

Ladies and Gentlemen, as we have seen in many contexts, the treatment of religious minorities is critical to ensuring the right to religious freedom that is inherent in a democracy. Today's briefing on the Turkish treatment of the Greek Orthodox Church highlights why we must continue to be vigilant on this issue.

Turkey, as a participating State of the Organization for Security and Cooperation for Europe, is required to meet commitments on religious liberty. In light of these commitments, the treatment of the Greek Orthodox Church, and in particular the School of Theology at Halki, is of concern. This university-level theological seminary, founded in 1844 to train Greek Orthodox clergy, educators and scholars, was closed in 1971 when Turkish authorities nationalized all private universities. Closure of this world-renowned facility deprived the Greek Orthodox Church in Turkey of a critical training site for future leaders. Yet, while private universities have since been allowed to reopen, seminaries remain closed. The 1989 Vienna Concluding Document commits the participating States to "allow the training of religious personnel in appropriate institutions". Therefore, we must question the basis for the continued closure of the School of Theology.

Another issue concerning the treatment of the Orthodox Christian minority in Turkey involves the ecumenical authority of the Greek Orthodox Patriarch. Unofficial Turkish government policy mandates that only Turkish citizens can hold church leadership positions. Yet, due to the closure of the Halki Seminary and the declining Greek population in Turkey, this has proven an increasingly difficult challenge. In response to this situation, the Patriarch has appointed several foreign clerics to positions on the Synod. This action should be acceptable since it is fully consistent with the Vienna Concluding Document, which declared that participating States will "respect the right of... religious communities to organize themselves according to their own hierarchical and institutional structure," as well as "select, appoint and replace their personnel in accordance with their respective requirements and standards".

Reopening the Greek Orthodox School of Theology and allowing the church the freedom to appoint its own personnel would send a strong signal that Turkey respects the rights of religious minority communities in keeping with its OSCE commitments.

I urge the Commission to continue to address these issues with Turkey.