

Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515-2004

June 3, 2021

Ms. Gayle Manchin
Chair
U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom
732 N. Capitol Street, N.W., Suite A714
Washington, DC 20401

Dear Chair Manchin:

We, the undersigned bipartisan Members of Congress, like millions of Americans across the country, are among the faithful in the second largest Christian Church in the world, Orthodox Christianity. We write to bring several issues to the attention of the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), urging you to take these matters under consideration in USCIRF's ongoing reporting with respect to religious freedom issues in Turkey.

Despite international condemnation, the state of Turkey continues to engage in chronic, egregious, systematic violations of the religious freedom of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, which is led by his All Holiness, Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew. His All Holiness is the 268th direct successor of Christ's first Apostle, Andrew, who preached in Asia Minor and Thrace, establishing the See of our Ecumenical Patriarchate in what is present-day Istanbul, Turkey, in 38 AD. The Apostle Andrew's brother, the Apostle Peter, established his jurisdiction in Rome and is the 265th direct predecessor of Pope Francis. The continuity of these ancient Christian Patriarchates, with their unbroken succession and global communicants, makes Turkey's treatment of the Ecumenical Patriarchate a matter of significance for all the world's 2.3 billion Christians.

In addition, the Turkish state continues to reject the legal status and the identity of the Ecumenical Patriarchate. The rejection of the ecumenicity of the Patriarchate violates not only the freedom of conscience, belief, and religion of all Greek Orthodox Christian citizens of Turkey, but of the 300 million Orthodox Christians worldwide who fall under the spiritual leadership of the Ecumenical Patriarch. In short, Turkey's actions violate the religious liberty of Orthodox Christian communicants under the spiritual aegis of the Ecumenical Patriarchate.

Finally, the state of Turkey's arbitrary conversion of the Hagia Sophia to an active mosque in July 2020 is a violation of Turkey's obligations under international law and, specifically as a signatory to the UNESCO Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage. We urge the USCIRF to work with other US government institutions, as well as international and multilateral organizations to ensure the full protections of the Hagia Sophia defined in the site's status as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The damage to the Hagia Sophia already imposed by the conversion to mosque status has been recorded by international experts. It is incumbent on the USCIRF to work with the UN Special Rapporteurs whose portfolios are directly relevant to the protection of the Hagia Sophia, and to recognize that Turkey's actions with respect to this 6th-century cathedral, the historical See of the

Ecumenical Patriarchate, constitute yet another of the many systematic, egregious, violent and non-violent violations of freedom of conscience, belief and religion vis-à-vis the Ecumenical Patriarchate.

By all measures and interpretations, qualitative and quantitative, violent and non-violent, Turkey's actions meet the statutory requirement of Country of Particular Concern (CPC) designation under United States law. Therefore, if USCIRF is to meet its responsibilities as mandated by Congress, it must recommend to the State Department that Turkey be designated as a CPC.

Serious transgressions against a religious symbol of the stature of our Ecumenical Patriarch and Patriarchate must carry major consequences. It is our hope that future Commission decisions will reflect that understanding.

Sincerely,



GUS BILIRAKIS
Member of Congress



JOHN P. SARBANES
Member of Congress



DINA TITUS
Member of Congress



CHARLIE CRIST
Member of Congress



CHRIS PAPPAS
Member of Congress



NICOLE MALLIOTAKIS
Member of Congress



VICTORIA SPARTZ
Member of Congress