



Avrupa Batı Trakya Türk Federasyonu Föderation der West-Thrakien Türken in Europa Federation of Western Thrace Turks in Europe Ευρωπαϊκή Ομοσπονδία Τούρκων Δυτικής Θράκης Fédération des Turcs de Thrace Occidentale en Europe

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WORKING SESSION 9: Tolerance and non-discrimination (continued)

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Dear Moderator,
Distinguished representatives,
And esteemed NGO Delegates,

The right to education is one of the core principles in international human rights and it should be faithfully implemented by all participating States. In the 1990 Copenhagen Document, OSCE participating States noted the critical role of education to promote tolerance in the context of the principles of non-discrimination and equality.

Education plays an essential role in countering racism, xenophobia, anti-Semitism, aggressive nationalism and other forms of intolerance, including against Muslims, Christians and members of other religions. Principle of equality and non-discrimination in the enjoyment of the right to education is a key to securing equal access to quality education for persons belonging to minority groups.

The Turkish community in Western Thrace, Greece is granted with the right to education in its mother tongue and autonomy in the management of its educational institutions with the Treaty of Lausanne which determined the status and basic rights in general. Although the Turkish community in the region has autonomous structure in the field of education under the 1923 Lausanne Treaty, more than 60 minority primary schools in the region have been closed down with the decision of the Ministry of Education, Research and Religion on closure of schools with low number of pupils since 2010.

According to the decision of the Directorate of Primary and Secondary Education in the Eastern Macedonia and Thrace State on July 11, 2017, three more primary schools belonging to the Turkish community in Western Thrace were closed down. Karakurca and Kizilagac minority primary schools in Rhodope province and Kütüklü minority primary schools in Evros province will be closed in the 2017-2018 academic year due to the low number of students.

Furthermore there are no bilingual kindergartens or nurseries for the Turkish children to learn their mother tongue in their early childhood, although compulsory education includes pre-school education under a law adopted in 2006. As noted in the U.S. International Religious Freedom

Report for 2016 on Greece, leaders of the Turkish community in the region continued to criticize the absence of bilingual kindergartens in Thrace¹.

The European Commission against Racism and Intolerance of the Council of Europe (ECRI) mentioned in its fifth report on Greece in 2015 that there are no special measures for the minority under Law No. 3518/2006 which has made pre-school education compulsory. The ECRI noted that the Government has rejected proposals to open Turkish- Greek bilingual kindergartens in the existing bilingual primary schools and referred to the case in Echinus where the regional school inspectors refused to enroll 20 children who had not attended the obligatory kindergarten and dismissed a bilingual school's principal, who had registered and taught them. The ECRI stressed that children's right to schooling should not be jeopardized and further recommended that the authorities should take all necessary steps to ensure that minority children have access to a bilingual or monolingual elementary school, as per their parents' choice². There is still no step taken by Greek authorities or there are no plans on how to avoid such situations like in Echinus in the next school year.

Despite many applications by the community organizations for establishment of bilingual kindergartens within the special education system that the Turkish community has been granted and establishment of other private bilingual kindergartens in the region, the Greek government rejected proposals to open Turkish- Greek bilingual kindergartens in the existing bilingual primary schools and rather adopted a legal framework in August 2017 for the implementation of a pilot project which envisages that a bilingual minority member, graduated from one of the higher education institutions in Greece, would work with a teacher in a kindergarten class in public schools in six provinces where children belonging to the Turkish community in Western Thrace lives. Previously, the Institute of Educational Policies under the Ministry of Education of Greece declared that the pilot project would be implemented in the remaining part of the academic year in six public kindergartens for an easy adaptation of the children to kindergartens, where minority children have no option than to go the public kindergartens since there is no permit for minority kindergartens in the country.

The U.S. report further noted that the Greek government provided funding to the Muslim minority in Thrace to select and pay salaries of teachers of Islam in state schools and the salaries of the three official muftis appointed by the state. Law on Muslim Preachers (4115/2013), which is known as "240 Imams Law", provides appointment of 240 "Quran teachers" who would offer their services in the public schools of primary and secondary education and mosques in Western Thrace under the auspices of the official muftis who are appointed by the State itself.

Despite strong objection by the Turkish community to the law, Islamic preachers were trained and appointed to public schools in the region and textbooks in Greek language for teaching Islam in public schools were prepared. For its further implementation, the Greek Ministry of Education made an announcement in August 2017 for filling of positions of in the region and noted that 120 positions of Islamic preachers will be recruited under a fixed term contract of nine months duration.

The leaders of the Turkish community note that the law would in practice allow the government to exercise state control over religion through the appointment of religious officers i.e. Imams to mosques and public schools under the realm authority of the official Muftis (appointed) in Xanthi, Komotini and in Didymoteicho, whom are not accepted and recognized by members of the Muslim Turkish community.

¹ <https://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm#wrapper>

² <https://www.coe.int/t/dghl/monitoring/ecri/Country-by-country/Greece/GRC-CbC-V-2015-001-ENG.pdf>

The religious autonomy of the Muslim Turkish community in Western Thrace has been undermined and diminished by governmental practices over years through legislations without prior consultation or opinion sharing with the representatives of the Turkish community.

We regret that the Turkish community in Western Thrace has no right to take a part in decision-making processes in issues which directly affect its daily life. We, again, request from Greek authorities to repeal Law 4115/2013 and respect freedom of religion or belief, including the right to choose their own clergyman to teach Quran.

We would like to the OSCE/ODIHR Advisory Panel of Experts on Freedom of Religion or Belief to ensure that the participating States respect the right of the religious minorities and communities to select, appoint and replace their personnel in accordance with their respective requirements and standards in accordance with Vienna 1989, Questions Relating to Security in Europe.