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THE MUSLIM MINORITY IN THRACE: A GENERAL OUTLINE

Greece attaches great importance to implementing coherent, comprehensive and effective policies that guarantee, inter alia, equality before the law, respect for human rights / religious freedoms and equality of opportunities for all. The same principles and goals apply with reference to the protection of and full respect for the rights of Greek citizens members of the Muslim minority in Thrace.

The 1923 Treaty of Lausanne established the status of the Muslim minority in Thrace / Greece, identifying it on the basis of the only common denominator, i.e. the Muslim faith, of the three – otherwise distinct – groups (Greek citizens of Turkish, Pomak and Roma origin) that comprise it. Each of these groups has its own spoken language and cultural traditions / heritage.

Further to fully complying with the 1923 Lausanne Treaty relevant provisions, Greece's policy and legislation (i.e. adoption of specific positive measures) over the last twenty years, reflect and implement contemporary human rights norms and standards, the very values of the European Union and its acquis, aimed at improving the living conditions of the members of this minority and their smooth integration into all aspects of both local and national society.

A number of important measures in favour of the members of the Muslim minority in Thrace have been adopted by the Greek Governments in recent years.

These measures attest Greece's commitment to further pursue, promote & enhance the integration of persons belonging to the Muslim minority in Thrace to the wider society they live in and prosper.

Due to its cardinal importance, particular attention has been paid to education.

Other adopted measures aim at promoting and safeguarding the cultural identity of persons belonging to the Muslim minority, as well as at facilitating their access to employment in the public sector.

Additional steps have also been initiated in order to enable members of the Muslim minority, especially women and young persons, to be beneficiaries of nationwide programmes and projects, co-financed, in some cases, by the European Union, designed for vulnerable social groups, focusing, in particular, on issues of gender equality, combating racism and xenophobia and promoting equal opportunities, access to employment and inter-cultural dialogue.

Moreover, the Greek policy has been praised by the State Department in its 2014 annual report on religious freedom, laying (inter alia) emphasis on the recent Law No.4301/2014, which sets the framework for religious communities and associations in Greece.

A. Participation in public life, both regionally and nation-wide:

In almost all successive parliamentary elections held in Greece since 1927, candidates that were members of the Muslim minority in Thrace have been elected as M.Ps. (with the governing party, the opposition or, in most cases,

on both sides of the Parliament). Currently, there are four (4) MPs that are members of the said minority.

Furthermore, the members of the minority do actively participate in all levels of the region's Local Administration. This continues to be the case, following the most recent (May 2014) regional and local elections. Roughly 120 Greek citizens members of the Muslim Minority were elected at the local and regional Councils in Thrace: among them three mayors in the cities of Arriana, Iasmos (Rodopi constituency) and Miki (Xanthi constituency).

A quota of 0.5% to the State exams system for civil service has been established in favor of persons belonging to the Muslim minority with the obvious intention to enhance their active participation in the public sector.

B. Right to education for the Muslim minority:

In keeping with the E.U.'s relevant policy, as well as with the international and regional trends in this field, as expressed in particular in O.S.C.E. guidelines, the Greek Government is firmly committed to continue its policy to uphold the right to education for the Muslim minority.

Taking, therefore, into consideration the comparative advantages of the public educational system – as opposed to minority structures – and nation – wide priorities in this field, the Greek Government stands ready:

on one hand to improve the functioning of the *existing minority schools*¹ (140 primary minority schools, 2 secondary and 2 Koranic schools) in Thrace

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on the other, *and foremost, to successfully accommodate the preference to the public educational system* shown by persons belonging to the Muslim minority.

Such an accommodation is being pursued in parallel with courses aiming at preserving the linguistic and cultural characteristics of persons belonging to the minority who attend public schools.

Higher Education: a 0.5% quota for the admission to Universities and Higher Technical Educational Institutes / Institutions of students who are members of the Muslim minority in Thrace has long been introduced. The obvious advantages of this measure are the promotion of further integration of persons belonging to the Muslim minority in Thrace into wider society, in an effective and inclusive way and the improved access to the job market.

C. (i) Freedom of association:

Freedom of association is unequivocally, firmly and broadly protected by the Greek Constitution.

Indeed, several Muslim minority associations and N.G.Os. freely operate in Thrace under the Law. They are thriving and actively pursuing their goal to highlight their culture, promote various relevant activities and enhance the well – being of their members.

Three (3) cases had, however, been brought before the European Court of Human Rights and decisions were reached.

¹ *These schools are not private; they are supported and funded by the Greek state.*

Greece has great respect for the European Court of Human Rights and its decisions, based on the principles upheld by the Council of Europe and the European Convention on Human Rights.

With these three (3) cases, the Greek state is considering the appropriate ways and means to implement the E.C.t.H.R. decisions, including possible legislative adjustments in order to pave the way for the Courts to be able to provide the appropriate redress.

