

**CENTRE FOR MONITORING THE RIGHTS AND FREEDOM OF  
ORTHODOX CHRISTIANS IN EUROPE**

**Violations of the Rights of Orthodox Christians in Europe in 2014**

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## Introduction

Religion remains an important factor in the life of many Europeans and the integral part of their identity and dignity. Multiple mechanisms safeguarding the freedom of religion in Europe were created during the last decades. The main legal mechanism protecting these rights within the Council of Europe is the European Convention on Human Rights (signed in 1950 in Rome). In particular, Article 9 of the Convention provides a right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. It contains the right to manifest a religion or belief, in worship, teaching practice and observance, subject to certain restrictions that are "in accordance with law" and "necessary in a democratic society". Articles 10 (*freedom of expression*) and 11 (*freedom of assembly and association*) of the Convention are closely related to Article 9.

In spite of the existing mechanisms, the situation with the rights of different religions in Europe often causes concerns. It is therefore necessary to animate these protecting mechanisms through the monitoring initiatives and by mobilizing the activity of religious communities. Only the *synergy* (cooperation) of governmental and intergovernmental institutions, non-governmental organizations and religious communities can effectively protect the individual freedoms in the sphere of religion.

In the present time, Orthodox Christians as well as other religious groups feel particularly vulnerable to intolerance, discrimination, and even violence on the part of materialistic supporters of the "new morality", of aggressive antireligious groups and from those who, in arguing for the secular character of the state, demand exclusion of religion from public life -- media, education, culture, and health. Unfortunately, new legislation too often becomes an instrument to violate the rights of believers and their freedom of religion, thus provoking tensions and conflicts within society. There is now an evident need to monitor the rights and freedoms of Orthodox Christians in Europe within 47 countries of the Council of Europe. Such monitoring the religious rights of Orthodox Christians will help to protect their religious freedom more effectively.

The Centre for Monitoring the Rights and Freedom of Orthodox Christians in Europe was established to present the results of such monitoring to European societies, to the Council of Europe and to other international European organisations. This project is initiated by active Orthodox Christians in Europe and supported by the Representation of the Russian Orthodox Church to the Council of Europe. While emphasizing the violations of Orthodox Christians' rights in Europe, the centre underlines that this is not a call for special treatment for Orthodox Christians, but an attempt to encourage the Council of Europe member

states to respect freedom of religion in general and to avoid discrimination against any religious community and its members, regardless of the size of the community to which a person belongs.

The Centre for Monitoring the Rights and Freedom of Orthodox Christians in Europe presents its first observation report for the year 2014. This first report is far from being complete, as it does not include all the cases of violations of the rights of Orthodox Christians that occurred in the Council of Europe member states during the past year. The compilers of the report hope that this first experience permits to start a detailed monitoring for 2015. Therefore any interested person is invited to send us information about the violations of the rights of Orthodox Christians in 2015 in Europe. After the verification of the submitted facts, the centre will publish them on the website and include in its annual report. The centre monitors only the violations directly or indirectly related to Orthodox faith or morality and does not deal with the human rights violations in general, even if those violations concern Orthodox Christians.

## Chapter 1

### Hate Speech, Violation of the Freedom of Expression and Humiliation of Orthodox Christians.

**January, 2014.** Vangelis Diamantopoulos, SYRIZA MP of the Greek parliament, impersonated a drunk Orthodox priest at a New Year's Day carnival in northern Greece. He was holding a chalice and pretended in public that he was giving the Holy Communion to people.

Archbishop Ieronymos, the head of the Church of Greece, said: "It is sad that at such a crucial time for the country a Member of the Parliament would behave in such a foolish way".

**Source:**

[http://www.ekathimerini.com/4dcgi/\\_w\\_articles\\_wsit\\_e1\\_1\\_06/01/2014\\_534738](http://www.ekathimerini.com/4dcgi/_w_articles_wsit_e1_1_06/01/2014_534738).

There is also a video which shows in details what happened that day.

