



# Avrupa Batı Trakya Türk Federasyonu Föderation der West-Thrakien Türken in Europa Federation of Western Thrace Turks in Europe Ευρωπαϊκή Ομοσπονδία Τούρκων Δυτικής Θράκης Fédération des Turcs de Thrace Occidentale en Europe

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## Government interference in religious autonomy of the Turkish community in Western Thrace, Greece

Dear Moderator,

Distinguished delegates and representatives,

In many OSCE documents, the participating States are called on to fully respect freedom of religion or belief of individuals and communities, and to prevent discrimination based on religion or belief. It is especially important to recall the 1990 Copenhagen Document which has established a framework for national minorities throughout the OSCE region.

The right of the Turkish community in Western Thrace in Greece to elect its own religious leaders is granted by the 1913 Athens Treaty and guaranteed by the 1923 Lausanne Treaty which determines its legal status. The obligations assumed by Greece of this treaty include the right to establish, manage and control at their own expense, any charitable, religious and social institutions, any schools and other establishments for instruction and education, with the right to use their own language and to exercise their own religion freely therein.

The election of religious leaders was incorporated into Greek domestic legislation in 1920 with a procedure which enabled the Turkish community to select its own religious leaders i.e. muftis in Rodopi, Xanthi and Didymoteicho.

However, in violation of the Athens and the Lausanne Treaties guaranteeing the religious autonomy of the Turkish community, Greece appointed muftis under Presidential decree of 24 December 1990 and Law no. 1920/1991 which retroactively validated the Presidential decree. Since the Turkish community viewed this as interference in its religious autonomy, it elected its own muftis in Rodopi and Xanthi.

Greece does not recognise today the Muftis elected by the Turkish community. In the past, the elected muftis of Rodopi and Xanthi were prosecuted and sentenced to prison for the illegal use of

religious symbols. In the cases lodged by them against Greece, the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) ordered there has been a violation of Article 9 (freedom of thought, conscience and religion) of the European Convention Human Rights.

There is a duality today in Western Thrace; the government-appointed muftis and the ones elected by the Turkish community. Greece claims that there is no single, internationally established method for the muftis' assignment and further argues that in all Muslim countries, muftis are appointed by the state, not elected by the community. However, Greece ignores the fact that the mufti election in Greece should be governed by the Treaty of Lausanne which grants the Turkish community religious autonomy. In other words, the mufti election in Western Thrace should be compared to the election of the Greek-Orthodox Patriarch in Istanbul by the Holy Synod, based on the principle of reciprocity provided by the said treaty.

The religious autonomy of the Turkish community has been further undermined by the Presidential decree No. 52/2019 which envisages the restructuring of the three mufti offices in Western Thrace.

According to the said decree adopted and entered into force on 11 June 2019, the mufti offices of the Turkish community are completely affiliated to the Greek Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs and transformed into an ordinary government office. The decree consisting 26 articles envisages the appointment of the personnel to be employed at the mufti offices by the ministry and quite limits the muftis' powers. The regarding decree is contrary to the 1923 Lausanne Treaty which grants the Turkish community in Western Thrace the right to establish and manage its own religious institutions as well as other international law documents on freedom of religion.

We as ABTTF urge Greece to abide by its commitments to fully respect freedom of religion or belief contained in OSCE documents. We call on Greece not to interfere in religious autonomy of the Turkish community, to ensure that it enjoys its right to elect its own religious leaders as the other known religions in Greece, to recognize the muftis elected by it as its official religious leaders in the region and to develop a mechanism for dialogue with the Turkish community to find solutions for the problems pertaining to freedom of religion or belief.

Thank you for your attention.