



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

NGO in Special Consultative Status with the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations
Member of the Fundamental Rights Platform (FRP) of the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights
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Name of Organization: Federation of Western Thrace Turks in Europe (ABTTF)

Name of Main Contact Person(s): Ms. Melek Kırmacı Arık

E-mail(s): melek.kirmaci@abtff.org; info@abtff.org

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SUPPLEMENTARY HUMAN DIMENSION MEETING

Freedom of Religion or Belief,

Fostering Mutual Respect and Understanding

2-3 July 2015

Hofburg, Vienna

SESSION III: Advancing Freedom of Religion or Belief and fostering mutual respect and understanding through dialogue and cooperation among and between authorities, religious and belief communities and civil society

Dear Moderator,

Distinguished representatives of delegates,

And esteemed NGO representatives,

The national instruments have significant role in promoting and protecting freedom of religion and fostering mutual respect and understanding between the authorities and the religious minorities and communities. There is a major gap between international human rights instruments and the level of protection and promotion of freedom of religion at the national level. The implementation of international human rights standards at the national level rather depends on the willingness of governments at a large level and the ability of individuals and minority groups to promote and protect their rights in order to live their governments up their commitments and obligations.

The Copenhagen Document includes specific rights of national minorities established an entire catalogue of minority rights and commitments for participating States. The results achieved in further standard-setting and interpretation of minority standards is still challenging. Greece only recognizes a “Muslim minority in Thrace” and denies the existence of an ethnic Turkish minority in Western Thrace.

The educational and religious autonomy of the Turkish Minority of 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 Minority.

Negative portrayals of Muslims, stereotypes and prejudices towards Muslims further create a general climate of mistrust, fear and hostility towards Muslim communities in Greece. Council of Europe’s Commissioner for Human Rights, Nils Muiznieks noted in his country visit report on Greece that in addition to migrants, other social groups have also been targeted by hate speech and violence including Muslim minority of Turkish origin.

Golden Dawn Deputy Ilias Panagiotaros, who was arrested under the police investigation for the murder of hip-hop singer Pavlos Fyssas in September 2013, submitted question in the Greek Parliament and asked the cancellation of FUEN Congress 2015, which was hosted by three minority organizations, Federation of Western Thrace Turks in Europe(ABTTF), Western Thrace Minority University Graduates Association(WTMUGA) and Friendship, Equality, Peace Party(FEP Party) in hometown region of the Turkish Minority, Western Thrace in Greece on 13-17 May 2015.

The main theme discussed in the Congress was the current status in educational and religious autonomy of the Turkish Minority of Western Thrace. Although Greek national and local authorities were invited to the Congress 2015, no representatives from the majority participated or even sent a reply to the invitation of FUEN. Before the Congress, an arson attack against a mosque in Yenice District in Komotini, and an attack against a masjid in Alankuyu District in Komotini took place on the same day in April 2015.

The Director of Human Rights Without Frontiers(HRWF) Int'l Willy Fautré, who made fact-finding mission to the region in 2012 and wrote a report on the Turkish minority, said during the FUEN Congress that "It is essential to assure mutual trust and respect in order to obtain a long-lasting solution between Greek state and the minority".

We call upon Greece to restore the educational and religious autonomy of the Turkish minority of Western Thrace enshrined in the 1923 Lausanne Treaty. A mechanism for dialogue between governmental authorities and the Minority should be established in the form of advisory or consultative bodies that would be the channel for the Turkish minority to raise its own voice.