**Source:** <http://www.inout.gr/showthread.php?t=124326>.



**March 2014.** The Archbishop of Cyprus was marked as homophobic and racist because he asked from all the Orthodox Churches during the Pan-orthodox Council in March 2014, to take unambiguous position against homosexuality and to condemn it.

**Source:** <https://left.gr/news/kypros-symfono-symviosis-kai-ratsistikes-omofovikes-diloseis>

**July 2014.** A film produced in Turkey with the title "*Code Sumela*" does not only deride the Orthodox Christians but also the priests and the sacraments of the Orthodox Church in order to show that Orthodox faith is allegedly for ignorant people only. The producers of the film used the name "*Sumela*" which is very important for the Orthodox as it is connected with the monastery which is dedicated to the All Holy Mother of God and is located in Turkey at Mela Mountain. This monastery is not only a worship place but also a historical monument. It was founded in 386 AD, during the reign of the Emperor Theodosius.



The authors of the film identify Christ with Mona Liza and consider the Holy Communion as a simple drink of alcohol. The actors in the film throw shoes to the icons and use the holy space of the church in order to chase one another.

**Source:** <http://www.ierovima.gr/pages/article.aspx?id=5931>

The Metropolitan of Xanthi (Church of Greece) condemned that film.

**Source:**<http://www.im-xanthis.gr/%CE%B4%CE%B5%CE%BB%CF%84%CE%B9%CE%BF-%CF%84%CF%85%CF%80%CE%BF%CF%85>

**December, 2014.** The Opera and Ballet Theater of Novosibirsk (Russia) presented a new production of Richard Wagner's opera *Tannhäuser* produced by Ainars Rubikis (musical director and conductor of the Novosibirsk theater) and by Timofei Kuliabin (director). The action of the drama was set in present days and Tannhäuser appears in it as a brilliant filmmaker, who produces a film *Grotto of Venus* telling the story of the allegedly sinful life of Jesus Christ in his young days.

The Orthodox Christians of Novosibirsk protested against the offensive presentation in the opera of the Jesus Christ's crucifixion. "I wrote letters to the Governor, to the Legislative Assembly and to the public prosecutor but received no reply yet. It has been almost a month now...We are not



experts and are not going to judge whether [the opera] is good or bad, we only speak about the respect for the rights of the faithful. There are rights and they have to be respected”, - said the Metropolitan Tikhon of Novosibirsk.

The director of the opera Timofei Kuliabin considers this approach to the opera production as erroneous and argues that the opera speaks only about Catholicism and thus the Orthodox people have no reasons for resentment.

The director of the opera Timofei Kuliabin is now accused of an administrative offence “deliberate public desecration of religious or theological literature, objects of religious veneration, signs or emblems of the world view symbols and attributes or their damage or destruction” (Art. 5.26 §2 of the Code of Administrative Offences of the Russian Federation). Director of the theater and opera director are now threatened with big fines. The hearing of the case was adjourned by the court of Novosibirsk for 10 March 2015.

**Sources :**

<http://ria.ru/religion/20150213/1047542650.html>

<http://tass.ru/obschestvo/1787783>

<http://www.pravmir.ru/postanovshhiki-operyi-tangeyzer-v-novosibirske-mogut-byit-oshtrafovanyi-za-oskorblenie-chuvstv-veruyushhih/#ixzz3Tb2fe0eb>

<http://www.pravmir.ru/mitropolit-novosibirskiy-tihon-usmotrel-narushenie-prav-veruyushhih-v-postanovke-operyi-vagnera/#ixzz3Tb28QSGA>

## Chapter 2

### Acts of Hostility Against Orthodox Priests and Church Staff.

**September 11, 2014.** The major of Stylida, Apostolos Gletsos, in Greece behaved aggressively against a priest during a religious ceremony just because he [the major] did not agree with the words of the ecclesiastical text. The Orthodox priest was invited to give his blessing for the new school year. During the ceremony and while the priest was chanting the Troparion of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross, the Major interrupted the priest and asked him to change the words because he didn't like them. The priest refused and he continued while the major left in the middle of the ceremony by showing a disrespectful behavior. After the end of the ceremony the major returned and started to offend the priest in front of the children, their parents and the journalists.

