

Dr. Tessa Hofmann (Berlin)

Ladies and gentlemen,

The recent debate in the European Union's institutions about Turkey's candidacy for membership in the EU is the appropriate occasion for human rights NGOs to evaluate Turkey's aspirations to meet the Copenhagen criteria. The joint memorandum, which was forwarded today to several institutions of the EU, articulates the concern of 31 national or international NGOs about very recent and severe violations, on a governmental level, of minority rights in Turkey. The decrees, issued by the Turkish minister of education, Dr. Hüseyin Çelik, during 2002 and 2003 against Armenian, Syriac and Greek demands for the recognition of the genocide on their ancestors have been described by the Teachers Trade Union of Turkey as chauvinist and racist.

The signatories of this Memorandum wish to draw the attention of the EU to Turkey's media and education systems, both of which exert a direct and substantial influence on public opinion and the perception of minorities. We do not ignore certain positive legal and administrative moves made by Turkey's government and lawmakers. And we are happy to have experts and representatives from both the Syriac and the Pontos Greek communities among us, who will evaluate the recent situation of Syriac Orthodox Christians and Muslim people of Pontos Greek origin.

But we know that lasting progress depends on profound reforms in Turkey's values as represented in her education system and on the approach towards ethnic and religious minorities by media and other opinion-leaders. As this concerns all minorities, let me please refer briefly to the relatively unknown Jewish case: The Jewish community in Turkey has drastically declined from 100,000 persons in 1923 to 22,000 in recent years. Nevertheless, the general Turkish perception of this tiny minority is extremely negative. Although it is officially denied, in reality anti-Judaism is widely spread in Turkey among all strata of the population, among nationalists, leftists as well as among islamists, Turks and Kurds alike. Despite the fact, that Turkey's penal law and constitution prosecute the provocation of ethnic hatred, Anti-Jewish emotions are almost daily aroused by Turkish mass media. Anti-Jewish publications such as Hitler's book "Mein Kampf" (My Fight) are popular, and its Turkish translation reached numerous editions. On August 17th this year, the Turkish newspaper „Vakit“ published an article, whose author glorified Hitler and justified the annihilation of European Jewry. The author Karakoc wrote: „We should, in fact, be thankful to Hitler, as we are all thankful to Osama bin Laden today.“¹ Media influence, impunity, chauvinist and even racist education result in polls, in which Jews, similar to the Armenians are perceived as a threat to Turkey and even to humanity. In a poll of 1999, only 11 percent of the responding Turkish students protested against the following suggestion: „It would be helpful for us, if the Jews (and the Armenians) would leave our country.“²

Similar to the Armenian situation, synagogues³ and Jewish cemeteries have become targets of

¹ Quotation after Sassounian, Harout: Wiesenthal Center Blasts Turkish Anti-Semitic article. „California Courier Publisher“, September 9, 2004

² Gürgü, Corry: Türkei nutzt OSZE-Konferenz zur Selbstdarstellung: Die Türkei ist frei von Antisemitismus, oder: Der Mond ist eine Scheibe (Turkey uses OSCE Conference for self-representation: Turkey is not affected by Anti-Semitism, or: The Moon is a plate.) Internet-publication by hagalil.com, May 18, 2005

terrorist attacks and desecration over the last two decades. Attacks on prominent members of the Jewish community of Istanbul have occurred. In public statements, one of the perpetrators of the attack on two synagogues during November 2003 in Istanbul regretted that they did not wait until the end of the service, in order to kill more Jews.

Even the second largest Muslim community within Turkey, the Kurds, suffer from a profoundly biased and distorted presentation in Turkish media. We therefore urge the EU institutions to refrain from an approval of Turkey's application until such time as Turkey meets the international standards of minority rights and is prepared to safeguard the existence of its religious and ethnic minorities by preventing further violations of these rights in all areas of public life, including public education and mass media.

³ Attacks on synagogues occurred on November 15, 2003 (57 victims), on March 1, 1992 and on September 6, 1986 (22 victims during a Sabbath-service). On March 2004, two people died during an attack in a Free Mason Lodge, for the perpetrators believed (as many others do in Turkey), that Free Masons a participants of an alleged universal Jewish conspiracy.