



**THE
CONSTANTINOPOLITAN
SOCIETY**

GREEKS EXPATRIATED FROM ISTANBUL
BY TURKISH COERCION

2015 HUMAN DIMENSION IMPLEMENTATION MEETING

Warsaw, 21 September - 2 October 2015

Wednesday, 30 September 2015

Working session 15: Fundamental freedoms II (continued), including:
– Freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief

The Ecumenical Patriarchate in Turkey

STATEMENT

Introduction

We thank the OSCE and the Serbian Chairmanship for the opportunity to contribute to a wider, yet focused dialogue, on the rights of the Ecumenical Patriarchate and religious freedom, in general, within the framework of its tolerance and non – discrimination agenda.

We represent the Constantinopolitan Society, a non – governmental / non - profit organization, established in 1928 in Greece by forcibly expatriated members of the Greek minority of Istanbul.

Our intervention will focus on religious intolerance issues that the Ecumenical Patriarchate in Turkey is still confronted with. A situation that is in contrast with what is in effect internationally and with the EU criteria.

General remarks

Turkey continues long-standing interferences in the right to freedom of religion or belief.

The Turkish government has not so far alleviated or done away with serious restrictions on freedom of religion or belief, including state policies and suffocating regulations of the past that deny legal personality / status to the Ecumenical Patriarchate, its right to own / maintain property -specifically resolve property problems not currently addressed by the new Law on Foundations that will enable the Ecumenical Patriarchate to function without undue constraints-, to train religious clergy, and to offer religious education.

On the grounds therefore of these concerns, the United States Commission on International Freedom (USCIRF) in its 2015 Annual Report, released on April 30, 2015, in the Key Findings underlines that:

“The overall landscape for democracy and human rights has deteriorated significantly in the last two years, with troubling implications for freedom of religion or belief in Turkey”.

Although we have noted that Turkish government has made some positive gestures toward the Ecumenical Patriarchate, these generally have not been through permanent, institutional, or legal reforms. Rather, rights and privilege have been granted on an *ad hoc* basis, leaving open the possibility that they could be revoked or discontinued.

Turkey does not accept the Patriarch’s ecumenical status and has been unilaterally trying to restrict his activities, specifically:

- Turkish government denies the recognition of legal entity to the Ecumenical Patriarchate, having as dire consequence the deprivation from its property.
- The Greek Orthodox Theological School of Halki (also known as Halki Seminary), which had been operating since 1844, the only Greek Orthodox educational institution in Turkey for training its religious leadership, remains closed, as it has been since 1971, despite promises and public statements of support for its reopening by President Erdoğan and former President Gül. Turkish authorities’ proposal that the reopening of the School should be done under the auspices of one of the state-run universities in Istanbul is not considered as a solution.

The Theological School of Halki should be re-opened without preconditions and with exactly the same status it held prior to its closure in 1971.

The reopening of the Theological School of Halki would strengthen Turkey's credibility in terms of its respect for fundamental human rights and freedom of religion.

- The three churches of Panayia Kafatiani, Aya Yani and Aya Nikola in the district of Karaköy-Galata in Istanbul, as well as their 72 immovable properties, continue to be illegally and forcibly occupied by the self-declared and nonexistent “Turkish Orthodox Patriarchate (TOP)”. Those three churches and their properties should be immediately returned to their legal owner, which is the Ecumenical Patriarchate and grant full legal status so as to be able to elect their governing bodies and freely administer and manage its own foundation.
- The Turkish government continues to require that only Turkish citizens can be members of

the Greek Orthodox Church's Holy Synod. The government's role in deciding which individuals may be part of the Ecumenical Patriarchate represents severe interference and control in its internal affairs.

- Turkey denies Ecumenical Patriarchate the ability to train clergy in the country.

Closing statement

As a concluding remark, we would like to underline that respect for religious freedoms is the responsibility of every State. It is not a matter that circulars and statements of good intentions alone can address. It calls for firm will, constructive dialogue and common understanding. Respect for these rights is beneficial for Turkey first and foremost, as it will strengthen its social, ethnic and religious structures, and safeguard pluralism and diversity in this country. Finally, every process is judged by the real and measurable outcome it brings to a challenging situation.

Thank you very much for your attention._