



United Nations Human Rights Council, 45th Session (14 September to 6 October 2020)

Universal Periodic Review: Turkey

Speaker: Humanists UK representative, Richard Thompson¹

We wish to raise concerns about the increasing normalisation of hate speech and discriminatory statements in the public discourse in Turkey.² This is leading to discrimination towards religious or belief minorities and undermining long-held secular principles, as well as freedom of expression and social liberties.

We are concerned that such discriminatory attitudes are being perpetuated within Turkey's education system, where religious education is predominantly taught from the perspective of Sunni Hanefi Islam. Such classes are compulsory and when students opt out, both they and their parents are required to reveal their religion or belief publicly.³ We ask the Turkish Ministry of Education to make faith-based religious education an elective rather than compulsory subject. We also recommend that the topic of evolution is restored to the school curriculum after its removal from textbooks in 2017.

Although freedom of expression is theoretically protected by the current constitution, it is increasingly undermined in practice. Article 216 of the penal code outlaws blasphemy, which is punishable by a prison sentence.⁴ There is also Government pressure to reform the constitution. We call on Turkey to instead repeal its blasphemy law, in order to protect freedom of religion or belief, and to prioritise investigating hate crimes towards religion or belief minorities.

Thank you.

¹ Humanists UK is the operating name of the British Humanist Association.

² Human Rights Council, Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review Thirty-fifth session. *Compilation on Turkey Report of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights*. <https://undocs.org/A/HRC/WG.6/35/TUR/2>

³ Humanists International, *Freedom of Thought Report 2019: Turkey*.

<https://fot.humanists.international/countries/asia-western-asia/turkey/>

⁴ Ibid