



Western Thrace Minority
University Graduates Association

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COMBATING HATE CRIMES IN WESTERN THRACE

Europe nowadays is more diverse than before and more than 300 million people with different ethnic, religious and linguistic backgrounds live together. Although this is fact, discrimination towards different religion, belief, ethnic identity and culture is increasing in Europe. It is believed that, perception of “others”, “unknown” may cause emotional and psychological distress and create tension if there is no reliable and adequate legislation.

As Europe, in Balkan states too, discriminative incidents towards Muslims and Turks have increased, and there is similar tendency in Greece as well. Therefore, the members of the Turkish-Muslim minority in Greece are often subject to hate crimes in the region.

Hate Crimes in Western Thrace

Western Thrace is a region that extends on an area of 8578 square kilometers in the northeast part of Greece. It consists of three provinces: Ksanthi, Rodopi and Evros.

Today, an estimated number of 150.000 ethnic Turks live in Western Thrace. Members of the Muslim Turkish Minority who have been living in this region for centuries identify themselves as ethnic Turks.

In recent years the situation of the Turkish Muslim Minority has relatively improved. But there has not been progress in the field of established minority rights. Greece alleges that “equality among citizens” policy provides sufficient reforms and continues to ignore its obligations regarding the rights of the Turkish Muslim Minority by violating the bilateral and international treaty obligations to which is a party. Denial of the Turkish Identity, occupation of the Charitable Foundations and practice of the state appointed muftis instead of the elected muftis continue unabated. More than 60.000 people still suffer from the deprivation of the article 19 of the citizenship law and the situation of minority education continues to be as miserable as ever, the level of education in mother tongue decreases day by day. And somehow the violent attacks still continue.



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In 1990, one of the extreme examples of hate crimes occurred in Western Thrace. On 29 January 1990 after the trial of Sadik Ahmet and Ibrahim Serif a religious ceremony organized for the anniversary of 29 January 1988 protest. But, a number of Greek people decided to protest this ceremony, then before the ceremony the violent attack to Turks started. Muslim Turks were beaten, around 30 people were injured and many shops belonging to Turks were damaged. On that day, it was not a coincidence that no Greek shop was damaged. According to the article "Hellenism" quoted in a book published in Istanbul *"The Greek shops were labeled as the Nazis labeled the shops belonging to the Jews. The difference was that in Western Thrace the labeled shops represented the ones that should not be damaged."* After these events the governmental officials declared that the loss of shopkeepers would be compensated. However, up to now none of them were given compensation.

In the year 2009, hatred towards the holy places of the Muslim-Turkish Minority appears to be widespread. Violent incidents against Muslim-Turkish Minority and their holy places are often triggered by local and national media and anti-Turkish/Muslim hysteria of ultra-nationalist groups. The authorities on the other hand, have not introduced satisfactory measures or precautions, but simply recorded and occasionally condemned the hate crimes. Due to the ignorance of the authorities regarding the implementation of the above-mentioned legislation, the number of attacks is increasing day by day.

Arson Attack to Toxotes Mosque (2 September 2009): The mosque in the village of Toxotes, located in the Prefecture of Xanthi, was attacked and some unidentified person/s tried to put the mosque on fire. The window of the mosque was broken and a gallon of oil was thrown into the mosque. The carpets and air conditioners were damaged. Fortunately, the fire did not cause more damage since tightly closed windows and doors blocked any fresh air to get in to the mosque. Despite the investigations by the police, the perpetrators were not found. This was actually the third attack to the mosque in the last 5 years. In the arson of 7 March 2004, the mosque was totally destroyed and it was refurbished with the voluntary donations of the Turkish Minority of Western Thrace, with some help extended by the Prefecture of Xanthi for reconstruction. On 1 November 2007, some people tried to put the mosque on fire once more, but the heavy rain on the very same night extinguished it. On both instances, the vandal/s could not be identified and persecuted.

Attack to the Hürriyet Mosque in Xanthi (12 November 2009): The windows of the mosque in the centre of the city of Xanthi were broken with the stones thrown by some vandals in midnight. In spite of the complaint lodged by the religious staff of the mosque, the perpetrators of the attack were not found and persecuted.

Attack to the Sünne Mosque in Xanthi (6 December 2009): The windows of another central mosque in the city of Xanthi were broken, and some degrading phrases were written on its wall against the Muslim-Turks and their holy book Kuran. The vandals painted obscene pictures on the walls of mosque. In this instance too, the perpetrators remained unidentified.



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Damages to the Muslim Cemetery in Tekton Village (January 2009): The local authorities in the Municipality of Vistonida failed to respect the Muslim cemetery while landscaping the area. The cemetery was damaged in order to open a road for trucks in early 2009. Some historical tombs that are older than 100 years were damaged. The Turkish Minority of Western Thrace protested against this non-respectable behavior, and minority origin member of the Hellenic Parliament from the Prefecture of Xanthi, Mr. Cetin Mandaci, formally brought this issue to the attention of Ministry of Interior. It was claimed that the cemetery was not damaged, while also denying the fact that the cemetery was a communal property of the Muslims-Turks living in the region. Although the local authorities promised to protect the cemetery by fencing, nothing has been achieved so far.

Attack to the Muslim Cemetery in Komotini (February 2010): The historical cemetery in the centre of the city of Komotini (called Poşboş Cemetery) was attacked by people affiliated to the ultra-nationalist groups. The tombs were painted with some degrading phrases.

Arson Attack to Poşboş Muslim Cemetery (August 2010)

On Friday evening, 13 August 2010, unknown people attacked to the Pospos neighborhood Muslim cemetery. More than 20 gravestones were broken. The vandals wrote on the walls of the cemetery: "Get out of the Consulate", "The Golden Dawn Organization".

CONCLUSION

As can be seen from the above examples, the Turkish Minority of Western Thrace is targeted on purpose specifically due to its ethnic origin and is constantly subject to hate crimes as a result of the unjustifiable and discriminative policies of the Greek Administration as well as the provocative and degrading context of the Greek Media.

The Turkish Minority of Western Thrace has under no circumstances confronted the Greek State, nor ever rebelled against it. Quite on the contrary, the members of the Turkish Minority of Western Thrace have always been law abiding exemplary citizens.

It is outrageous that the Greek Administration and the media perceive the Minority as a threat against national security.

Therefore, the Turkish Minority of Western Thrace calls upon the international community to urge Greece to end all oppressive and discriminative practices targeting the minority immediately and implement an objective and satisfactory legislation in order to prevent hate crimes as well as to take all necessary precautions to better police and prosecute these crimes.



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Pictures from the Attacks

1- Toxotes Mosque in Xanthi (2 September 2009)



2- Hürriyet Mosque in Xanthi (12 November 2009)



3- Sünne Mosque in Xanthi (6 December 2009)





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4- Muslim Cemetery in Tekton Village (January 2009)



5- Poşboş Muslim Cemetery in Komotini (February 2010)



6- Poşboş Muslim Cemetery in Komotini (August 2010)