**Source:**

[http://www.newsit.gr/default.php?pname=Article&art\\_id=333358&catid=6](http://www.newsit.gr/default.php?pname=Article&art_id=333358&catid=6)

**September 26, 2014.** A Serbian Orthodox priest was victim of discrimination in Great Britain where the authorities refused to give him a visa, while at the same time they gave it to the representative of another religious group. The priest, farther Mladjenović was about to visit London, Birmingham, Nottingham and Derby where he would have a communication with other religious communities. He would also visit the British Parliament and the BBC. Father Mladjenović said that he had deposited the same documents and he had paid the same amount of money for the Visa as the Bosnians. Only the Serbians were rejected.

**Source:** <http://romfea.gr/diafora-ekklisiastika/26937-2014-09-26-08-02-53>.

**December 20, 2014.** The Chairman of the Moscow Patriarchate Department for External Church Relations, Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk had an official visit to Macedonia (FYROM). He met Archbishop Jovan (Vraniskovsky) of Ohrid in the “*Mother Theresa*” clinic in Skopje. Archbishop Jovan is being held in prison for three years because of as many believe to be false accusations. It should be noted that the archbishop has many serious health problems.

The Council of the Court of First Instance Skopje I, on January 9, 2015, ruled that Archbishop Jovan of Ohrid and Metropolitan of Skopje should be released from prison. The Public Prosecution issued a written statement that it would not file an appeal against that court decision for releasing of Archbishop Jovan. Unfortunately, the day of Epiphany 19<sup>th</sup> January, which is a public holiday and a non-working day in FYROM, the Public Prosecution has altered its stance, the media informed the public that he has indeed filed an appeal against the mentioned court decision, exactly on this day. Archbishop Jovan was not released from prison, despite the fact that there has been a court decision for his release. Finally the Archbishop was released on 2<sup>nd</sup> February 2015.

**Source:** <http://www.poa-info.org/archbishop/announcements/20150119.html>.

**Source:** <https://mospat.ru/en/2015/02/03/news115108/>

## Chapter 3

### The Right of Freedom of Assembly for Orthodox Christians.

**January 6, 2014.** During the celebration of Epiphany of Christ, homosexual couples gathered in Piraeus (Athens, Greece) where the celebration was taking place and they started kissing each other in a provocative way.



**Source:** <http://www.piraeuspress.gr/piraeus/dimos-peiraia/4887/peiraias-filomofulon-zeugarion-ston-agiasmo-ton-ydaton-foto>.



## Chapter 4

### Acts of Vandalism and Desecration Against Orthodox Worship and Sacred Places.

**February 23, 2014.** In Crete (Greece) the churches of Saint Spyridon and of Saint Paraskevi were broken in. Unknown persons tried to burn the icons and other worship objects. They destroyed some of the church equipment and fled.



**Source:** <http://www.ekriti.gr/article/neoi-vandalismo-i-se-ekklisies-ayti-ti-fora-sto-karavado>.

**March 1, 2014.** In Pogoni of North Epirus (Greece) some perpetrators burned the icons of the chapel of Mother of God and those that they couldn't burn were broken.



**Source:** <http://tsoutsouneros.arvanitis.eu/archives/46164>

**April 22, 2014.** In Kosovo the Minister of Environment Dardan Gashi wanted to demolish a church under construction arguing that it didn't have a planning permission. The Serbian Orthodox Church's Raska-Pizren eparchy which is in charge of the church condemned the statement of the Minister as a provocation aimed at disrupting inter-ethnic and inter-religious relations in Kosovo.



The Serbian Orthodox Church denied that the building was constructed illegally and said that it has all the documents required by the legislation. Moreover, the Church received confirmation from the authorities in Pristina and international institutions that the construction could be continued.

On 3<sup>rd</sup> October 2014, the Committee on Culture, Science, Education and Media of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe in Strasbourg discussed the report on "*Cultural heritage in crisis and post-crisis situations*". The Serbian delegation demanded the adoption of the Resolution with data about the 150 churches, monasteries and other religious buildings that had been destroyed in Kosovo. The adoption of a Resolution on the topic is expected in mid-2015.

