



THE MUSLIM MINORITY IN THRACE: A GENERAL OUTLINE

A. The Muslim Minority in Thrace: religion as the common denominator

The Muslim minority in Thrace consists of three distinct groups whose members are of Turkish, Pomak and Roma origin. Each of these groups has its own spoken language, cultural traditions and heritage, which are fully respected by the Greek state.

The 1923 Treaty of Lausanne that establishes the status of the minority in Thrace refers to it as being a religious minority - the Muslim faith being the common denominator of the aforementioned components.

B. Legal basis and basic principles

Greece fully respects its obligations under the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne, as well as contemporary human rights Treaties.

In conformity, in particular, with the principles of equality before the law and equal enjoyment of civil rights, persons belonging to the Muslim minority in Thrace enjoy the same rights and are subject to the same obligations as their fellow citizens.

Indeed, persons belonging to the Muslim minority in Thrace actively participate in all aspects of everyday, public, civil and political life on the regional as well as the national level.

C. The introduction and adoption of concrete measures – an overview

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

These measures attest Greece's commitment to further pursue, promote and 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 was paid to the field of education. Other measures also adopted aim at promoting and safeguarding the cultural identity of the persons belonging to the Muslim minority and 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.

D. The right to education

- *Pre-school Education*: in keeping with international and E.U. educational standards and contemporary trends, the various activities introduced at public kindergartens serve as a tool for the smooth transition to primary education. Kindergarten teachers

that are members of the Muslim minority in Thrace are encouraged to work at kindergartens in areas where there is an increased number of Muslim students¹.

- *Primary and Secondary Education / Public vs Minority Education:* In accordance with the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne, Greece guarantees the proper functioning of the existing minority schools² (194 primary minority schools, 2 secondary and 2 Koranic schools) in Thrace.

An increasing number of persons belonging to the Muslim minority in Thrace are showing a preference for the public educational system³. The Greek state has successfully accommodated this preference, while at the same time offering courses aimed at preserving the cultural and linguistic characteristics of persons belonging to the minority who attend public schools.

Indeed, Turkish language courses have been introduced, as a pilot programme, to public schools curricula in Thrace, as an optional language course. At the same time, Greek language & civilization courses are available for Muslim parents. This two-tier approach has proven useful to both students and parents who are members of the Muslim minority.

- *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 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.

E. Religious Freedom - The Muftis & the Application of the Holy Islamic Law in Thrace

- *The Muftis selection process:* There is no tradition for the election of Muftis in Thrace. Law 1920 / 1991, regulating the status of Muftis, provides that the Muftis in Thrace are selected following fully transparent procedures.

By virtue of the 1920 / 1991 Law, the selection procedure of the Muftis takes place with the active participation of prominent Muslim personalities of the local society.

The integrity and transparency of the process is also important given the judicial authority bestowed on the Muftis on certain matters of family and inheritance law.

It should be noted that members of the Muslim minority also have the option to take their legal cases pertaining to family and inheritance law to the country's Civil Courts. These Courts also review the decisions taken by the Muftis within their jurisdiction in order to determine their compatibility with and non-contradiction to the Greek Constitution. Greece takes seriously into account the need to strengthen the substantive review and control by domestic Courts.

¹ Currently, the number of university-educated kindergarten teachers that are members of the Muslim minority in Thrace is still low, however it is expected that this will change in the near future.

² These schools are not private; They are supported and funded by the Greek state.

³ This is also consistent with international trends in this respect, taking into account the comparative advantages of the public – as opposed to minority – educational structures.

- *Appointment of religious teachers – Extension of benefits*: 240 religious faith teachers were appointed to the three Mufti Offices, following a Law (3536) adopted early in 2007 by the Ministry of Education, Life-Long Learning and Religion. This very substantial appointment of religious faith teachers aimed at efficiently accommodating the spiritual needs of the Muslim community in Thrace. In line with the principles of equal rights and equal opportunities and by virtue of the aforementioned law, the selected Muslim spiritual elders have access to a state salary, if they so choose, and to health and retirement benefits, as is the case with their Christian religious counterparts.

The provisions of Law 3536 / 2007 extended these benefits to the preachers and teachers of the Holy Koran. The option to benefit from the afore-mentioned provisions is also offered to the Imams (Muslim clerics), as they are also preachers and teachers of the Holy Koran.

Allowing for the provisions of the 3536 / 2007 Law to include the preachers and teachers of the Holy Koran as beneficiaries is widely perceived as a means to facilitate their unimpeded devotion to their spiritual duties, thus further contributing to the efficient accommodation of the religious needs of the Muslim community in Thrace.

-*The Muslim Foundations (Wakifs)*: By virtue of the new 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 2007, the Muslim Foundations were 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.

F. Participation in public and political life:

- 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.

- In almost all successive parliamentary elections held in Greece since 1927, candidates belonging to the Muslim minority in Thrace have been elected as members of the Parliament either with the governing party or the opposition or, in most cases, on both sides of the chamber. Currently, there are two MPs members of the Muslim minority in Thrace, both elected with the governing party⁴.

No restriction exists as to a possible creation of a party by members of the Muslim minority. Such a party's access to the Parliament will be subject to acquiring the 3% of votes of the electoral body, as is the case with every other political party in Greece. It should be noted that the specific percentage required for a party to gain seats in the Hellenic Parliament is in line with what is internationally in force and was introduced for political stability purposes.

⁴ Overall, sixteen candidates - members of the Muslim minority in Thrace were included in the electoral lists of almost all political parties that participated in the October 2009 national elections.

-The participation of persons belonging to the Muslim community in Thrace at all levels of the region's Local Administration is highly encouraged. Following the local administrations elections of 2006, a total number of about 240 persons belonging to the minority were elected or appointed to a wide range of positions (from Vice Prefects to Mayors and Town Counsellors etc).

G. The right to freedom of association

There is a thriving civil society comprising a large number of Muslim minority associations and NGOs that have been registered by the competent courts and operate unimpeded, thus preserving, highlighting and promoting all aspects of the cultural, educational and economic life of the minority.

Three judgments of the ECtHR on an equal number of associations' cases have been rendered. At present, the three cases are pending before the competent Greek Judiciary Authorities.

The Greek Government is considering ways to implement the judgments of the ECtHR.

H. Respect for the cultural diversity and heritage in Thrace

- The Greek Government is endeavouring to preserve the distinct cultural heritage of all three components of the Muslim minority in Thrace. This commitment is often challenged by sometimes forceful tactics and methods pursued by certain individuals promoting their own agendas at the expense of the harmonious co-existence of the population in Thrace, irrespectively of their religious beliefs.

- 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.

- In particular with respect to the cultural heritage and sense of identity of that component of the minority that is of Turkish origin, an increasing number of cultural and artistic events and festivities, with the participation of artists from Turkey, were hosted in Thrace by municipal authorities. Cultural co – operation between local authorities from both sides of the border is being constantly strengthened.

I. Freedom of expression and freedom of the media

The freedoms of expression and media, the existence of pluralistic media and the free flow of information constitute a basic element of every democratic society. Seven (7) minority radio stations, nine (9) minority newspapers and nine (9) minority magazines are part of an open and pluralistic media environment in Thrace, which functions without restrictions.

J. A concluding point

The Greek Government attaches great importance to the dialogue with local society. This dialogue is an all-inclusive process and aims at promoting and enhancing prosperity, stability and equal opportunities for all Greek citizens.

It is through this process with the citizens, irrespectively of their religious beliefs, that the Greek Government will continue to seek further ways and means to enhance their progress, prosperity and well-being.