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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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**Oral Statement submitted by the Federation of Western Thrace Turks in Europe, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status**

## The Turkish Minority of Western Thrace in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Cycle Review of Greece

ABTTF would like to extend its sincere gratitude to the Working Group of the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) for the second-cycle review of Greece on 3 May 2016. We regret that most of the recommendations regarding the rights of the Turkish Minority of Western Thrace did not enjoy Greece's support during the review.

ABTTF regrettably notes that the competent Greek authorities have in no manner consulted any association or NGO belonging to the Turkish Minority of Western Thrace. Neither ABTTF nor any organization belonging to the Turkish minority participated in the meetings, if any, with NGOs for the second national report and then after.

ABTTF also submitted a written contribution<sup>1</sup> to the 25<sup>th</sup> session of the UPR Working Group on the implementation of by Greece of the first cycle UPR recommendations related to the Turkish Minority of Western Thrace.

<sup>1</sup> <https://daccess-ods.un.org/TMP/5632681.84661865.html>

## **Self-identification and the recognition of the Minority**

Greece does not confer official status on any indigenous ethnic group nor recognize “ethnic minority” or “linguistic minority” as legal terms, it affirms an individual’s right of self-identification, not right of collective self-identification by members of an ethnic or linguistic group. Greece defines the Turkish Minority of Western Thrace by its religious identity, namely as the “Muslim Minority in Thrace”, and denies the existence of an ethnic Turkish minority in the country on its territory.

## **The right to choose its own religious leaders and its religious personnel**

With reference to Sharia law affecting family and inheritance for Muslims residing in Western Thrace and the recommendation from the first cycle review of Greece, ABTTF noted, as referred in the summary of the stakeholders’ information, all decisions of the muftis appointed by the Greek government on marriages, divorces or inheritance issuance are liable to be made null and void by first instance courts and therefore, it is the responsibility of the State under review to prevent any impediments that may occur.

Today, Greece does not recognize the Turkish minority’s right to elect its own religious leaders (Muftis) and appoints the Muftis on the grounds that these have judicial power on civic matters. We hereby stress that the elected Muftis do not necessarily apply the Sharia law on family and inheritance law matters and just perform religious duties. They are those Muftis appointed by the Greek government who use their judicial competences on inheritance and family issues based on Sharia law.

The Law 4115/2013 which amended Law 3536/2007 envisages the appointment of 240 Islamic religious instructors to teach Islam to the children belonging to the Turkish minority in Greek-language public primary and secondary schools and mosques in Western Thrace under the auspices of the government-appointed muftis.

We urge the Greek government to allow the Turkish Minority of Western Thrace to elect freely its own religious leaders and to repeal the Law 4115/2013 which hinders the minority from managing and controlling its own religious institutions and exercising its religion freely therein.

## **The freedom of association and the (non) implementation of the ECtHR judgments**

Today, the implementation of the three judgments of the European Court of Human Rights finding a violation of freedom of association due to the dissolution and/or refusal to register by the Greek authorities of the associations established by the persons belonging to Turkish Minority of Western Thrace have been still pending.

We request the Greek government to implement, without any further delay, the judgments of the European Court of Human Rights with regards to the cases of the Turkish Union of Xanthi and Others v. Greece, Bekir Ousta and Others v. Greece & Emin and Others v. Greece.

## **The right to education and the lack of bilingual minority kindergartens**

The Turkish Minority of Western Thrace is granted the right to education in its native language and autonomy in the management of its educational institutions. The educational autonomy of the Turkish minority has been undermined and diminished by governmental practices over years. The Greek government has wide-ranging control over the Turkish minority schools at all levels,

whether it concerns the composition and the functioning of the school boards, the hiring and firing of teachers, the distribution of textbooks or the building and repair of school buildings.

The school education of minority children in Turkish and in Greek is an emergency issue. The former UN Special Rapporteur on Minority Issues Gay McDougall had commented bilingual education would allow better knowledge of both Turkish and Greek from an early age and enable greater choice of whether to go to minority or Greek public primary school.<sup>2</sup>

We urge the Greek government to restore the educational and religious autonomy of the Turkish Minority of Western Thrace enshrined in the 1923 Lausanne Treaty. We, once again, ask the Greek authorities to establish bilingual minority kindergartens in the region of Western Thrace in line with the minority schooling system and give bilingual education in public kindergartens in the region until bilingual minority schools are established. We urge the Greek government to revise its policies concerning the minority primary and secondary schools, including their number and their location, the training and hiring of teachers, curriculum and textbooks to be used.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://daccess-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G09/111/98/PDF/G0911198.pdf?OpenElement>