centuries and which stands as the symbol of a great Christian empire, the Byzantine, which flourished for more than 1000 years, is yet another indication of how Turkey (a candidate for accession to the EU) interprets respect for the symbols of other religions.

What action can the Commission take as a matter of urgency to place this symbolic Christian church under the protection of a European organisation (with the possible participation of the Commission’s Directorate-General for Education and Culture) to guard it against the kind of desecration and damage described above?

Answer given by Mr Verheugen on behalf of the Commission

(22 December 2003)

In its reply to written questions E-2962/03 by Mr Alavanos (1) and E-2995/03 by Ms Kratsa-Tsagaropoulou (2), the Commission has commented on concerns similar to those expressed by the Honourable Member. The Commission monitors the progress achieved by Turkey in adopting the relevant ‘acquis’ in the area of culture, as part of Turkey’s preparations for membership. Safeguarding the national heritage is not part of Community competence.

As regards any possible action, the Community’s financial assistance programme for Turkey does not allow to provide support for conserving and restoring religious or cultural works, such as those stored in the Hagia Sofia.

(1) OJ C 78 E, 27.3.2004, p. 771.
(2) See page 125.

(2004/C 88 E/0661) WRITTEN QUESTION E-3366/03 by Avril Doyle (PPE-DE) to the Commission

(14 November 2003)

Subject: Human rights situation in Chechnya

Can the Commission outline what action has been taken by the European Union to highlight the human rights violations and the breaches of international humanitarian law in Chechnya, with particular reference to the cases of Said-Khusein Imakaev and his father Said Khusein.

Can the Commission also indicate whether these issues will be discussed at the imminent EU-Russian Summit to be held in Rome on 6 November and give a brief report on the outcome of this meeting, with particular reference to Chechnya.

Answer given by Mr Patten on behalf of the Commission

(18 December 2003)

The Commission is closely following developments in Chechnya. The Commission supports a political solution to the conflict, which respects Russia’s territorial integrity, as well as all genuine efforts to bring about a lasting peace.

The Commission is aware of, and concerned about, disturbing reports of human rights violations in Chechnya. The Commission is also aware of the case to which reference is made, which has been presented to the European Court of Human Rights. Regrettably, it is not isolated: a total of 2 343 people have disappeared since August 1999, according to data from the office of Mr Sultygov, the Presidential Representative for Human Rights in Chechnya. Human Rights organisations report that several hundred people have gone missing in Chechnya (many of them in forced disappearances) in 2003.
The Commission used the occasion of the European Council on 6 November 2003 in Rome to express its concern at reports of ongoing human rights abuses. The Commission continues to stress the need to end the culture of impunity for perpetrators of human rights abuses on all sides of the conflict.

The Commission also expressed its concern at the closure of camps for internally displaced persons in Ingushetia. The Commission considers it of the utmost importance that internally displaced persons are not left with no option but to return to Chechnya. This is particularly so, in view of the fact that the security situation in Chechnya has, if anything, deteriorated since the constitutional referendum and Presidential elections, and in view of the poor humanitarian situation. On this latter point, the Commission regrets that Russia has not yet taken concrete measures to facilitate the provision of humanitarian aid — by providing non-governmental organisations (NGOs) with access to United Nations Very High Frequency (UNVHF) communications, by ensuring security for aid workers (the case of kidnapped humanitarian aid worker Arjan Erkel was specifically raised) and by allowing the Humanitarian Aid Office (ECHO) to open an office in Nazran, Ingushetia — despite repeated requests to do so.

The Commission will continue to use relevant Union/Russia political dialogue meetings to call on the Russian authorities to improve the situation in the north Caucasus.

The Commission provides support to NGOs in the region via the European Initiative for Democracy and Human Rights, with the aim of supporting the development of a functioning civil society. A number of training programmes have also been implemented in cooperation with the Council of Europe.

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(2004/C 88 E/0662) WRITTEN QUESTION E-3377/03
by Elisabeth Schröder (Verts/ALE) and Inger Schörling (Verts/ALE) to the Commission
(14 November 2003)

Subject: Oil extraction by Russia in the Baltic Sea, near the Curonian Spit (D6 oil deposit)

The Russian oil company LUKoil will begin oil extraction from the D6 oil deposit before the end of 2003. D6 is located only 22 km from the Russian coast and 6 km from the Lithuanian border. Oil spills would endanger the Curonian Spit in Russia and Lithuania, and possibly the Finnish and Swedish coast as well. The Curonian Spit is a World Heritage site, a national park and will be part of Natura 2000 after Lithuanian accession. It is already receiving LIFE funding. The area is known for its sensitive environment. Tourism, dependent on clean beaches, represents a major economic factor in the area. A transparent, international EIA has not been conducted by the Russian authorities. The second Northern Dimension Action Plan approved in mid-October calls for cooperation with Russia in order to comply with the Espoo Convention and implement cross-border cooperation on environmental issues.

1. Does the Commission believe the project to be environmentally safe?

(a) If so, how can the Commission explain the fact that an international EIA, involving Lithuania, has not been conducted and that the national EIA has been highly secretive?

(b) If not, will the Commission assume its responsibility for an appropriate impact assessment for a project affecting a Natura 2000 area by supporting the Unesco World Heritage Committee in insisting on an international, transparent EIA with international experts, as prescribed by the Espoo and Helsinki Conventions?