



**THE
CONSTANTINOPOLITAN
SOCIETY**

GREEKS EXPATRIATED FROM ISTANBUL
BY TURKISH COERCION

Warsaw Human Dimension Conference

6 October to 17 October 2025

Monday, 13 October

Plenary session 6: Tolerance and non-discrimination I, including:

- Addressing racism, xenophobia and discrimination, anti-Semitism and intolerance and discrimination against Christians, Muslims and members of other religions

The Ecumenical Patriarchate in Türkiye

STATEMENT

Introduction

My name is Kleanthi Perifanou and I represent the Constantinopolitan Society, a civil society organization, established in 1928 in Greece by forcibly expatriated members of the Greek Minority of Istanbul.

We thank the OSCE and the Finnish Chairmanship for the opportunity to present our concerns about the actual implementation of OSCE freedom of religion commitments and identify further action, which may be taken by Türkiye, as participating State, regarding the Ecumenical Patriarchate in this country. The Turkish government has not so far alleviated serious restrictions on freedom of religion, including state policies and suffocating regulations that deny legal personality / status to the Ecumenical Patriarchate, its right to own, maintain and manage property, train religious clergy and offer religious education.

Persisting shortcomings

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

- Turkish government continues to deny the recognition of legal entity to the Ecumenical Patriarchate, having as main consequence the deprivation of its property.

The percentage of the expropriated property of Greek Orthodox foundations

does not exceed 23% of the cases that were eligible for restitution; 70% of the cases were dismissed as inadmissible. Petitions from the Ecumenical Patriarchate for the return of historical religious properties from the state also remain pending.

Seventeen (17) foundations owned by the Ecumenical Patriarchate have been illegally seized by the General Directorate of Foundations - GDF (Vakıflar Genel Müdürlüğü - VGM), meaning that Greek Minority members are actually prevented from holding elections and electing administrative boards of those foundations.

- Despite Türkiye's international human rights obligations protecting the right of religious communities to elect their leaders, it is "established practice" that the state interferes in how Ecumenical Patriarchate elects its leaders. So, the Turkish government continues to dictate that only Turkish citizens can be members of the Ecumenical Patriarchate's Holy Synod. The government's role in dictating which individuals may be part of the Ecumenical Patriarchate represents unacceptable interference with the internal election process of the Patriarchate.
- The three churches of Panayia Kafatiani, Aya Yani and Aya Nikola in the district of Karaköy-Galata in İstanbul, as well as their 50 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 acquire full legal status, so as to be able to elect their governing bodies and freely administer and manage its own foundations.
- Of great concern is the fact that once again the Turkish authorities did not permit Ecumenical Patriarchate to hold the sacred celebrations of the Virgin Mary's Day on August 15, 2025 at the Panaghia Soumela Historical Monastery in Trabzon.

Greek Orthodox Theological School of Halki

The Greek Orthodox Theological School of Halki, an institution of great spiritual and clergy educational importance, which had been operating since 1844, remains closed since 1971. The Turkish government closed the Theological School of Halki in accordance with a constitutional decision that banned the operation of private institutions of higher learning, a decision that served to effectively force the closure of religious and theological schools in the country. Although the Turkish government and officials have at times expressed support for reopening the Theological School of Halki, no concrete steps have been taken.

Therefore, the Theological School of Halki should be allowed to reopen for the sake of the community's survival as well as for the survival of the Ecumenical Patriarchate itself – a 17 centuries-old religious institution based in Istanbul. It is a matter of respect for the freedom of religion, as well as the protection of minority rights.

Religion-based hate rhetorics – actions of vandalism

The Ecumenical Patriarchate keeps being a target of humiliating actions. Especially, government officials increasingly engage in hate speech that targets the Ecumenical Patriarch. President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan said that the conversion of Hagia Sophia into a mosque would gratify “*the spirit of conquest*” of Mehmet I, the conqueror of Constantinople in 1453. Additionally, Erdoğan’s ultranationalist partner Devlet Bahçeli argued that the legal basis for converting Hagia Sophia rests on “*the right of the sword*”. Such declarations clearly consist a belligerent rhetoric, which not only puts the sacred heritage of Türkiye’s religious minorities at risk, but also threatens their lives, making them potential targets of hate crimes.

Since the conversion of Hagia Sophia into mosque it has been vandalized several times. Imperial Gate in Hagia Sophia has been badly damaged and the decorative emblem was stolen. Also, a number of tiles of the priceless marble floors in Hagia Sophia have been damaged by heavy machines used to clean the site. On July 11, 2025 an attempted arson at Hagia Sophia was reported in Turkish media. According to Police statement, a man partially covering his face, lit a Bible on fire near a column. The flames spread to the carpet before being extinguished by mosque security.

Attacks or acts of vandalism on minority worship places continued and need to be investigated.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Due to systematic and ongoing violations of religious freedom, OSCE / ODHIR are called upon to urge the Turkish government to bring its laws and practices into compliance with international standards on freedom of religion or belief.

Specifically:

- Respect the right to freedom of religion or belief as enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and allow the reopening of the Theological School of Halki, for the sake of the community’s survival as well as for the survival of the Ecumenical Patriarchate itself.
- Grant full legal personality to the Ecumenical Patriarchate, so that the latter may enjoy, inter alia, ownership rights and exercise property ownership, administration and management.
- End Turkish citizenship requirements for the Ecumenical Patriarch and the Holy Synod of the Greek Orthodox Church, and permit them to select and appoint their leadership and members in accordance with their internal guidelines and beliefs.

Thank you for your attention._