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Turkey: Efforts to protect freedom of religion need to be strengthened

Strasbourg, 03.02.2011 – “Positive steps have been undertaken to allow religious minorities to freely manifest their beliefs. However, a number of outstanding issues remain, which require the attention of the Turkish authorities,” said today the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, Thomas Hammarberg, publishing a [letter](#) on the issue addressed to the Turkish government.

Commissioner Hammarberg notes with satisfaction the measures taken to strengthen the protection of places of worship, properties and religious freedom of non-Muslim minorities and welcomes the Prime Minister’s instruction to counter publications containing elements of incitement to hatred and hostility towards non-Muslim communities.

Observing that the Greek Orthodox Theological Seminary of Heybeliada (Halki) remains closed, the Commissioner reiterates his recommendation to allow its reopening and to remove restrictions on the training of clergy in the country, including Armenian clergy

Commissioner Hammarberg is also concerned by the slow implementation by Turkey of the judgments of the European Court of Human Rights concerning freedom of religion. “In 2007 the Court found a violation by Turkey with regard to religious instruction, as it failed to meet the requirements of objectivity and pluralism and to provide an appropriate method for ensuring respect for Alevi parents’ convictions. I raised this concern already in my 2009 report and I have now asked for more information on the measures taken or envisaged by the authorities to comply with the judgment”.

The Commissioner also requested additional information on the measures envisaged to address the absence of financial aid available to the Alevi community and the non-recognition of their worship places (*Cemevleri*), which also has important financial implications and affects the enjoyment of religious freedom.

Finally Commissioner Hammarberg calls for a solution to the issue of identity cards that contain an indication of religion, in accordance with the 2010 judgment of the Strasbourg Court, which condemned Turkey for violating the right to freedom of religion on account of the very fact that the applicant’s identity card contained an indication of religion.

Read the [reply](#) from the Turkish authorities.

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Elected by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, the present Commissioner, Mr Thomas Hammarberg, took up his function on 1 April 2006