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**The Role of Political Parties in Western Thrace – Greece
And the Right of Political Participation of
WESTERN THRACE TURKISH MINORITY**

An estimated number of 150.000 ethnic Turks live in the North-East part of Greece. Members of the Muslim Turkish Minority, who have been living in this region for centuries, identify themselves as ethnic Turks. The legal status of this minority was established by the Peace Treaty of Lausanne which was signed in 1923, the bilateral agreements signed between Greece and Turkey and the international instruments concerning human and minority rights which Greece signed and ratified.

Universal Declaration of Human Rights, International Covenant on Civic and Political Rights, European Convention on Human Rights, Declaration on the rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities, 1990 Copenhagen Document and other relevant documents defined the right to political participation and representation of minorities.

In line with those documents the States shall respect the right to political participation and representation of minorities as well as the right to participation to decision making procedures. Also, States shall encourage full and effective political participation of minorities in order to develop a peaceful and democratic society.

In the process of exercising the right to political participation, the equality between persons belonging to minorities and those belonging to the majorities have to be guaranteed.

The equal right to political participation of minorities can be associated with their ability to exercise other fundamental rights including their recognition, freedom of opinion and expression, freedom of assembly, and freedom of association.

The situation in Greece is, however, not in line with the provisions of abovementioned international documents.

First of all, Greece denies any ethnic/national minorities within its borders. So, the affective participation of minorities in every phase of life in Greece is restricted.



Turkish/Muslim Minority in Western Thrace

Generally speaking, the Turkish minority in Greece is not adequately represented in the political and public life of Greece. Despite the existence of two minority MPs in the Hellenic Parliament and more than 200 minority people in local administrations, there are some structural limitations on the political representation of minority. After the election of the first independent minority MP to the Hellenic Parliament in late 1980s, the Greek electoral law was changed on 24 October 1990 and an electoral threshold of 3% was introduced for the first time. Since the threshold was also implemented for the independent candidates, the minority has lost the chance of being represented in the parliament through its own party and/or with an independent MP (3% of the total population of Greece means nearly 300.000 votes, whereas the total population of the minority is estimated about 150.000). Due to these regulations the minority can only be represented with the MPs elected through majority political parties in the parliament, which in turn, often proves to be a hindrance to express their thoughts and feelings freely regarding minority affairs.

Moreover, according to the Law no 2539/1997 put in force in the second half of 1990s, the Ministry of Interior applied a new plan which combined several prefectures of Thrace and East Macedonian Regions under super-prefecture to prevent minority to elect its own Prefect in Thrace. This system merges the electoral districts where the Turkish Minority lives with that of Christian Greek population. In order to hide the discriminatory nature of this implication, the system of super-prefectures is also used in local elections in the Attica region together with Western Thrace. Also, the Greek government applied policies aimed to change demographic structure of the region by transferring population from the ex-Soviet Union countries. Such an implementation of demographic change increases the overall number of Christian Greek Population in Western Thrace and facilitates the election of more Christian Greeks for the local administration.

The minority is also concerned about the current "Kallikratis" Plan regarding the restructuring of local administrations. The plans for the Rhodopi, Xanthi and Evros prefectures would hinder the political representation of the minority once more. The Kallikratis Plan decreased the total number of local units in Rhodopi from 9 to 4 by merging the regions populated with the minority and majority in such a way that the minority is in a position to elect only two mayors with a minority background. Similarly, 7 municipalities in Xanthi were reduced to 4 with a serious craftsmanship that it will be possible for minority to be politically viable only in one municipality and elect mayor.

Bearing in mind the population rates in the region, the minority of Western Thrace call upon the Greek State:

To take special measures for the effective and adequate participation and representation of the minority to political life, introducing a special quota for the minority should be considered as positive discrimination.



Western Thrace Minority
University Graduates Association

To withdraw the 3% electoral threshold for an independent candidate to be elected.

To protect and promote full and effective participation of the Minority in political decisions on the national and regional level concerning the region in which the Minority lives, and to create a consultative mechanism, at national, regional and local levels which would ensure an institutionalized, open, sincere and continuous dialogue with representatives of the Turkish Minority.

To take all necessary steps in line with the international standards in order to ensure the effective participation of the Turkish Minority of Western Thrace to the political life in Greece.