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PC.SHDM.NGO/13/19
2 April 2019

ENGLISH only



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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)

Supplementary Human Dimension Meeting
Upholding the Principles of Tolerance and Non-Discrimination, including
in the Promotion and Protection of Freedom of Religion or Belief
1 – 2 April 2019
Hofburg, Vienna

SESSION III: The Role of Educational Programs and Civil Society Initiatives as a Means to Address Negative Stereotyping and Stigmatization and Promote Mutual Respect and Understanding: State Responses, Coalition Building, Community Resilience

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Dear Moderator,
Distinguished representatives, delegates and NGO representatives,

Negative portrayals of Muslims, stereotypes and prejudices towards Muslims create a general climate of mistrust, fear and hostility towards Muslim communities in the territories they are used to live in. This is a serious challenge for many OSCE participating States that they have to manage in their multicultural and multi-faith societies. There is a need for an effective strategy and policy to address racism, xenophobia, discrimination or related intolerance against Muslims.

There is no any other religious group other than Muslim Turkish community in Greece and in any county in Europe where the Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs directly or indirectly intervenes in selection/election of the leaders. Although Article 3(1) of the Greek Constitution notes that the prevailing religion in Greece is that of the Eastern Orthodox Church of Christ, the ecclesiastic of the Eastern Orthodox Church of Christ is selected by the Church itself. Likewise, the Jewish Central Board or the Catholic and Protestant Church are free to elect its own religious leaders.

Although Alexis Tsipras, Prime Minister of Greece, noted during a press conference following the EU Leaders' Summit in Brussels in December 2017, that they wanted to reach a point where the religious leaders recognized by the Greek state were not questioned by the minority, the steps taken by the government since then have proved that the government unilaterally takes decisions in a way

which would further destroy the autonomy in the religious field with no informal or formal dialogue with the community representatives in the Mufti issue.

Under a law adopted in 2013, the government appointed 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, which in turn led a huge reaction and objection among members of the Turkish community.

Furthermore, a draft Presidential Decree published by the Ministry of Education and Religious on 28 August 2018 which aims to establish the procedural rules for cases under the jurisdiction of the Mufti and the adoption of his decisions, and the regulation of issues of organization, establishment and filling of staff positions and the operation of the Mufti Jurisdiction Affairs Directorate in the Mufti Offices raised concerns of the Turkish community concerning their religious freedom. Because, the decree recommends the establishment of the Mufti Jurisdiction Affairs Directorate in the Mufti Offices in Komotini, Xanthi and Didymoteicho, which are independent decentralized public services of the Ministry of Education, Research and Religion, at the level of general directorate under the Minister of Education, Research and Religious Affairs. The Department for Mufti Jurisdiction Affairs, an organizational unit under the Directorate, would be responsible for the diligence of all the necessary details and for keeping the appropriate procedure each time for initiating the procedure before Mufti(appointed) while he is exercising his jurisdiction power. All the institutions representing the Turkish community and the Turkish MPs in the Greek parliament declared that this is in stark violation of the autonomy in religious affairs granted by the 1913 Athens Treaty and guaranteed by the 1923 Lausanne Treaty as the Mufti Office becomes a regular public institution under ministerial management and supervision, where only the official language Greek is spoken.

On 9 January 2018, the Greek parliament adopted a law which would make optional Islamic law to settle family and inheritance issues of persons belonging to the Turkish community in Western Thrace. The law is not consulted with the elected religious leaders, whom Greece does not recognize.

The non-recognition of elected Muftis by the government and no formal dialogue with representatives of the Turkish community in issues concerning their religious rights cause a lack of trust to governmental authorities. There are no inclusive policies and awareness-raising programmes that promote tolerance and mutual understanding between the Turkish community and governmental authorities. Besides, there are no educational programs or any partnerships with civil society representing the Turkish community in Western Thrace as a means to address negative stereotyping and stigmatization in relation to racism.

It is very important that governments should pay a particular attention to the implementation of OSCE commitments and other relevant international commitments in the field of human rights. Recalling that persons belonging to national minorities should have the right freely to profess and practice their religion, including acquisition, possession and use of religious materials, and to conduct religious educational activities in their mother tongue, we demand from Greek authorities to ensure that Muslim Turkish community enjoys its right to elect its own religious leaders as other known religions in Greece and recognize the Muftis elected by the community as official religious leaders of the Muslim Turkish community in the region.

Greece and all other participating States should review their national integration strategies to ensure that all people regardless of race, ethnicity, religion gender or any other status are empowered to engage actively in the process of inclusion by promoting their social, economic, political and cultural participation in society. Greece should take result-oriented measures for eliminating discrimination and hate speech against the Turkish community and improve diversity throughout the system by eliminating prejudices while developing strategies that are inclusive of minorities which would be part of an overall governmental policy for the promotion and protection of minority rights in the country.

In addressing the phenomenon in general terms, ODIHR should pay more and continuing attention to hate-motivated incidents and crimes against Muslims in the OSCE area and establish a more concrete cooperation mechanism with NGOs in reporting racism and racist hate crimes they face in countries which they live and national training seminars for civil society in addressing and reporting hate motivated attacks and crimes to national authorities and international organizations.