

World Interfaith Harmony Week 2017

UPF Panel discussion about religious freedom

Bratislava, Slovakia, February 2, 2017

By Barbara Grabner

On the last day of January, the National Assembly of the Slovak Republic amended the existing law about the registration of religious bodies. From now on every faith needs to have a minimum of 50,000 adult members if it wishes to be recognized by the state. The number is disturbingly high since Slovakia has only five million inhabitants! The new legislation is not only restrictive but also discriminating: Only the Catholic Church and three other churches meet the required standard; new religions or established faiths like Islam are prevented to take roots in the country. Before the vote

took place, UPF Secretary General Milos Klas sent to all members of parliament a letter appealing to protect religious freedom.

Considering the legal restraints, the Slovak branch of UPF decided to make the religious discrimination the topic of this year's UN World Interfaith Harmony Week. Hence, we organized a panel discussion in a public hall in Bratislava. Panelists came from the Central European Interfaith Forum, the Department for Religious Studies, the Evangelical Theological Faculty, the Hare Krishna movement, and also a member of parliament who had voted against restrictions. Among the audience of almost thirty persons there

was also a top-politician from the Christian party KDH. Part of the program was also the appointment of two new Ambassadors of Peace: The leading couple of Hare Krishna, who are frequent guests and speakers at UPF's interfaith events.

The panel discussion lasted three hours, that is one hour longer than expected. All guests really enjoyed the free discussion and the spirit of tolerance despite some heated statements. Our panel discussion was one of few, if not the only public event about the dangers of religious discrimination through the new legislation in the Slovak capital.

