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The right to education in mother tongue of the Turkish Minority of Western Thrace and the problem of bilingual minority kindergartens in Greece

Dear President,
Distinguished representatives
And esteemed NGO delegates,

Every person has the right to education which encompasses free and equal access to education provisions as well as the obligation to rule out discrimination at all levels of the educational system, to set minimum standards and to improve quality of education. The lack of equal access to quality education leads to denial of civil and political rights of children belonging to national minorities and segregation in society due to the marginalization of minority children.

The 1990 Copenhagen Document clearly states that the OSCE participating States will endeavour to ensure that persons belonging to national minorities have adequate opportunities for instruction of their mother tongue or in their mother tongue. Yet Greece is still very far away to fulfil her commitment arising from the regarding document on her territories.

The Turkish Minority of Western Thrace in Greece is granted with the right to education in its mother language and autonomy in the management of its education institutions under the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne which has determined the status and the basic rights of the Minority in general. As enshrined in the Section III of the Lausanne Treaty, the Turkish Minority of Western Thrace shall have an equal right to establish manage and control at its own expense, any charitable, religious and social institutions, any schools and other establishments for instruction and education, with the right to use its own language and to exercise its own religion freely therein. Furthermore, the right to education is provided by Article 16 of the Greek Constitution which defines the scope and aim of education for the development of an ethnic and religious consciousness.

However, the children belonging to the Turkish Minority of Western Thrace in Greece have been discriminated with respect to the right to education in mother tongue at the preschool level for a couple of years. Under Law 3518/2006, the compulsory period in education in Greece has been extended from nine to ten years starting from the school year 2007-2008 and the pre-school education for all children who are 5 years old has been made compulsory. The regarding law does not bring any regulation about ethnic and cultural characteristics of the children in Greece, therefore all children, who have completed their age of five, are obliged to attend public kindergartens where the instruction is only in Greek.

Since the regarding law does not bring any regulation concerning the schools belonging to the Turkish Minority, it contradicts with the principle of educational autonomy enshrined in the Lausanne Treaty. The right not to be discriminated is violated because Greece without an objective and reasonable justification fails to treat the children belonging to the Turkish Minority differently, who speak a different mother tongue other than Greek. This violates the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union and EU Charter of Fundamental Rights and the Council of Europe's Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, which Greece signed but not ratified yet.

Furthermore, it is recommended from a pedagogical perspective that it is crucial for children to learn the mother tongue well enough and it facilitates children's learning and a second language easily and fluently. However, Greece does not allow the establishment of bilingual minority kindergartens within minority schooling system. Furthermore, it does not allow minority institution to build and operate private bilingual kindergartens. 211 local representatives of the Turkish minority signed a petition in 2010 for the inclusion of pre-school education into the bilingual education scheme in Western Thrace. Although the petition was submitted to the Greek Ministry of Education, it was not taken into consideration by relevant Greek authorities. Culture and Education Foundation of Western Thrace Minority (CEFOM) had applied to the Greek local authorities for establishment of a private bilingual kindergarten in 2011. The Greek authorities did not respond the establishment of the first private bilingual kindergarten in Western Thrace.

When the former UN Independent Expert on Minority Issues, Gay McDougall, visited Greece on 8-16 September 2008¹, she stated a commonly stated problem is the absence of bilingual kindergartens for the Minority in Western Thrace. Four years later, Willy Fautre, who wrote a report following the fact-finding mission the Federation of Western Thrace Turks in Europe (ABITTF) and the Friendship Equality Peace (FEP) Party organized on 16- 20 October 2012 with the participation of President of Federal Union of European Nationalities (FUEN) Hans Heinrich Hansen and former MEP François Alfonsi (France) noted one of the most important problems stated during consultations with the Minority representatives and civil society organizations is pre-school minority education for the Turkish Minority of Western Thrace.

In the beginning of school year 2012-2013, some children belonging to the Turkish Minority of Western Thrace in Echinós (Şahin) village of Xanthi were not enrolled to the first grade of the primary school on the ground that those children had not attended public kindergarten. During the fact-finding mission in Western Thrace in October 2012, the international delegation also visited Echinós (Şahin) village in Xanthi and met parents of those children belonging to the Turkish Minority. During consultations, the parents stated they do not want to send their children to public kindergartens where the language of education is only in Greek. The problem was solved in November 2012, this, however, does not mean a long-lasting solution to the problem of bilingual minority kindergartens.

¹ A/HRC/10/11/Add.3 para. 24, <http://daccess-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G09/111/98/PDF/G0911198.pdf?OpenElement>

The problem is still pending and Minority children are still obliged to attend public kindergartens in the school year 2014-2015. In June 2014, FUEN, the European Association of Daily Newspapers in Minority and Regional Languages (MIDAS), representatives of the Danish minority in Germany and representatives of the German minority in Denmark in partnership with ABTTF, Western Thrace Minority University Graduates Association (WTMUGA) and FEP Party carried a fact-finding mission to Western Thrace, and the delegation met the parents of the 20 minority children in Echinos (Şahin). The delegation noted with great concern the Minority children are still obliged to attend public kindergartens where the education is only in Greek and the demand for bilingual minority kindergartens is still being disregarded by the Greek authorities, though eight years time have been elapsed since the adoption of the regarding law.

We would like to remind that education is both a human right in itself and an indispensable way of realizing other human rights. Education is central to promoting the identity of individuals and expressing their identity, while it allows persons belonging to national minorities to pass on their culture to future generations, preserving and developing their minority characteristics. Under Law 3518/2006, the right of children belonging to the Turkish Minority of Western to use their own language and have education in mother tongue has been violated.

Greece should provide adequate opportunities to persons belonging to the Turkish Minority of Western Thrace to learn their mother tongue or to learn through the medium of the mother tongue, alternatives which should not be understood as mutually exclusive. In the particular context of pre-school education, delivery of educational services with the established bilingual minority kindergartens is a right stemming from their right to establish, maintain and manage its own educational institutions.

We urge the Greek State to respect its obligations under the Treaty of Lausanne and take measures in order to restore the autonomous structure in the field of education. We expect from the Greek State to respect, protect and promote the rights enshrined in the Lausanne Treaty and act in full compliance with the provisions of the Treaty and the core international human rights treaties to which Greece is also a party.

Thus, and specifically with respect to the problem in the pre-school level of education, we call on the Greek government:

- To establish bilingual minority kindergartens in Western Thrace in line with the minority schooling system.
- To give bilingual education in public kindergartens in the region until bilingual minority schools are established.
- To allow the Turkish Minority of Western Thrace to establish private kindergartens where the language of education will be in Turkish and Greek.

Thank you for your attention.