



Western Thrace Minority
University Graduates Association

OSCE

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Combating intolerance and hate-motivated attacks against the Muslim Turkish Minority of Western Thrace in Greece

Thank you Madam Moderator,

My name is Ali Chousein Oglou and I am representing the Western Thrace Minority University Graduates Association from Greece.

Extending on an area of 8578 square kilometers, Western Thrace is located in the northeast part of Greece. It constitutes one of Greece's borderlands with Turkey and Bulgaria. The region is composed of three provinces: Xanthi (*İskeçe*), Rodopi (*Rodop*) and Evros (*Meriç*). The Muslim Turkish Minority is one of the historical and national minorities of Europe members of whom have been residing in Western Thrace for centuries.

In recent years, the situation of the Turkish Muslim Minority has relatively improved compared to the past decades. Since the beginning of the 1990s, most of the human rights violations have come to end. Nevertheless, there has not been major progress in the field of group-based collective rights of the Minority. In different local, national and international platforms, representatives of Greece keep underlining that the policy based on two basic principles of "equality before the law" and "equality in civic rights" has provided sufficient reforms regarding individual and collective rights of the Minority since the early 1990s.

However, looking closer to different matters of the Muslim Turkish minority it becomes apparent that Greece has never fully protected rights of the Turkish Muslim Minority by emanating from bilateral and international agreements as well as the Greek Constitution. That is, as of 2013 the collective Turkish identity of the Minority is still denied, members of the Minority are not allowed to define their own religious heads/muftis as well as board members of their Muslim Charitable foundations (*awqaf*), around 60.000 members of the Minority people still suffer from being stripped of their Greek citizenship under Article 19 of the Greek Citizenship Law (in

force between 1927 and 1998). Also, although the level of illiteracy continues to drop among the Minority members, the overall quality and level of education received by the Muslim Turkish students are still kept below the average of the country as a variety of fundamental problems remain unresolved.

Although the two major Minority and majority entities of Western Thrace coexist and share the same territories for centuries, the ethnic Turkish and Muslim identities of the Minority community have frequently been stigmatized and targeted either individually or collectively since the incorporation of the region into Greek national territories in the early 1920s. Mosques, masjids, cemeteries, tombs and Minority associations bearing the term “Turkish” in their titles, e.g. Komotini Turkish Youth Union (*Gümülcine Türk Gençler Birliği*), Xanthi Turkish Union (*İskeçe Türk Birliği*), continue to be in the target of those who do not tolerate the historical existence of Turkish and Muslim identities in Western Thrace.

It is useful to note that increasing tension between Greece and Turkey have actually triggered hatred against the Minority survival, thus increasing violent and hate-motivated attacks of those individual and groups and damaging the notion of coexistence and cohabitation in Western Thrace. In particular, bilateral controversies over issues regarding Cyprus and the Aegean Sea between the 1950s and 1990s resulted in a number of hate-motivated attacks against the Muslim Turkish presence in Western Thrace, which are counted among the primary reasons why tens of thousands of Muslim Turks felt uncomfortable and insecure, and they decided to leave their historic lands Western Thrace permanently; most of them migrated to Turkey and other European countries.

Although the bilateral controversies have lessened across the Aegean Sea and relations between the two countries improved since 1999, hate-motivated attacks and hate crimes against the Muslim Turkish identity in Western Thrace continues primarily due to the increasing nationalism and Islamophobia across the European continent in recent times.

Of all the incidents that happened recently which also contradict with Greece’s commitments to texts of the OSCE safeguarding fundamental principles of tolerance and non-discrimination, Human Rights Branch of the Western Thrace Minority University Graduates Association would like to share some recent examples of hate crimes against the Muslim Turkish presence in Western Thrace, Greece that is a member country of the OSCE.

Attacking Mosques:

Isalo (*Uysallı*) Mosque: Some people attacked to the mosque of Isalo village on 2 March 2011 by breaking windows of it using pavement stones. This was actually the second attack to this mosque located in the Rodopi Prefecture since the same mosque was also attacked in 2003.

