

MOVEMENT FOR THE RENAISSANCE OF NORTHERN EPIRUS

OSCE HUMAN DIMENSION IMPLEMENTATION MEETING

10 September - 21 September 2018

Warsaw – Poland

Working session 6: Tolerance and non-discrimination I, including combating anti-Semitism, combating intolerance and discrimination based on religion or belief, including against Christians, Muslims and members of other religions

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Thank you Mr/Mrs Moderator,

Honorable representatives,

As Orthodox Christians, we want to point out that the issue of the church property in Albania and even more so in the area of the Greek National Minority in Northern Epirus, remains unresolved for twenty-seven years since the fall of the Communist regime.

Until now, the Albanian authorities have not returned to the Orthodox Autocephalous Church of Albania a great number of temples and monasteries, keeping their property on the grounds that the buildings have historical value and should be under state management.

The temples, which were built back in the Byzantine era, are conveniently being categorized as cultural monuments. The church of Panagia in the Episkopi of Argyrokastro, the monastery of Saint Nicholas in Mesopotamos and the monastery of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary in Kostari are three typical cases.

However, the justice and state mechanisms of Albania move on even in their privatizations, as happened with the historic monastery of the Agioi Saranta, on the coast of the Ionian Sea.

Using the usual practice of counterfeiting documents and through corrupt judges and government officials, they managed to privatize and then sell an estate of 400,000 square meters worth 6 million euros, including the ruins of the monastery. **1.40'**

It was later proven that the documents used for privatization of the area were forged. However, the person who had the estate in his possession had already sold a big part of it piece by piece to 162 buyers. The court, however, did not declare these transactions void...

Since January 2017 there have been trespasses of the ecclesiastical property at the monastery of Agioi Theodoroi in Dryamades of the Municipality of Himara with an illegal construction of a building inside the monastery's site by former members of the Albanian security forces and the former Albanian Police Chief Artan Didi.

The non-rendering of the old Orthodox Christian churches to the Orthodox Autocephalous Church of Albania is sometimes an opportunity for professional activities that are also disrespectful to these sacred places. **1.20'**

For example, in March 2016, the old churches in Veratio (Berat) and Elbasan, which are historical monuments of Orthodoxy, were used for photoshoots with models.

This caused the strong reaction of the Orthodox Church of Albania, which asked the competent state authorities to return the temples, monasteries and all the worship objects. In an official statement it characterized what happened in these temples as sacrilege and underlined that "*such insults do not promote the cultural heritage and have not been made in any other religious community in Albania*".

The Orthodox Church of Albania has repeatedly called for a law that has been passed in 2009 but has never been applied by the Albanian authorities to finally be respected. According to this law the Albanian state must give back all the churches, the monasteries and the Holy Relics, icons and objects of worship, which are precious and holy for all the Orthodox people and certainly for the Greek National Minority of the country. **1.30'**