

OSCE Review Conference
(Warsaw, 30 September-8 October 2010)

Working Session 2: Fundamental Freedoms I

Right of Reply
Delegation of Turkey to the OSCE

Dear Ms Moderator,

As we had witnessed in a number of past OSCE events, the status of the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate, the use of the adjective “Ecumenical” and the reopening of Heybeliada Theological School, along with a couple of recommendations, have been brought to the attention of distinguished participants by a representative of the Order of Saint Andrew

Given the time constraints and since those critics had already been duly responded at the times they were raised, my intention now is rather to focus on developments both on the ground and in the tone critics have been expressed.

We have noted this time with satisfaction that important and encouraging developments attained in Turkey and good intentions of Turkish officials have been recognized by the speaker. Worth to mention a few among those recent encouraging developments are an official permission granted for a religious celebration at the Monastery of Sümele, hosting a religious mass at the Akdamar Church and comprehensive amendments made to the Constitution following a referendum held in September.

Though not a development but a confirmation as legitimate of Turkey’s stance to the question of the use of the “Ecumenical” title is the announcement on 12 March 2010 of the opinion of the Venice Commission on the legal status of religious communities in Turkey and the rights of the Orthodox Patriarchate of Istanbul to use the adjective “Ecumenical”. Having examined the question in detail, the Commission held that **Turkish authorities are neither obliged themselves to use this title when referring to the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate, nor formally recognize it.** The Commission concluded that “...*there is no indication that the Turkish authorities prevent the Patriarchate from using this title and that the Turkish authorities are under no positive obligation to use this title*”. The opinion of the Venice Commission is totally in line with Turkey’s constitutional principle, as a secular State, not to interfere in internal affairs of religious communities. This holds true also for Muslim communities, which constitute more than % 95 of the people.

As for the reopening of the Heybeliada Theological School, I would like to underline that Turkey acknowledges the need of the Greek Orthodox Community to train their clergy. It was proposed to reopen the School under the aegis of one of the state universities in Istanbul since the Turkish legislation requires that religious training be held under supervision of the State, an obligation that applies not only to non-Muslim minorities but also to the Muslims. Yet this proposal was rejected. Determined to address that legitimate need effectively, Turkish authorities are now in search of a workable solution, which would also have to meet constitutional requirements.

Thank you for your attention.