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WESTERN THRACE TURKISH MINORITY

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Western Thrace Minority University Graduates Association (WTMUGA), established in 1982, focuses on cultural and social development of the Turkish Minority of Western Thrace-Greece. Monitors human and minority rights violations in the region, prepares reports, parallel reports to different International Bodies on human and minority rights abuses in the region. WTMUGA's main working areas are: - Social, cultural and educational development of the Turkish Minority of Western Thrace, - Representation of Western Thrace Turkish Minority in the international platform, - Combating racism and xenophobia, - Monitoring and reporting human and minority rights violations of the region.

WESTERN THRACE TURKISH MINORITY

The estimated number of 150.000 ethnic Turks lives in the North-East part of Greece. Members of the Muslim Turkish Minority, who have been living in this region for centuries identify, themselves as ethnic Turks. The legal status of this minority was established by the Peace Treaty of Lausanne which was signed in 1923, the bilateral agreements signed between Greece and Turkey and the international instruments concerning human and minority rights which Greece signed and ratified.

At the beginning of the last decade the new minority policy based on the principles “equality before the law” and “equality in civil rights” put into practice since then there have been some improvements concerning the basic citizenship rights. Members of the Turkish Minority of course, accept these as positive developments; however, still much remains to be done if the situation of the minority is to become wholly satisfactory. Denial of ethnic identity, freedom of association and peaceful assembly, religious freedom, charitable foundations, expelled citizens and educational rights are still the main problems of Western Thrace Turkish Minority.

The denial of ethnic identity of Western Thrace Turks by the Greek government has been one of the most contentious issues regarding the government’s minority policy. Until the Junta regime in 1967 the identification of the Minority as Turkish was not a problem. By the advent of Junta regime, however, the authorities started to call the Minority as “Muslim” and since then, they continued to reject the ethnic Turkish identity in Western Thrace. Today, Greece still insists on the policy of denying ethnic Turkish identity of the minority.

Moreover, Turkish associations are still banned and courts continue to refuse registering new Turkish associations. The Cases of Xanthi Turkish Union and The Cultural Association of Turkish Women of Rodopi are the striking examples of this unacceptable implementation of the Greek authorities. It should be also important to note that even the word ‘minority’ caused problem for the establishment of a new minority association (Please refer to the trial of Bekir Ousta vs. Greece No: 35151/05, dated 11 October 2007). Evros Minority Youth Association applied to the Court of First Instance in Alexandroupolis so that the said Association could be registered in Greece on the basis of relevant ECHR decision. However, the local court rejected the application on December 9, 2008 on the grounds that the decisions of ECHR are not obligatory regarding the Greek domestic law and they do not necessarily require the Greek authorities to register the association.

The Article 19 of the Greek Citizenship Law (No: 3370 of 1955) was an obvious case of racial discrimination and a flagrant violation of the fundamental right to citizenship. It was in breach of the Greek constitution and international law. It provided that: “A citizen of non-Greek origin leaving Greece without the intention of returning may be declared having lost Greek citizenship.” On 23 January 1998, Article 19 of the Greek Citizenship was repealed by the Greek Parliament. This act was welcomed both by the international community, as well as within the ranks of the Turkish minority. However abolishment did not include a retroactive effect. The Minister of

Interior on April 2005 announced the number of Muslim Turks deprived from the Greek citizenship until 1998 was 46.638. So far, apart from some 200 persons living in Greece, no steps have been taken in order to reinstate thousands of unlawfully expelled citizens and their children who continue living as stateless persons.

According to many human and minority rights instruments and article 40 of Peace Treaty of Lausanne, members of the minority have the right to establish, manage and control their own schools and to use their own language freely. But, because of the Governments' interference the autonomous structure of Turkish Minority education has been changed radically. So, the present form of the educational system of Turkish Minority cannot serve fundamental educational needs.

The Greek state since 1923 has put in force more than 70 new laws, decrees and governmental decisions regarding the minority education. While these new regulations are more in favor for the improvement of the state language instruction (Greek), they undermine the autonomy and increase the weakness of the instruction of the Turkish curriculum. Furthermore, The Minority is not allowed to directly elect board members of the minority schools since 1972.

According to the Law No. 3518/2006 pre-school education in Greece since 2007 has become compulsory for children 4 and 5 years old. The new law is not in line with the international and bilateral agreements concerning the minority education system in a way that all pupils with different linguistic, religious and cultural background across the country as well as the members of the Turkish Minority of Western Thrace are obliged to follow the compulsory pre-school education which is only in Greek language. The new law on pre-school education does not stipulate any special measures for minorities.