It is to be noted that national legislation needs to be properly amended in order to enable superior Greek Courts to accept ECtHR rulings as a legal basis for redress. However, the Courts de facto take into consideration the ECtHR standards, so that, since the above-mentioned decisions in 2008, more than 50 minority associations have been established and recognised according to the ECtHR case law.

(ii) Respecting cultural diversity:

In a broader context, the cultural heritage of all the three components of the Muslim minority is fully respected. The Government is committed to undertaking and sponsoring initiatives that highlight inter – cultural dialogue, integration and social coherence, including through projects in the context of the EU. An example of such a project is the initiative to establish Youth Councils, with the participation and active involvement of young Christians & Muslims alike, as part of the Local Administration network in Thrace.

Further to the various activities of minority associations and N.G.Os. in this field, during the last years, an increasing number of cultural / artistic events and festivities have been hosted in Thrace / Greece, through the co – operation of Greek – Turkish municipal authorities, with the active involvement of minority associations and N.G.Os., including artists invited from Turkey.

It is to be highlighted that Greece denounces any attempts to impose an identity on a person or a group of persons, even by representatives of other groups within the minority in consistency with the spirit of Article 3 of the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities and as it was also reflected in the 1704/2010 PACE Resolution.

D. The issue of the Muftis in the region of Thrace in Greece:

In the case of the religious leaders of the Muslim minority in Thrace, a 1991 law is in place in Greece, stipulating that the three (3) Muftis are being selected, through open and all – inclusive procedures, by a pool of notable and esteemed teachers of Islam, members of the minority and subsequently being nominated to the Mufti Offices by the state.

These religious leaders have also judicial responsibilities as to family and inheritance cases of domestic law, which are brought before them by those members of the Muslim minority, who avail themselves of their optional right to have Islamic law applied to their cases.

The abovementioned law allows the selection of notable, distinguished teachers of Islam who will perform these responsibilities in the best and most responsible way.

It is well known that, internationally, there is not a single method for the selection of the Muftis. Each sovereign country, be it Muslim or non-Muslim, has the right to establish its own process, provided that it is in accordance with the Islamic tradition and religious rights and freedoms.

The so called “elected Muftis” are not officially recognised: despite attitudes of evident disrespect to the existing legislation and an often provocative attitude, the State does not obstruct their activities, showing maximum tolerance and restraint.

The Muslim Foundations (Vakıf):

By virtue of law 3647 / 2008 on the administration and the management of the Muslim Foundations in Thrace, the members of the three main Management Committees are to be elected. This was a longstanding request of the Muslim minority, met by the Greek state.

In addition, the Muslim Foundations are exempted from submitting the Tax Declarations on Income, Land Property and Major Land Property of previous years. As a result, their accumulated registered debts, fines and mortgages were written off. As of 2008, the Muslim Foundations are exempted from paying the Major Land Property tax for property that is being used for the charitable purposes of the Foundations.

E. Freedom of expression and freedom of the media:

Freedom of expression and media, the existence of pluralistic media and the free flow of information constitute a basic element of every democratic society.

At least four (4) minority radio stations, six (6) minority newspapers and various minority magazines and websites are part of an open and pluralistic media environment in Thrace, which functions without restrictions.

F. Concluding remarks:

The Greek Government attaches great importance *to the dialogue with civil society*, a dialogue which is an all – inclusive process aimed at promoting and enhancing prosperity, stability and equal opportunities for all Greek citizens, irrespective of their religious belief, origin or cultural backgrounds.

It is, therefore, through this process that the Greek Government *will continue to seek further ways and means to meet the needs of the members of the Muslim minority and enhance their progress, prosperity and well – being.*

GENERAL POINTS ON OTHER ISSUES RAISED

Greek citizens of Muslim faith residing in Rhodes and Kos enjoy the same rights and have the same obligations as all other citizens in the country.

No treaty or other international instrument designates them as a minority and they are not recognized as such by the Greek state. It should be noted though that their religious and cultural rights are fully respected. Indicatively, in these two Greek islands, there are 3 mosques, 2 Muslim cemeteries and 3 Muslim charitable foundations, which adequately cover the Muslims' religious and other relevant needs.

As far as Ottoman cultural heritage is concerned, it is to be noted that in the last years, and despite the stringent economic conditions Greece is facing, we have spent over 26 million Euros for the restoration of significant Ottoman monuments in Greece.

With regard to religious freedom, mosques – such as Suleymaniye in Rhodes – are granted for the celebration of major Muslim holidays, as was the case with Qurban Bairam a few weeks ago.

The Greek Government has the political will and takes all the appropriate policy measures in order to fulfill its responsibility to protect any person regardless their belonging to a minority (perceived or established) or the majority.