**Source:** <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/kosovo-minister-urges-destruction-of-serb-orthodox-church>.

**Source :** [http://www.parlament.gov.rs/National\\_Assembly\\_Standing\\_Delegation\\_at\\_PACE\\_Session\\_in\\_Strasbourg.22582.537.html](http://www.parlament.gov.rs/National_Assembly_Standing_Delegation_at_PACE_Session_in_Strasbourg.22582.537.html)



**June 3, 2014.** In Aigion (Greece) an unidentified person pretended to venerate the miraculous icon of Mother of God (Panagia Trypiti) in the church of Aigion. He asked people present inside the church to leave him alone in front of the icon to pray. The person, responsible for the order in the church, respected his will and left him alone. Some minutes later the people in the church heard a noise of broken glass. Near the icon they

found stones which the visitor had hidden in his pocket and by which he attacked the icon breaking the glass protecting the holy image.

**Source:** <http://www.romfea.gr/ieres-mitropoleis/24719-2014-06-04-08-09-55>.

**July 31, 2014.** In Tripoli (Greece) the perpetrators irrupted into the chapel of Saint Theodore. They caused damages inside the chapel and stole the baptismal font (vessel for baptising children).



**Source:** <http://www.romfea.gr/diafora-ekklisiastika/25672-2014-07-31-06-58-45>.

**August 1, 2014.** In Kimolos (Greece) the chapel of Saint Andrew was vandalised. The unknown persons caused great damages not only to the icons but also to the altar of the worship building.



**Source:** <http://www.romfea.gr/diafora-ekklisiastika/25686-2014-08-01-07-37-25>.

**September 14, 2014.** In Crete (Greece) the day of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross: Sacrilegious persons vandalised the church of the Ascension Day, in Nida, 22 km from Anogia in Crete. A shepherd and his wife were passing by this small church and noticed the desecration.

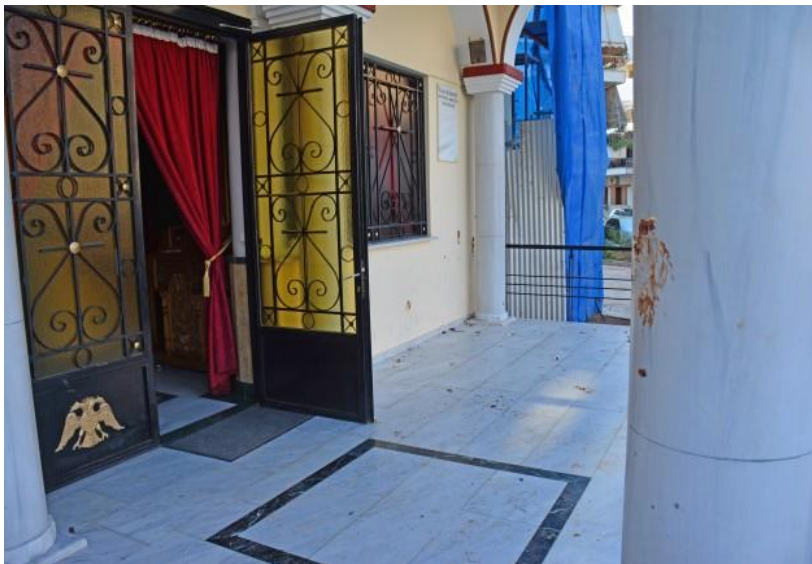
According to their testimony the perpetrators had urinated in the middle of the cloth that covers the Holy Altar. They took a small icon and after defecating in the church they took the bodily waste and spread it, by using the small icon as a spatula, to all the other icons around. At the same time the walls of the church



remained clean so it can be assumed that the offenders wanted only to desecrate the icons and the Altar. All the icons were defecated on the face of the saints. Then the attackers took the coal and wrote on the Holy Altar: “*Eat shit, it’s a treat from Zeus*”. Finishing this desecration, they threw the coal and some of the icons in the baptismal font.