There is no minority nursery school in Western Thrace. The recent announcements of the Minister of Education and Religious Affairs regarding the establishment of multicultural nurseries is ambiguous and far from sincerity.

As for the year of 2008 there are 193 Private Minority Primary schools across the region of Western Thrace. The instruction in these schools is bilingual, in Greek and Turkish. Many students attend to these schools where some teachers are employed for the Turkish instruction and some for the Greek instruction. Both teachers are paid by the Greek Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs. Text books for the Turkish instruction, according to agreement between Greece and Turkey are provided by Turkey. The textbooks for the Greek instruction are supplied by the Greek state.

In the last 10 years the Greek state has taken major steps (such as preparing new text books, educating teachers, supplying additional courses in Greek) by using EU financial sources for improving the curriculum of the Greek language. However, no major step has been taken for the improvement of the Turkish curriculum. Actually, the main problem of these schools is the poor quality of the Turkish curriculum. There are no more well trained and qualified teachers for the Turkish instruction. Most of the teachers graduated from a two/three year Special Pedagogical Academy of Thessaloniki are not qualified to teach the text books provided by Turkey. As a result, students who attend to these Minority Schools are not able to learn both languages. Today, there are many successful examples of bilingual schools. The success of the

bilingual or the multilingual educational system has been proved by academicians and is a phenomenon in today's world. It is also important to note that the Minority primary schools were a good example in the past.

The compulsory education in Greece (including the pre-school education) is 10 years. But it is not applied for the minority schools. This 10 year compulsory education system which is perceived as double standard and seen as application of isolation by the Muslim Turkish Minority of Western Thrace.

The number of minority secondary and high schools in Western Thrace is inadequate. There are only 2 minority high schools in the region, one in Komotini, the other in Xanthi. In Komotini, where the Turkish minority constitutes more than half of the population, there is only one Turkish minority high school vis-à-vis 24 state high schools. Likewise, in Xanthi, % 45 of the population of which is of the Turkish minority, there is just one Turkish minority high school vis-à-vis 37 state high schools.

Most of the minority students do not have the opportunity to finish the secondary education. Every year more than 2.000 students attend the secondary education. There are only two Minority secondary and high schools in Western Thrace with the capacity of 1000 students, the Celal Bayar Minority High School in Komotini and the Muzaffer Salihoglu High School in Xanthi. Those who have no opportunity to continue their educations in these schools are obliged to attend the public schools where the instruction is only in Greek. The Greek state is rejecting minority's applications for the establishment of new minority high schools.

The Special Pedagogical Academy (EPATH), founded in 1968, trains members of the Minority as teachers for Minority schools. The main language of instruction of the EPATH is Greek. The duration of education used to be two years but recently, it increased to three years. Although all of the pedagogical academies in Greece were replaced by the Faculties of Education or Departments of Education in 1989, EPATH still remains as the unique Teacher Training Institution of this type. In the preparatory year, the EPATH students are taught Greek, Basic Mathematics, History, Psychology, Geometry, Music, Turkish, Sports, Geography of Greece and Techniques. It is useful to stress that, although these teachers will educate the Minority children in Turkish, all of the courses except Turkish are taught in Greek which, in turn, affects the level of their teaching capacity in Turkish. Today, all teachers in minority primary Schools are graduates of this Academy.

The recently introduced practice of elective Turkish classes in Greek high schools cannot replace the right to minority education. In fact, the Turkish Minority reacted to this practice as a breach of minority rights and as a vehicle for assimilation.

Taking into account that their three year of education is predominantly in Greek, the EPATH teachers have highly been criticized for their poor level of knowledge in Turkish language. Some teachers admit their weakness of teaching properly the Turkish language and the lessons in Turkish. This increases the suspect among the Muslim Turks that EPATH teachers have been used deliberately by the Greek State for not giving a proper and modern education to the Western Thrace Minority Pupils, such an attitude of the State authorities can widely be interpreted as an impediment against the improvement of the level of education of the Minority.

There has not been any progress towards the settlement of the outstanding institutional problem of Muslim religious leaders, the Muftis. The European Court of Human Rights concluded on two instances, i.e. *Serif versus Greece* (14 December 1999-Case No: 38178/97) & *Aga versus Greece* (17 October 2003-Case No: 50776/99 & 52912/99), that Greece has violated Article 9 of the ECHR. Given the finding that there has been a violation of Article 9, State continues to disregard minority's elected Muftis and works through a number of appointed officers who lack credibility and respect even among their own people. The authority of the individuals appointed by the State to the Offices of Mufti in Komotini, Xanthi and Didimoticho is disputable since they are not accepted and recognized by the minority population. The minority, on its part, expects the government to cease interfering in the field of divine conscience and finally recognize minority's right to elect its own religious leaders.

