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The increasing trend in hate speech and hate crimes against the Turkish Minority of Western Thrace in Greece

Dear Moderator,

Distinguished representatives, delegates and NGO representatives,

Despite efforts of European states to eradicate racism and intolerance with manifestations of hate crime, crimes motivated by bias or hatred remain a daily reality across the EU region, including Greece. In his letter of 25 July 2016 addressed to Mr. Toskas, Alternate Minister of Interior and of Administrative Reconstruction of Greece, and to Mr. Paraskevopoulos, Minister of Justice of Greece, the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, Nils Muižnieks noted that during his last visit to the country, he received reports indicating an increase of hate crimes in Greece.¹

This issue has intensively been discussed during Greece's UPR Second Cycle Review held on 3 May 2016 at the 25th Session of the UPR Working Group, and several Member States made recommendations to Greece on the prevention of hate crimes against vulnerable groups including religious minorities.

The Muslim Turkish Minority of Western Thrace², which is the only recognized minority as "Muslim minority in Thrace" in Greece had become a target of hate-motivated attacks in the past five years. The United States Mission to the United Nations in Geneva has also raised its concern about instances of discrimination against members of the Muslim minority during the second-cycle-review of Greece.

¹<https://wcd.coe.int/ViewDoc.jsp?p=&id=2437603&Site=COE&BackColorInternet=DBDCF2&BackColorIntranet=FD8C864&BackColorLogged=FDC864&direct=true>

² Under the 1923 Lausanne Peace Treaty, Turkish Minority of Western Thrace has an equal right with the non-Muslim minority in Turkey to establish, manage and control at their own expense, any charitable, religious and social institution, any school and other establishment for instruction and education, with the right to use their own language and to exercise their own religion freely therein. Greece only recognizes a "Muslim minority in Thrace" and denies the existence of an ethnic Turkish minority in Western Thrace.

The U.S. International Religious Freedom Report for 2015 on Greece mentioned that there were incidents of vandalism of Jewish cemeteries and memorials and attacks on Muslim houses of worship³. Throughout the year of 2015 and the start of 2016, many hate crimes motivated by racism were conducted against the people and institutions of the Muslim Turkish Minority of Western Thrace. Today there is a risk of tension, and even conflict in the region of Western Thrace based on the provocative events that have taken place in the recent months.

On 7 March 2015, In Dimetoka(Didimoticho), a town inhabited with a significant proportion of Turkish Minority members, Dimetoka Muslims, Sports, Cultural and Educational Association was attacked by unknown assailants. Nobody was injured, but windows were broken⁴.

On 10 April 2015, Easter is celebrated in Echinós, a minority village in Xanthi's mountainous area, where no Christians live in but keeps a church at the entrance of the village. A group of Greek Orthodox Christians, composed of 55-60 including commande soldiers from the 4th Army Corps and retired military officers, carried wooden crosses and candles along the streets of Echinós and celebrated Good Friday in St. Giorgios Church⁵.

On 17 April 2015, the Komotini (Gümülcine) Mahmutağa mosque located in the same yard as Yenice Neighbourhood Minority School in Komotini, was set on fire by an unidentified person or persons in the morning⁶. At the Alankuyu Masjid, a hundred meters away, trees were cut. Another noteworthy aspect of this attack is that the elected Mufti of Komotini İbrahim Şerif's residence is very close.

On 8 December 2015, the only political party of the Western Thrace Turkish Minority, the Friendship Equality and Peace (FEP) Party suffered an attack. The new headquarters of the FEP Party was attacked during the late hours by an organization called "ΟΙ ΦΡΟΥΡΟΙ ΤΗΣ ΘΡΑΚΗΣ" –"Guardians of Thrace"; the building's windows were broken and the organisation's name was written on the walls with blue paint. Also a photocopy machine was broken, cupboards and mirrors were smashed⁷. The most painful was the theft of the Party's founder and minority's leader Dr. Sadik Ahmet's car, in which he lost his life in 1995. Following these events, the criminal complaint and investigation started by the police, like in other attacks, brought no solution and no official explanation by authorities regarding the attack.