**Source:** [http://news247.gr/eidiseis/koinonia/prwtofanhs\\_ierosylia\\_afodeysan\\_stis\\_e\\_ikones\\_toy\\_xristou\\_se\\_nao\\_sthn\\_krhth.3028047.html?service=print](http://news247.gr/eidiseis/koinonia/prwtofanhs_ierosylia_afodeysan_stis_e_ikones_toy_xristou_se_nao_sthn_krhth.3028047.html?service=print)

**September 14, 2014.** In Nafplio (Greece), at the same day as in Crete, in the church of Saints Konstantin and Helen, the sacristan who arrived early in the morning also found the walls and the staves full of bodily waste.



**Source:** [http://www.dogma.gr/default.php?pname=Article&art\\_id=6685&catid=3](http://www.dogma.gr/default.php?pname=Article&art_id=6685&catid=3)

**September 23, 2014.** In Turkey, the Orthodox Church of the Dormition of Mother of God in Cappadocia was burned in order to start the filming of a movie. The authors of the series “*Emanet*” caused so many damages in the church which provoked the reaction of the Turk director of the “*Foundation of Research and Protection of the buildings of Cappadocia*”. For this reason the director Mr. Tokmak denounced the authors to the District Attorney by mentioning a huge destruction. He also said that they didn’t have permission to enter the church that is why they broke the doors.



The church was built in 1849 and it is under protection as a historical monument.

**Source:** <http://www.tovima.gr/politics/article/?aid=634164>

**December 13, 2014.** Attackers vandalized the territory of the Orthodox source located close to the Holy Dormition Monastery in the city of Lipetsk (Russia). Vandals broke the protecting glasses of icons and dropped the iconostasis into the water. It is not the first time that the attackers are encroached on the font near the monastery. In previous years the vandals also broke the Crucifixion and damaged icons at the source.

Holy spring, named after the Mother of God "Life-giving Spring", located next to the ancient monastery of the Lipetsk Region - Holy Dormition Monastery. This place is venerated and beloved by many Orthodox faithful who come here to take water and to plunge into the water. The



source and the area around have been equipped on the public initiative.

**Source:** <http://www.le-eparchy.ru/node/3919>

## **Conclusion**

Even uncompleted report of 2014 on the violations of rights of Orthodox Christians shows that in some European countries, Orthodox Christians are among the religious groups which are easily stigmatised and harassed for the public promotion and defence of their convictions by different non-governmental organisations, public authorities or by individuals.

The Orthodox also face diffusion of negative stereotypes about them and deformation of the Orthodox Christianity. This falsely presents Orthodox Christians as being unable to participate in public life or retrogrades. Such approach is however offensive and disrespectful to Orthodox Christians.

Hostility toward Orthodox priests and the Church staff is also observed in 2014 in European countries. They suffer frequently from discrimination, verbal offenses or from physical violence.

The right to assembly of Orthodox Christians sometimes is violated by attacks from groups which have the intention to offend and interrupt with their presence a religious event.

The Orthodox worship building and sacred places are often damaged, violated and profaned.

Receiving in 2014 from Ukraine numerous pieces of information about serious violations of rights of the country's religious communities, especially of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate), the largest confession in the country, the Centre for Monitoring the Rights and Freedom of Orthodox Christians in Europe prepared a special report on the situation in Ukraine.

All facts mentioned in the report witness about absence of a satisfactory level of respect of rights of Orthodox Christians in some European societies. Continuing the monitoring and analytic work for 2015 Centre for Monitoring the Rights and Freedom of Orthodox Christians in Europe will elaborate its proposals for amelioration of the situation with the rights of Orthodox Christians.

## **Invitation for Cooperation**

The “**Centre for Monitoring the Rights and Freedom of Orthodox Christians in Europe**” invites for cooperation everyone, who can provide it with information about the violation of religious rights of Orthodox Christians in the member countries of the Council of Europe.

You can contact us by e-mail: [info@orthodoxrights.org](mailto:info@orthodoxrights.org)