

POMAK ASSOCIATION OF XANTHI PREFECTURE: A SHORT STATEMENT

Good morning Ladies and Gentlemen

My name is Alie Efenti and I am representing the Pomak Association of the Prefecture of Xanthi.

Pomaks are Muslim Greek citizens, indigenous people of Thracians Mountains, who speak Pomak, a language of Slavic origin. As it is stated in the Lausanne Treaty we are members of the Muslim minority in Greece.

Lausanne Treaty also protects our rights for education, freedom of thought, religion and association. These rights have been further reinforced by Greek constitution and other international Conventions.

We, the Pomaks as members of the Muslim community we followed the fate of our country through the history's turmoil and participated actively in the political and social life of Greece. However in 1950's, bilateral agreements between Greece and Turkey (concerning minority education of Greeks in Istanbul and Muslims in Greece) forced us to learn Turkish and to follow the Turkish educational curriculum in half of the total modules, in all minority schools in our villages. The three languages speaking issue becomes even more complicated considering the fact that our community learns Arabic in order to read the Holy Koran.

We believe that the imposing of learning three foreign languages irrelevant to our mother tongue in minority education generates a process of misidentification of our cultural identity and at the same time discourages our efforts for social integration in the rest of the Greek community.

The only efficient solution to this problem would be the establishment of Greek public primary schools in all of our villages, where languages like Arabic- English- Turkish- German etc can be taught as optional modules. As our language is an oral language, we understand that new linguistic rules have to be invented and used, in order to be organized in a sophisticated manner that could be taught and studied.

However in order for our children to progress, we need as soon as possible the opportunity for our children to be educated under the same conditions as all Greek citizens in Greek language but in a manner that allows us to stay faithful to our principles of religion and identity.

In order to protect our special culture, history and identity and moreover because we were forced to forget it, in 2007 a group of people founded the Pomak Association of Xanthi Prefecture. During the first days of our association, the famous Turkish speaking newspaper "Millet", published the names of the members of the Pomak's Association in their effort to expose us in front of our community by naming us traitors and devils. Despite the terrorism and threats that the members of our association experience since then, the humiliation of our families even inside the mosques, we manage to keep the spirit of our association alive till now.

In the next two months we will be proud to celebrate the opening of our new Pomak Cultural Centre in the city of Xanthi.

To conclude I would like to ask the support of OSCE board for the following

- We need Greek state to preserve our fundamental right for equal opportunities in education through the establishment of fully integrated public primary schools in our regions. Recently, (the last 10 years) because of the special quota for minority's children, in University enrolment, our children had more possibilities to receive higher level education and the number of scientists, doctors and lawyers in our community, working along with the Christian majority has been increased. However if Pomaks are to be integrated successfully into a multi-ethnic society they need to acquire fluency in the State language. Or else we are condemned to social marginalisation, poverty and to the uncertainty of a hopeless future.

- We need effective protection of the legitimacy of our Pomak identity, against the cruelty of the Turkish Consulate and Turkish nationalists. It is unacceptable to feel vulnerable within the borders of the European Union, because we want to be able to speak our own language, sing our songs and express freely our opinion concerning the future of our children.

- We would like European and Greek Institutions to encourage the study and the research of the Pomak Culture in an Academic level.

Finally, I would like to share with you my hopes for the future of this community. Goya, my favorite painter said once "life is like the spiral". I came here today, because I believe that my community can escape of the vicious circle concerning the nature of our identity (Pomaks –Turks-Greeks) that damages our efforts for progress and integration.

We should open this circle, relieve my community and create a spiral, for the sake of our children. Because they are the adherents of the future, and this future has to be easy and friendly, in order for them to live happily in the place they were borne.