The new bill 3536/2007 regarding the appointment of 240 imams/Islamic (seminary) teachers is contrary to the article 43 of the Peace Treaty of Lausanne that protects the religious freedom of the Muslim Turkish Minority. According to the provisions of this law, these 240 imams or seminary teachers would be appointed by a 5 member committee composed of Christian officials. Like that of 1992 UN Declaration on Minorities, other provisions of international treaties and documents that Greece signed and ratified promoted Minority's religious autonomy. This new application which is totally refused by the minority threatens the freedom of faith of the Minority. The Consultative Committee of the Turkish Minority of Western Thrace which is composed of the elected members of the Minority (such as MPs, mayors, vice prefects and etc.) on its assembly on 27 August 2008 announced its unanimous decision about objection to the bill of 240 Imams. There are more than 250 mosques operating in Western Thrace. Almost all of the imams practicing in those mosques are selected and paid by the members of the Muslim Community. Imams are also in a position of religious leaders of small communities and their appointment by a Christian committee is against the Islamic Faith. On 6 April 2009, even Mr. Tzemali Metso the "appointed" Mufti of Komotini raised his objections to the implication of aforementioned law in a letter sent directly to the Prime Minister as well as Minister for Education and Religious Affairs.

Muslim Charitable Foundations (Waqfs) constitute an essential part of Minority's cultural, historic and religious heritage. The government continues to appoint the people who currently hold positions in the Administrative Boards of the Muslim Foundations. Disregarding their financial immunity, the State continued to impose excessive taxes and legal sanctions on the properties owned by the Muslim Charitable Foundations for four decades. Minority's inability to govern and have access to the accounts of these Waqfs also prevents them from dispensing the revenues obtained thereof towards society's vital needs, such as the maintenance and improvement of schools and repairs or build mosques. Although the provisions of the law passed in 2007 (No: 3554) erased the existing debts of waqfs, the fines and income taxes imposed on them remained intact. As of December 2008, the total debt of Administrative Board of Komotini Waqfs accumulated to 775.463 Euro, which resulted in the imposition of mortgages on 23 shops and one farm owned by the waqf administration. New law (Law no: 3647/2008) passed on 7th February 2008 was prepared without taking into consideration Minority's opinions and proposals. Although the new law foresees the appointment of board members with elections, the minority does not endorse the provisions of the law that give excessive jurisdictions to the

Secretary General of Eastern Macedonia and Thrace region as well as the tutelage powers vested in the office of the “appointed” Muftis. It should also be noted that, before the passing of the said law, the Minority had communicated its opinion and remarks regarding the draft bill to the Government, which proved a futile effort since the Administration once again disregarded the Minority’s will.

Although the sporadic acts of vandalism and desecration targeting mosques and Muslim cemeteries has become rare in recent years the Muslim Turkish Minority still has problems about attacks towards its sacred places. Turkish – Islamic historic monuments in Western Thrace inherited from the Ottomans are systematically eradicated. Mosques, chapels of dervishes, bridges are not restored and attempts of restoration by individuals are not given permission. The destruction begins with the inscriptions being torn down, eliminating the identity of the work. In other cases, the so-called restoration process is delayed expecting that, time itself will do the destruction. Meanwhile the Alevi-Bektashi chapels of dervishes, who were the first settlers of Western Thrace, are converted into churches. Some publications distributed by the Government refer to Ottoman mosques as “Turkish churches” and the Ottoman bridges are regarded as “Pomak bridges” in an effort to prove that these architectural works belong to another nation. The city plan drawn by Komotini (Gümülcine) Municipality in 1933, which covers about 20 mosques and mesjids, is carried out gradually. From time to time, Ottoman tombstones in nearby villages, which are estimated to be 350 – 400 years old, are taken to unknown destinations by trucks and the police forces just witness these occurrences without taking any action to stop them.

THE SITUATION OF THE TURKS IN RODOS AND KOS

There are more than 5000 ethnic Turks living in these two islands. These people do not have a status of a recognized minority. However as they have been living in these islands for more than 350 years they had religious, linguistic and cultural rights. There was a school where the mother tongue (Turkish) was taught until 1970’s. Since then these people do not have the opportunity to learn their mother tongue. Today they are under the threat of losing their ethnic, linguistic and cultural identities. The Greek government has never given an answer to their requirement for learning the Turkish language.