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**THE
CONSTANTINOPOLITAN
SOCIETY**

GREEKS EXPATRIATED FROM ISTANBUL
BY TURKISH COERCION

2014 HUMAN DIMENSION IMPLEMENTATION MEETING

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Working session 13: Tolerance and non-discrimination II (continued),
including combating racism, xenophobia and discrimination,
also focusing on intolerance on religious grounds

The Ecumenical Patriarchate in Turkey

STATEMENT

Introduction

We thank the OSCE and the Swiss 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 E.U. 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 2014 Annual Report, released on April 30, 2014, in the Key Findings underlines that:

“The Turkish government limits all religious groups’ rights to own and maintain places of worship, train clergy, and offer religious education. This has been particularly detrimental to the smallest minority communities and their ability to transmit their faith to future generations.”

Recent positive developments

- Although we have noted that Turkish government has made 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.
- We welcome the Turkish government’s acceptance of the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew’s request to hold, for a fifth time, this year’s Divine Liturgy of the Dormition of Virgin Mary, on Aug. 15, 2014, at the historical Sümela Monastery in Trebizond, which was closed to worship for 91 years.

Negative developments and persisting shortcomings

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

- Denial of recognition of legal entity to the Ecumenical Patriarchate, having, *inter alia*, as dire consequence the deprivation from its property (see also the March 2010 avis of the C.o.E. Venice Commission).
- 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 official promises and public statements of support for its reopening. President Erdoğan declared that Ankara will not move on this issue until Greece reciprocates with steps to address some issues related to the Muslim minority in Greece, including the renovation of two Ottoman mosques in Athens. The invocation of reciprocity by Erdogan is considered as unacceptable.

The democratization package, announced in September 30, 2013, disappointingly did not include the reopening of the Theological School of Halki.

Turkish authorities' proposal that the reopening of the School 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 rights and freedoms.

- The three churches of Panayia Kafatiani, Aya Yani and Aya Nikola in the district of Karakoy-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.
- Denial to the Ecumenical Patriarchate to have its own printing facilities for the publishing of religious texts, books, etc.
- In September 2013, the government declined a request by the Ecumenical Patriarchate for permission to conduct a religious service at the restored Taxiarchis Church museum in Ayvalik.
- The Ecumenical Patriarchate keeps being a target of humiliating actions. For example, in the schoolbook on national security, published by the Ministry of Education of Turkey, in the chapter "The geographic position of Turkey and the threats against Turkey" and in the sub-chapter "Greece", the Ecumenical Patriarchate and the Halki Seminary are also mentioned among the problems regarding the relations with this country. In this way, the Patriarchate is subject to hostile actions.

Closing statement

As a concluding remark, we would like to underline that respect for religious freedoms is responsibility for 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._