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**2015 OSCE Human Dimension Implementation Meeting (Warsaw)
Statement for Working Session 15 on freedom of religion or belief
(30 September 2015)**

Greece: Blasphemy laws & declaration of religion for exemption from religious education

Greece is (with Ireland and Poland) one of last **European Union** member states where blasphemy laws¹ may lead to prosecution, fines and even imprisonment. There have been recurrent arrests, criminal charges, referrals to trials and or criminal convictions to prison sentences for blasphemy of the Orthodox Christian religion. The most recent conviction was on 16 January 2014, when **Philippos Loizos**, the creator of a satirical “Elder Pastitsios” website, was found guilty of “repeatedly insulting religion” and was sentenced to a suspended prison sentence of ten months.² His appeal has yet to be heard by the courts.

Such laws have a deterrent effect on journalists, academics, artists and other citizens which may amount to self-censorship. They also allow religious lobbies such as the **Synod of the Church of Greece** to maintain undue influence on public affairs.

Additionally, as the **Greek National Commission for Human Rights (GNCHR)** has stressed in a in a recent report to the **UN HRCttee**,³ “*the regulation concerning the right to abstain from religious education courses does not provide a long-term solution, as it requires prior formal justification. The GNCHR highlights that religious education should include an introduction to the history and the main values of each religion. This will fully comply with constitutional commands and the political reality of modern Europe.*”

Indeed religious education is a doctrinal education in Orthodox Christianity.

Moreover, exemption from it has become even harder this September 2015. Parents of pupils who were exempted last year invoking only “*reasons of religious conscience*” thus not having to reveal their religious identity were asked this year to partially reveal their religious identity.

Characteristically, **Vice-President of the International Federation of Human Rights Dimitris Christopoulos** reported on his **Facebook** account on 16 September 2015 that he was asked to sign a certified declaration for his son that “*the pupil ... is not an Orthodox Christian and for that reason I ask that he be exempted from religious education in application of circular 12773/23-1-205*” and

¹ **Article 198 of Criminal Code (CC):** “*Malicious Blasphemy: 1. One who publicly and maliciously and by any means blasphemes God shall be punished by imprisonment for not more than two years. 2. Except for cases under paragraph 1, one who by blasphemy publicly manifests a lack of respect for the divinity, shall be punished by jailing for not more than six months or by pecuniary penalty of not more than 3,000 euros.*” **Article 199 CC:** “*Blasphemy Concerning Religions: One who publicly and maliciously and by any means blasphemes the Eastern Orthodox Church of Christ or any other religion tolerated in Greece shall be punished by imprisonment for not more than two years.*”

² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elder_Pastitsios

³ http://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=INT%2fCCPR%2fIFL%2fGRC%2f19179&Lang=en

posted a facsimile of the form he was asked to sign.⁴ He refused to do it and instead filed a declaration for “*his exemption from religious education for reasons of religious consciousness.*” So did a few other parents with the ability to fight the issue. Such declaration was not accepted by some school headmasters and pupils have been forced to attend religious classes or face consequences from their absences.

On 24 September 2015, the newly appointed **Deputy Minister of Education and Religion Professor Sia Anagnostopoulou** stated that she would issue a new directive to remove the obligation of that partial declaration of the pupil’s religious identity, thus respecting freedom of religion and belief. Three days later, **Archbishop of Greece Ieronymos**, head of the official state Orthodox Church, strongly condemned that intention, considering it as contrary to the, obligatory in his view, religious Greek Orthodox content of the Greek education system. The following day, on 28 September 2015, the Deputy Minister in essence retracted her statement claiming she had been misinterpreted ...

Recommendation to Greece on freedom of religion or belief

- **Greece should abolish blasphemy laws, i.e. Articles 198 and 199 of its Criminal Code.**
- **Greece should promptly amend recent circulars that require parents to declare the non-Orthodox Christian identity of their children as a prerequisite to be exempted from religious education as well as revise the content of religious education so as to include an introduction to the history and the main values of each religion and be neutral towards all religions including the prevailing one.**

⁴<https://www.facebook.com/christopoulosdim/photos/a.1401434350117654.1073741830.1401258560135233/1634781960116224/?type=1&fref=nf>