

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

September 8, 2016

H.E. Recep Tayyip Erdoğan
President of the Republic of Turkey
T.C. Cumhurbaşkanlığı Genel Sekreterliği
06689 Çankaya, Ankara
Turkey

Dear Mr. President:

We write today to express our serious concern over the revocation of a license for the annual Divine Liturgy for the Feast of the Assumption at Panagia Sumela Monastery in Trabzon on August 15, 2016. Reports that the official government explanation for the revocation - construction issues during renovation - may indicate a policy for banning Christian worship in this space altogether are deeply troubling. As members of the United States House of Representatives and co-chairs of the Congressional Caucus on Hellenic Issues, we ask you to help assuage these fears by allowing this peaceful gathering in observance of the annual Christian celebration in years to come.

We commend your government for working to preserve this important space in order to qualify for the UNESCO World Heritage List for future generations to visit. However, we are concerned about reports of government-sponsored religious suppression and interference with the peaceful worship at the Ecumenical Patriarchate in Turkey. We urge you to take action to alleviate fears that this recent license revocation is a precursor to a longer term prevention of use of the Panagia Sumela Monastery by the thousands of Orthodox Christians who have traveled to Trabzon to take part in the celebration of the Feast of the Assumption there since it reopened in 2010.

In partnership with Turkey and other nations in 2014, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) launched a new network of parliamentarians—the International Panel of Parliamentarians for Freedom of Religion or Belief (IPPFoRB). The goal of the IPPFoRB is to combat religious persecution and advance freedom of belief. We strongly support this mission, and agree that any ally of the United States must respect democratic values and promote unity and harmony instead of divisiveness and provocation.

Partnership and cooperation on human rights are critical to achieve 21st Century prosperity. With rising violations of freedom of religion or belief around the globe, we must strive to advance this fundamental freedom for everyone everywhere. As such, we ask that you immediately allow for the celebration of Divine Liturgy at Panagia Sumela Monastery, and work to ensure that the annual Feast of the Assumption mass may take place there in the future.

Thank you for your attention to this important matter.

Sincerely,



GUS M. BILIRAKIS
Member of Congress



CAROLYN B. MALONEY
Member of Congress