Another hate crime was reported in Xanthi on 28 January 2016. Fully covered with masks, a group of men kidnapped an imam who is working at the Elected Mufti Office of Xanthi and forced him to get on a minibus. According to the imam, they threatened him saying that they would kill the Elected Mufti of Xanthi and would attack his children. They also told that they were closely following the movements of the Mufti Office. The perpetrators called themselves "The Guardians of Thrace" and in the end they released the imam to bring these threatening messages to the Mufti himself. It is important to note that all perpetrators of these attacks remain unknown and unpunished. Therefore, we urge the Government of Greece to find the perpetrators, and try them at a court. Also, we stress the importance of taking the necessary steps to prevent similar future hate crimes against the Minority of Western Thrace and other groups in the country.

According to the statement by the Elected Mufti of Xanthi Ahmet Mete, the Mufti has constantly been receiving death threats since he was elected Mufti in 2007. He noted that if anything happens to him or his family, the responsible would be the Greek State, because the elected Muftis are under threat while performing their religious duties.⁸ The hatred against representatives and institutions of the Muslim Turkish Minority of Western Thrace has increased in the last few years and the organization that names itself "The Guardians of Thrace" targets the autochthonous Turkish

³ <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm#wrapper>

⁴ <http://www.trakyaninsesi.com/haber/4592/dimetoka-musulmanlari-dernegine-saldiri.html>

⁵ <http://www.birlikgazetesi.info/haberler/10165-ahnde-qpaskalya-aynq-.html>

⁶ <http://www.trakyaninsesi.com/haber/5026/gumulcinede-camii-kundaklandi.html>

⁷ <http://www.debpartis.org/indexENG1.php?s=detailsENG&id=3963>

⁸ <http://www.iskecemuftulugu.org/haber.php?duvid=353>

minority in the region. ECRI Report on Greece (fifth monitoring cycle) notes that the influence of the offices of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in issues concerning the Minority creates a perception that members of the Minority are not equal citizens and that they are still perceived as “others” in their home country where they have lived for centuries.⁹

Another hate-motivated incident took place at the EP building in Brussels. On 2 March 2016, our organization, Federation of Western Thrace Turks in Europe (ABTTF) organised a conference at the European Parliament in Brussels in association with the Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization (UNPO). The conference, hosted by Csaba Sógor MEP (EPP) and entitled ‘Freedom of Association in Greece: A Loophole in European Minority Rights Standards’, received unexpected attention as two Golden Dawn MEPs (non-attached) came to the meeting room just before the beginning of the conference and verbally attacked and threatened the host MEP Csaba Sógor. They were caught on camera attempting to derail the conversation, immediately denying the existence of any minority other than the ‘Muslim minority’ referred to in the Lausanne Treaty¹⁰.

A last incident took place in the Greek parliament. On 4 August 2016, during the parliamentary debate regarding the construction of a mosque in Athens, SYRIZA MP from Xanthi Hüseyin Zeybek, a member of the Turkish Minority of Western Thrace, was attacked by neo-Nazi Golden Dawn MPs Ilias Panagiotaros and Yannis Lagos. During the debate in the parliament, Golden Dawn MPs accused him of recently burning the Greek flag during the funeral of a young minority member who died while performing his military service in the Greek army. Another Golden Dawn MP Yannis Lagos called Hüseyin Zeybek ‘pro-Turk’ and a ‘Turkish agent’ during the debate. The Vice President of Parliament Nikitas Kaklamanis intervened and ordered the Golden Dawn MPs to ‘sit down’ and leave the room¹¹.

We note with very concern that the Turkish Minority of Western Thrace has been a target of hate crime attack in recent years and persons, institutions and places of worship belonging to the Turkish minority are being attacked by unknown perpetrators. There is a very high concern that the stability and peace in the region may break down and would escalate the tensions in the society.

We request from the Greek Government to take result-oriented measures for eliminating discrimination and hate speech against the Minority and to improve diversity throughout the system by eliminating prejudices and to develop strategies that are inclusive of minorities which would be part of an overall governmental policy for the promotion and protection of minority rights in the country.

We kindly request OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities Ms. Astrid Thors and her Office to pay a greater attention to the risk of escalation of tensions in the region of Western Thrace in Greece.

⁹ https://www.coe.int/t/dghl/monitoring/ecri/Country-by-country/Greece/Greece_CBC_en.asp

¹⁰ <http://www.xryshaygh.com/enimerosi/view/anthellhniko-aischos-sthn-eurwboulh-to-laiko-komma-nd-sundiorganwnei-ekdhlw>

¹¹ <http://www.tovima.gr/en/article/?aid=820062>