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National minorities

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**Florina/Lerin & Blagoevgrad/Gorna Dzumaja, Wednesday, 20 September
2006 by Georgios N. Papadakis**

http://www.eurolang.net/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=2711&Itemid=0

Greece and Bulgaria are continuously failing to comply with international accords concerning human rights and protection of ethnic and linguistic minorities, while historic-based propaganda is used to justify the hostile attitude of both states towards their Macedonian minorities. These were the main conclusions of the European Free Alliance's, a European Parliament political party (EFA), fact-finding mission in the region held last week. It was led by the Catalan MEP and EFA Vice President , Bernat Joan i Mari, and the Party's co-director Guenther Dauwen.

In a press conference held in the city of Florina/Lerin after the European Free Alliance delegation's meetings with Greek local authorities, Bernat Joan i Mari stressed that it is unacceptable and counter-productive to continue to deny the existence of the Macedonian people and their language and urged Greece to organize an open census allowing Macedonians to declare their ethnic, linguistic and cultural origin.

The Catalan MEP, who sits on the Culture Committee of the European Parliament and a sociolinguist by profession, rejected the Greek allegations that Macedonian is a not a distinct and different language. He concluded that now is the time to overcome the burdens intentionally raised by Greece's obsession with disputable historical facts and look towards the future based on the present situation.

The EFA representatives had the chance to witness how Greece deals with the issue of Macedonians living in the country in a meeting with high-ranking officials from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and university professors in Thessaloniki/Solun.

Although the delegation was invited to visit Greece by local EFA affiliate party EFA-Rainbow, which campaigns for recognition of the Macedonian minority, the representatives of this party were expelled from the above-mentioned meeting because they did not have a personal invitation. It is considered by EFA Rainbow that it is part of the policy of the Greek state to avoid any kind of direct dialogue with Macedonians.

The fact finding mission of EFA continued in the Pirin region of Bulgaria, home to the majority of ethnic Macedonians. According to Guenther Dauwen the situation there resembles that in Greece, Bulgaria recognises no separate Macedonian nation or language and puts all sorts of obstacles in order to avoid electoral participation of Macedonian political parties. For example, Bulgaria changed the law for the formation of a legal political party. Now 5,000 signatures are required for the official application instead of 500 in the past.

OMO Ilinden Pirin, the organization for Macedonians in Bulgaria, and EFA observer member, is so far the only victim of the 5,000 quota policy, they also face hostile Bulgarian authorities and press. Stojan Georgiev, vice president of OMO Ilinden Pirin, told the delegation that after a request to host an event in the city of Blagoevgrad/Gorna Dzumaja, the mayor replied that they should go to Macedonia to do it.

According to OMO Ilinden Pirin the mainstream media often use defamatory statements when referring to the Macedonians in Bulgaria. EFA were told during the visit that there were reports that OMO Ilinden Pirin tried to "bribe" Roma and Turks in the city of Goce Delcev with 50 leva (24 euro) in order to collect the necessary amount of signatures for the registration of the party. Georgiev categorically rejected these allegations, pointing to the miserable financial situation of the party and its members and urged EFA to intervene so that the EU makes the recognition of the Macedonian minority conditional to Bulgaria's EU accession.

Last Sunday in Istanbul, speaking to a conference organized by Turkish associations from western Thrace in Greece, Turkish PM, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, accused Greece of ignoring international treaties and not applying the commitments it undertook regarding the protection of minorities. He also urged the EU to take a closer look at member states that do not fulfil certain human rights criteria while at the same time being extremely critical to candidate countries over the same issues. (Eurolang 2006)

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