

Turkey considering reopening Halki Seminary, Justice Minister Sadullah Ergin says

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The Greek Orthodox Halki (Heybeliada) Seminary in İstanbul, the only school where the Greek minority in Turkey used to educate its clergymen, was closed in 1971 during a period of tension with Greece. (Photo: Cihan; Usame Ari)

Justice Minister Sadullah Ergin has said the Turkish government is considering reopening the Greek Orthodox seminary on Heybeliada, a demand long pursued by Turkey's Greek community.

The Greek Patriarchate is an institution under the protection of international law as guaranteed by the Treaty of Lausanne. It has long complained about the status of the Halki Seminary as well as other property issues in Turkey. Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I has repeatedly said that the reopening of the seminary is of vital importance to the survival of the Greek Orthodox clergy.

Established in 1844 on the island of Heybeliada off İstanbul, Halki Seminary was closed in 1971 under a law that placed religious and military training under state control. The EU and US frequently criticize Turkey for not reopening the Halki Seminary, a decision which experts say is related to Turkey's interpretation of secularism.

Speaking on a TV program on Wednesday, Minister Ergin said: "The reopening of the Halki Seminary is among the many topics currently being discussed [during the drafting of the new constitution]. We will all see the results. It is a political decision.

The Halki Seminary might be opened.”

Government officials have repeated the possibility of reopening the school many times before, but Ergin’s statement is still good news, according to Fener Greek Patriarchate spokesperson Father Dositheos Anagnostopoulos. However, he noted that how the school is reopened is as important as if it will reopened, if not more so.

“This is great news, but I would like to know in what way [in terms of conditions of operation] they are opening it,” he told Today’s Zaman over the phone. “We haven’t had an open dialogue with Ankara [regarding the conditions under which the school would reopen]. We have let them know that we want the school to function as it did before. In what way are they opening it? This is nice, it is hopeful, but what matters is how it is going to be.”

He also said that even if concrete steps were taken to eventually open the school, it is unlikely that this can be realized anytime soon. Explaining that Orthodox schools traditionally open on Sept. 1 each year, he noted: “I don’t think we could make it [in time for] Sept. 1 this year, even if it was passed. I hope it opens, but students will have to be enrolled, professors will have to move from abroad and there is a lot bureaucracy there with permissions from Ankara,” Anagnostopoulos said.

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