Metropolitan Hilarion: Decision of the Turkish authorities looks like a conscious aggravation of interreligious relations

Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk, head of the Department for External Church Relations, gives comments to RIA-Novosti about the decision made by Turkey's Council of State on 10 July 2020 to change the status of Hagia Sophia Cathedral in Istanbul.

- What do the decision of Turkey's Council of State and Erdogan's decree on the status of Sophia mean?

- The Council of State of Turkey has repealed the 1934 Decision of the Turkish Government on the status of the Hagia Sophia Museum. On this basis, the president of Turkey has placed the edifice under the jurisdiction of Turkey's Department for Religious Affairs for organizing services in it. Hagia Sophia has become a mosque again just as it was in the Ottoman era.

- What can account for this decision? Is there a shortage of mosques in Turkey?

- The decision is accounted for by the internal political realities of the country, in the first place, by the demands of the most radical part of the Muslims. To all appearances, for the present leaders of Turkey they are more important than the world public opinion and the attitude of the Local Orthodox Churches or, say, the negative reaction of UNESCO.

- **Are some compromise decisions possible and what are they (perhaps, to divide the edifice for a parallel use by Moslems by Fridays and Christians by Sundays)?**

- I do not know of examples of such compromises and I do not think they would be possible or appropriate in the given situation.

- How will this decision affect the relations with Turkey and pilgrimage and tourism?

- It will certainly complicate them? For Orthodox Christians, Sophia of Constantinople remains a shrine of world significance, and its return to the status of mosque will be taken negatively by many people, including in our country. I would not like to make harsh assessments but such a decision looks like a conscious aggravation of interreligious relation both in Turkey and throughout the world. I am not the

one who assigns those responsible; they will be assigns by history.

Interviewer Olga Lipich

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