

European panel wary on religious rights in Turkey: European Union membership at stake

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Turkey still does not have a legal framework to ensure that religious minorities can function “without undue constraint,” says a European Commission report on the country, which is seeking membership in the European Union.

“Missionaries have been portrayed in the media or by the authorities as a threat to the integrity of the country, and non-Muslim minorities as not being an integral part of Turkish society,” the commission said in a November 6 progress report on Turkey’s membership in the 27-nation union.

Christians frequently complain of discrimination in Turkey, most of whose 71 million citizens are Sunni Muslims. However, the Rome-based AsiaNews agency reported that the Turkish government has agreed to settle longstanding grievances by religious minorities ahead of the country’s possible admission to the European Union.

The agency said the pledge had been made to the Istanbul-based Orthodox ecumenical patriarch, Bartholomeos I, during talks November 3 between the patriarch and Turkey’s foreign, education and justice ministers.

AsiaNews said government representatives at the Istanbul talks had praised the contribution of religious minorities to the “centuries-old rich inheritance” of Turkey and pledged to take steps to improve their rights.

Istanbul was once the Byzantine Christian capital Constantinople but now belongs to Muslim-majority and politically secular Turkey.

In its report, the European Commission stated, “To date, use of language that might incite hatred has been left unpunished. Non-Muslim religious communities—as organized structures of religious groups—continue to face problems.”

In June, a Turkish court ruled that the Istanbul-based patriarchate was authorized to perform religious functions only among Turkey's 6,000-strong Greek Orthodox community. Turkey regards the term *ecumenical patriarchate* as having political overtones that could undermine the country's national sovereignty.

For its part, the patriarchate says the term is purely an internal church designation and has no political implications. The ecumenical patriarch himself has what is called a "primacy of honor" among the world's Christian Orthodox leaders.

The Turkish court stated that future patriarchs or Orthodox office holders should be Turkish citizens employed in the country at the time of their election.

In late October, the European Parliament agreed on a resolution that demanded legislation to protect religious minorities in Turkey. The resolution also called for all churches in the nation to be given the right to own property and train clergy. -

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