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OSCE HUMAN DIMENSION  
IMPLEMENTATION MEETING

19 to 30 September 2016

Warsaw –Poland

Working Session V: (Specifically selected topic) Freedom of assembly and association

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Thank you Ms/Mr Moderator,

Issues about the official identification of a minority group in an EU member country may sound trivial within the growing discourse of minority rights in Europe and the Balkans. Nevertheless, Greece's identification of the Muslim Turkish minority has been one of the most controversial issues between the Minority and Greek state since the incorporation of Western Thrace into Greece.

It is useful to note that all Greek citizens, including members of the Minority, are free to use their constitutional rights of self-determination. But, in the context of Western Thrace this right can only be used individually and not in collectivity with others. Put differently, any Minority member is free to determine herself/himself with ethnic Turkish identity. Nevertheless, a group of these Minority members who feel the same are prohibited to establish a 'Turkish' association in Greece. Regarding the individual usage of the principle of self-determination, most Minority members still hesitate to use ethnic Turkish identification due to the possibility of being stigmatized by the ultra-nationalist and racist Greek groups.

I would like to give an example of state hand discrimination. On 1 December 2010 a group of Turkish women in Xanthi applied to establish "The Cultural Association of the Turkish Women of the Region of Xanthi". However, the First Instance Court of Xanthi rejected this application in 2011 because of the term 'Turkish' in its title. The Association applied to the Court of Appeal. The judicial procedure still continues.

At this point, it is also significant to emphasize the hypocrisy of the Greek state regarding the freedom of association of its Minority citizens in Western Thrace. According to the official policy of Greece, the Minority is defined as 'Muslim' composed of three ethnicities, i.e. "Turks, Pomaks and Roma". Members of the Minority are free to use one of the most fundamental human rights, the right of self-determination. However, only a small section of this community are allowed to use another basic human right, freedom of association, which is an individual right that can only be enjoyed collectively with other members of a group. That is to say, those Minority members who identify themselves as 'Pomaks' or 'Roma' started to form their unions in the second half of the 1990s. Since then, the functioning of Pomak and Roma associations have been supported and financed by some Greek politicians and NGOs while the Turkish ones are still not allowed to have a legal status and cannot function officially as registered NGOs in Western Thrace.

Therefore,

The Turkish Minority of Western Thrace calls upon the Greek State

To respect the ethnic Turkish identity of the minority and ensure the right to establish Turkish Minority NGOs,

Thank you for your attention/