from an administrative process into a near-closed door.
- It also entrenches historical advantage, because older groups that registered under less restrictive rules retain benefits that are effectively unavailable to newer entrants.
- The requirement to submit extensive personal information raises an additional rights concern: even before a group is recognised, the state demands a high level of disclosure from members of minority religions.

# SLOVAKIA



- Slovakia is the strongest example in this set of registration law operating as a substantive barrier rather than a neutral formality.
- When unregistered groups cannot access schools, funding, prisons or hospitals on equal terms, the issue is no longer just symbolic recognition; it affects the lived capacity of a community to care for members, educate children and sustain public religious life.
- The result is a legal landscape in which freedom of belief exists in principle, but equal institutional expression does not.
- In March 2023, parliament reportedly failed to pass a proposal that would have allowed registration for groups with fewer than 50,000 adherents, showing how politically difficult reform remains.

# COMPARATIVE CONCLUSION

- Taken together, these four countries show four distinct but related risks.
  - **Austria** demonstrates the burdens created by layered recognition and long-term qualification rules.
  - **Hungary** demonstrates the danger of political discretion and unequal treatment in access to state cooperation and funding.
  - **Slovakia** demonstrates how a very high threshold can make registration functionally unattainable.
  - **The Czech Republic** demonstrates how even a comparatively open model can still reserve important public-facing rights for higher-tier groups.
- The broader lesson is that the impact of registration and recognition should be judged not only by whether groups may meet privately, but by whether they can participate fully and equally in public, institutional and civic life.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

- An ideal registration system should begin from the principle that freedom of religion or belief does not depend on state approval.
- Registration processes should be clear, fast, inexpensive and non-discriminatory.
- Updated version of international guidelines on the legal personality of religious or belief communities to reflect more recent developments (e.g. OSCE/Venice Commission are now over a decade old).
- An ideal system should also avoid rigid hierarchies of status.
- Where registration exists, it should serve a limited administrative function: granting legal personality, enabling property ownership and clarifying financial or institutional arrangements.

# UNDERSTANDING THE IMPACTS: A COLLABORATION WITH INTERBELIEF RELIEF

- Since the Forum's launch in February 2026, I have collaborated with Interbelief Relief to produce a detailed survey designed for religious groups to answer about their experiences of trying to gain registration and recognition.
- Key topics of the survey include the context of the particular religious group and their current legal status.
- I also designed the survey according to my approach to understanding the issues which is called pre-registration, registration and post-registration.
- Groups are therefore asked about their experiences before applying (eligibility and barriers), their experiences during registration (procedure, treatment and fairness), and after registration or refusal.