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TURKEY CONTINUES POLICY OF CHRISTIANOPHOBIA²

According to the decree of the Turkish president, the famous Chora church – the Greek monastery of the Byzantine Empire – will be opened as a mosque on 23.02.2024³.

The Church of the Holy Savior in Chora, colloquially known as the “Chora Church”, was founded in the VI century during the reign of Emperor Justinian, flourished in the Byzantine era and was converted into a Kahriye-Jami Mosque by decree of Sultan Bayezid II in 1511 after the conquest of Constantinople by the Turks. After Ataturk's death in 1945, the building was converted into a museum, but a Turkish court ruling in 2019 revoked the museum's status, paving the way for the building to be converted into a religious building once again. In 2020, the building became a mosque again, but the opening had to be postponed due to the restoration work, which has already been completed and on February 23, 2024, a “solemn prayer” will sound again in the church of Chora after almost eight decades⁴.

Previously, the Greek Foreign Ministry had condemned the plans to turn the Christian historical and religious site back into a mosque.

This is another example of Ankara completely disregarding the feelings of religious and national minorities in the country and challenging the neighboring states, the historical and civilizational heritage of the peoples, which includes the large parts of culture that Turkey has forcibly taken over.

It should be recalled that by an identical procedure, the famous cathedral of Constantinople, the Holy Aya Sophia, which is the second largest object of Christian architecture in the world, was transformed into a mosque. In July 2020, the Turkish Council of State, followed by a Turkish court, concluded that the Aya Sofia would lose its status as a museum and fall under the jurisdiction of the Religious Affairs Office. In the same month that the Byzantine-era frescoes of St. Sophia's Cathedral

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² The original article (in Russian) was submitted to the Editorial office on 12.02.2024.

³ Manas News: In Turkey, another Orthodox shrine will become a mosque. (in Rus), 11.02.2024, <https://manas.news/world/v-turcii-eshhe-odna-pravoslavna-je-svjatynja-stanet-mechetju/> (download date: 11.02.2024).

⁴ TENGRI NEWS: «Turkey has turned into a mosque another church» (in Rus.), 22.08.2020, <https://tengri.news/kz/europe/turtsiya-prevla-v-mechetrati-esche-odnu-tserkov-412043/> (download date: 11.02.2024).

were draped, and the mosaic floor decorated with Christian symbols was completely covered with carpets, the first solemn prayer took place in the church.

The protests of the USA, the RF, Greece and other countries, as well as leading Christian religious leaders, had no influence on the decision of the Turkish authorities, who declared that no one had the right to interfere in Turkey's internal affairs, as the issue of the status of the temple could not be dealt with by other states and international organizations. In response to UNESCO's protest against the Islamization of the museum, which is considered a pearl of world cultural heritage, Turkey unilaterally removed Aya Sofia from the list of specially protected sites on its territory. Remember that the temple was added to the list back in 1985⁵.

Thus, the church of Chora suffered the same fate as Aya Sofia, paving the way for a new lawlessness of the Turkish authorities in this area, marking the era of the country's return to its traditional path of religious intolerance, chauvinism, and cultural hatred. The events clearly show that the doctrine of Kemalism, which aimed to create an image of Turkey as an inter-civilizational bridge linking the East with the West, Islam with Christianity, and the past with the present, is failing the country's new political elites and ideologically-driven society and is no longer guided by the idea of universalizing the country's civilizational priorities within the framework of its future historical development.

However, it can hardly be assumed that the responsibility for acts of open intolerance and ethno-religious discrimination of a medieval character lies solely in the conscience of this country. Experience has shown that the Christian countries of the West, in whose shadow Turkey recovered from the catastrophe of the First World War, turned a blind eye to the lawlessness of this country's authorities for many years. The military and political importance of this country in the context of the West's geopolitical confrontation with the USSR and then with Russia, as well as its key position and role for the liberal world in exercising control over the oil-rich Arab geopolitical conglomerate and the Islamic community as a whole, contributed to the unwillingness to adapt Ankara's domestic policies to Western standards of democracy. Thus, Turkey successfully built up the image of a secular, tolerant and even supportive of the ethno-religious diversity of its social fabric, while both during Ataturk's reign and in the second half of the 20th century, its policy of discrimination against all minorities by definition and the practical destruction of its national cultural heritage had gained momentum.

This policy reached its peak in 1955, when the hatred of the Turkish masses based on ethnic and religious identity degenerated into outright pogroms against

⁵ BBC News: «Aya-Sofia: Turkey and UNESCO exchanged harsh statements on the anniversary of the conversion of the world-famous museum into a mosque», 24.07.2021, <https://www.bbc.com/russian/news-57956803> (download date: 12.02.2024).

Greeks, Armenians, and other minorities in Istanbul. The West reacted practically nothing to these riots and hardly held the Turkish authorities and political elites responsible for what happened.

The weak criticism of some American-European political circles and religious consistories of what is happening in Turkey has frozen under the iron clank of the NATO machinery to which this country has recently (1952) belonged and which, because of its special importance for Washington and the European capitals, revels in its impunity.

A new wave of violence (it has never stopped) began in the early 2000s, when a massive wave of arson attacks on the property of Christian communities, the desecration of churches and the murder of priests, mainly of the Latin Catholic Church of Turkey, took place⁶. The effects of these events are literally still being felt today. On January 28, 2024, for example, the Catholic Church of St. Mary in Istanbul was subjected to an armed attack during a service in which one parishioner was killed and another seriously injured.

Of course, the state is formally innocent in all these acts of terror and violence against Christian communities in Turkey, it is ostensibly fighting criminals, uncovering extremist cells, and arresting criminals and their accomplices for long periods of time. But this is only the visible side of the problem. In fact, religious extremism would not have existed in Turkey if the state itself had not waged an aggressive campaign to inculcate the ultra-radical ideology of Pan-Turanism into society, if it had not promoted Islamic chauvinism, if it had not initiated legal proceedings to expropriate the property of religious communities, if he had not continued the policy of denying legal status to numerous Christian churches in the country, if he had not destroyed Christian churches and, finally, if he had not expropriated the most famous Christian shrines or converted them into mosques.

Statistics and data analyses show that, as a result of Turkey's state policy, many Christian – Latin Catholic, Greek Catholic, Greek Orthodox, Chaldean, Armenian, Armenian Catholic, Protestant, etc. – churches have been replaced by Christian churches. There are only reminders of their former greatness: the temples are empty, the congregation has shrunk to a catastrophic level, the parishioners are leaving the country out of fear and half of Turkish society does not want to live alongside the Christians who, as enemies of the «faithful», undermine Turkey's sovereignty and freedom⁷.

⁶ Simavoryan A., Christians in Modern Turkey (Protestants and Catholics) (in Rus.). Noravank Foundation, 24.05.2012, http://noravank.am/rus/articles/detail.php?ELEMENT_ID=6513 (download date: 10.02.2024).

⁷ Ibid.

And even under these conditions, the Christian world does not find the will and the strength to raise its voice in defense of the common heritage of civilization and to break the imposed political situation of the «silence of the lambs" of the Western elites. The Turks are destroying Armenian churches in Western Armenia, dismantling crosses, praying in the cathedral of Ani – the Vatican remains silent. Catholic priests are blown up in broad daylight, their heads cut off – the Greek Church remains silent. Greek temples are called mosques – the Armenian clergy distance themselves with formal remarks... And as long as everyone is guided only by their own understanding of the interests and instructions of the main geopolitical players, it will be impossible to get out of this disastrous cycle. The story of the Chora Church confirms this.