Toxotes (*Okçular*) Mosque: Located in in one of the villages with low Muslim Turkish concentration, the Toxotes mosque is highly popular while talking about intolerance in Western Thrace since it is the only mosque that has been attacked four

times since 2004. Some of these attempts targeted to put the mosque on fire by smashing windows of the mosque and throwing a gallon of oil was thrown into the mosque while some others attacked the mosque and caused material damage. The last attack to the mosque happened in May 2012. In all instances, none of the attackers could be identified and persecuted.

Attacking cemeteries:

Poshbosh (*Poşboş*) Cemetery: On the 16th of February 2012, Poshbosh cemetery located in Komotini was attacked. Some of the gravestones were damaged. Attackers are still unknown. Similar to the examples above, it is useful to underline that this was the third attack in two years against the same cemetery.

Bektashi tomb in Xanthi (*İskeçe*): On 23 March 2012, a bektashi tomb located in downtown Xanthi was targeted. By using one of the most frequently-used hate-based slogans, they wrote "Τούρκος Καλός Μόνο Νεκρός (The best Turk is the dead Turk)!" on the walls of a Bektashi tomb, which indicates racism and hatred of some people against the ethnic Turkish identity of the Minority in Western Thrace. This is also one of those examples how members of some extreme right-wing xenophobic organizations in Western Thrace use sacred religious places so as to indicate their intolerance and hatred against the ethnic Turkish identity of the Minority.

Attacking the ethnic Turkish identity:

Komotini Turkish Youth Union: Around 150 members of the Golden Dawn, an extreme right-wing political party who have 18 seats in the Greek Parliament, attacked those sitting in the garden of Komotini Turkish Youth Union on the 6th of August, 2012. The main aim of the group was to demonstrate against the Turkish Consulate in Komotini. As they were allowed to march towards the street where the Consulate was located, they arrived in front of the Komotini Turkish Youth Union, read the Greek National Anthem and threw plastic bottles to those Turks sitting in the garden of the Union.

Xanthi Turkish Union: An unidentified person or persons attacked the Xanthi Turkish Union on 23 March 2012. One of the most prominent racist expressions, frequently used by some extreme far right Greek groups, was chosen so as to defame the front wall of the Union: "Έξω οι Τούρκοι (Turks Out)!"

Friendship, Equality and Peace Party (FEP Party/*Dostluk, Eşitlik ve Barış Partisi*): Being the only political party of the Muslim Turkish minority, FEP Party was attacked several times in recent years. On 22 August 2012, unidentified person or people smashed the nameplate of the Party. Recently, headquarters of the Party located in Komotini was targeted again by a local Greek resident who went into the building and shouted slogans against the Party and its founder, Dr. Sadık Ahmet, Turkey and ethnic Turkish identity in Western Thrace. The perpetrator was trialed and persecuted.

Attacking individuals and causing social discomfort:

Some members of the Muslim Turkish minority continue to be targeted and attacked by extreme rightist groups. The recent example occurred on the 18th of September, 2012 when Mr. Mulazim Cemali, a Minority teacher, member of an anti-racist organization and candidate MP of the leftist political party, i.e. Antarsia, was hit in Xanthi. Contrary to those hate-motivated attacks whose perpetrators have never been identified, those people who attacked him were arrested and sentenced to eight months imprisonment.

Along with individual cases, hatred and intolerance against the Turkishness of the Minority is depicted collectively by some members of the Golden Dawn. Especially during the holy month Ramadan in 2012, small groups composed of Golden Dawn members drove into some minority-only or mixed villages, chanted slogans against Turkey and the ethnic Turkish minority, thus creating social discomfort and feeling of insecurity among members of the Muslim Turkish minority.

Taking into consideration increasing xenophobic, racist and hate-motivated crimes as well as Islamophobic attacks against the ethnic Turkish and Muslim identities in the Western Thrace region of Greece, some examples of which are mentioned above, the Western Thrace Minority University Graduates Association calls upon Greece to:

- comply fully with OSCE commitments
- identify, arrest and punish hate-oriented attackers against the Minority survival in Western Thrace.
- prevent any kind of verbal and physical hate-based and Islamophobic action that endangers the coexistence of these two fundamental entities of Western Thrace
- strengthen basic principles of respect and tolerance towards the ethnic Turkish and Muslim identities not only inside Western Thrace but also across the country

Thank you for your attention.