



World Directory of Minorities

Europe MRG Directory → Turkey → Rum Orthodox Christians

Print Page

Close Window

Rum Orthodox Christians

The Rum Orthodox community comprises ethnic Rums in Istanbul, Gökçeada (Imros) and Bozcaada (Tenedos), as well as Arabic- and Turkish-speaking Antakya Rum Orthodox Christians (Antiochians) who are not ethnically Rum. Until recently, the total number of Rum Orthodox in Turkey was pronounced to be around 2,000–3,000. A recently launched research study put the number of ethnic Rums in Istanbul at 5,000. According to an official from the Rum Orthodox Patriarchate, as of 24 March 2007, the number has fallen to 4,000. In addition, there are 280 ethnic Rums in Gökçeada, 20 ethnic Rums in Bozcaada, and around 1,800 Antiochian immigrants in Istanbul. The number of Antiochians remaining in Antakya is around 10,000. Thus, there are around 16,100 Rum Orthodox Christians in Turkey. However, only 4,300 of these fall under the protection of the Treaty of Lausanne because the Turkish state does not recognize the rest as Rum Orthodox.

After the signing of the Treaty of Lausanne, the process of eradicating non-Muslims from Anatolia continued with the 1923 population exchange agreement, whereby Turkey and Greece ‘exchanged’, i.e. expelled their respective Rum and Turkish minorities, with only a few exceptions. In 1964, having failed to resolve the Cyprus conflict as it had wished, the Turkish government deported tens of thousands of Rums of Istanbul who carried Greek passports, including those married to Turkish citizens, confiscating their properties and assets. (See Demir, H. and Aktar, R., *Istanbul’un Son Sürgünleri*, Istanbul, İletiflim, 2004).

Despite protection under the Treaty of Lausanne, the Lausanne minorities cannot fully enjoy their religious freedom. The state denies their religious institutions legal personality, which causes great difficulties in administration, property rights and clergy training. The state does not recognize the Rum Orthodox Patriarchate and deals instead solely with the Patriarch himself, which results in a highly inefficient system. Due to the lack of legal personality, the official registry records do not name the Patriarchate as the legal owner of its properties, leaving the Patriarchate vulnerable to confiscation of its properties. The ban on the training of clergy, the absence of operative Christian theological schools, and the citizenship criterion imposed on clergy eligible to provide religious services in Turkey creates a shortage of priests. Currently, there are only 31 Rum Orthodox priests providing services in 90 churches. The Rum Orthodox theological seminary in the island of Heybeliada (Halki) remains closed. As a result, there is a risk that there may not be a suitable candidate to succeed the Patriarch upon his death.

According to a Rum Orthodox priest, authorities are ‘perfectly aware that if the Halki seminary does not re-open one day, the Patriarchate will close down’. The de facto ban against the Rum Orthodox Patriarchate against using its 14-centuries old ‘ecumenical’ title has turned into law through the decision of the High Court of Appeals on 26 June 2007. In a case concerning the dismissal of a priest, the court held that the Patriarchate’s claim to the ecumenical title has no legal basis. The ruling is not only ultra vires, since the court ruled on a religious question which exceeds its mandate, but is also against the letter and spirit of Lausanne, the Constitution and the ECHR.

While the Treaty of Lausanne protects the property rights of non-Muslim minorities, the Directorate General of Foundations (Vakıflar Genel Müdürlüğü, VGM) exercises an unchecked and arbitrary

authority over these institutions. This has resulted in the confiscation of churches and their properties and the Rum Orthodox community has suffered acutely from the inadequate lack of restitution following confiscation of its property. The VGM is also able to overtake management of those minority foundations, which it considers have non-functioning boards of directors. But lack of functioning boards have been caused by the state – for example, the Istanbul governorship did not allow the Rum Orthodox community to hold board elections after 1991. As a result, the boards of many foundations in Gökçeada and Bozcaada have become non-operational and the VGM has overtaken management of these foundations.

But a 2005 ruling by the Council of State overturning a 1997 VGM decision to take over the management of the Büyükada Rum Girls' and Boys' Orphanage Foundation is a welcome judicial intervention. The court held that the authority of the VGM to assume the management of non-functioning foundations did not extend to those belonging to non-Muslim minorities. The VGM appealed against the decision and continues to retain the management of the orphanage.

Rums are easily identifiable by their accents and as such can quickly fall prey to insidious discrimination from public officials and when accessing public services that according to testimony from the community, they can experience on a daily basis. Discrimination also pervades the Turkish education system - a joint project on textbooks conducted by the History Foundation and Turkey's Science Academy found this statement in a geography textbook: 'Almost everyone living in Turkey is a Turk. Until recently, there were also Rums and Armenians in addition to Turks. Some of these groups have attempted to harm the country when they found the chance to do so.' ('Çocua Devletin Görevi Böyle mi Öretilmeli', Radikal, 5 February 2005)

powered by [the webbler](#)