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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  
Member of the Federal Union of European Nationalities (FUEN)

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SUPPLEMENTARY HUMAN DIMENSION MEETING

Freedom of Religion or Belief,

Fostering Mutual Respect and Understanding

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Hofburg, Vienna

**Session I:** Freedom of Religion or Belief and fostering mutual respect and understanding in the OSCE area-opportunities and challenges

Dear Moderator,

Distinguished representatives of delegates,

And esteemed NGO representatives,

In the Astana Commemorative Declaration in 2010, the participating States reaffirmed that “greater efforts must be made to promote freedom of religion or belief”, but religious minorities still face problems in practising their religion or belief throughout the OSCE region due to the lack of implementation of commitments undertaken by participating States. In Greece, Turkish Minority of Western Thrace, which is officially recognized as “Muslim minority in Thrace”, is challenged by prohibitions to its right to elect its own religious leaders (muftis).

The religious freedom of the Turkish Muslim minority of Western Thrace is protected by the 1913 Athens Treaty. The muftis were to be elected by Muslims who were entitled to vote, but this provision along with the provision for the establishment of the position of Chief Mufti has never been implemented. Two of three muftis, one in Komotini(Gümülcine), and one in Xanthi(İskeçe) have been appointed by a special decree issued by the King, while mufti in Alexandropolis(Dedeğaç) has never been appointed. After problems with regard to the appointment of mufti with the Greek Government in 1985, Greece repealed the relevant law and decided to appoint the muftis on nominations from the Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs. In reaction to that, the Turkish Minority elected its own muftis, however public authorities did not recognise them.

Today, Greece doesn't still recognize the right of the Turkish Minority of Western Thrace to elect its own religious leaders. Greek authorities stated that they are examining possible ways of introducing new elements that would allow an even more representative and transparent process for the selection of the Muftis. Any efforts to improve this framework by Greek authorities should be in accordance with the rights and freedoms granted to the Minority by international treaties.

A further problem is that Law on Muslim Preachers (4115/2013) which envisages of appointment of 240 “Quran teachers” who will offer their services in the public schools of primary and secondary education and mosques in Western Thrace under the auspices of the official muftis who are appointed by the State itself. Law 4115/2013 start implemented in August 2013 and 63 religious officers, among whom only 3 are university graduates, started to teach Islam and Quran in Greek in public schools of secondary education in Western Thrace in January 2014 despite strong opposition by members of Turkish minority.

Reminding the 1989 Vienna Ministerial Council Decision, we call upon the Government of Greece:

- not to diminish by no means autonomous establishment of the Turkish Minority of Western Thrace;
- to recognize the right of the Turkish Minority to elect its own religious and repeal Law 4115/2013,
- to establish a dialogue mechanism based on mutual tolerance and understanding with the Turkish Minority in Western Thrace,

We request the OSCE/ODIHR Advisory Panel on Freedom of Religion or Belief to have a greater role on further implementation of the OSCE commitments in all participating States.