



Turkish Minority of Western Thrace 2010

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 for the full utilization of minority rights. 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.

DENIAL OF ETHNIC IDENTITY

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 prohibited. 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.

FREEDOM OF ASSOCIATION

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. In both cases (ECtHR decisions –*Tourkiki Enosi Xanthis and Others v. Greece – No: 26698/05* and –*Emin and Others v. Greece – No: 34144/05*), the ECtHR decided that the freedom of association of the Turkish minority has violated. It should be also important to note that even the word ‘minority’ caused problem for the establishment of a new minority association (See *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.

EXPELLED CITIZENS

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.

EDUCATION

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 educational autonomy and increase the weakness of the instruction of the Turkish curriculum.

According to the Law No. 3518/2006 pre-school education in Greece since 2007 has become compulsory. 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.



Western Thrace Minority
University Graduates Association

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 2010 there are 191 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. This weakness is also accepted by some of the graduates of this Academy. 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 worldwide. 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. The existence of 6 year compulsory education for minority pupils as opposed to 10 year compulsory education for majority 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.

RELIGION

There has not been any progress towards the settlement of the outstanding institutional problem of Muslim religious leaders, the Muftis. The European Court of



Western Thrace Minority
University Graduates Association

Human Rights concluded on 4 instances, i.e. *Serif v. Greece* (14 December 1999-Case No: 38178/97), *Agga v. Greece (No.2)* (17 October 2002-Case No: 50776/99 & 52912/99), *Agga v. Greece (No.3)* (13 July 2006 – Case No: 32186/02) and *Agga v. Greece (No.4)* (13 July 2006 – Case No: 33331/02) 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. 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.

CHARITABLE FOUNDATIONS (WAQFS)

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. The total current debt of Administrative Board of Komotini Waqfs is estimated to reach 1 million 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



Western Thrace Minority
University Graduates Association

also be noted that, before the passing of the said law, the Minority via our association 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.

In the year 2009, hatred towards the holy places of the Muslim-Turkish Minority appears to be widespread. Violent incidents against Muslim-Turkish Minority and their holy places are often triggered by local and national media and anti-Turkish/Muslim hysteria of ultra-nationalist groups. The authorities on the other hand, have not introduced satisfactory measures or precautions, but simply recorded and occasionally condemned the hate crimes. Due to the ignorance of the authorities regarding the implementation of the above-mentioned legislation, the number of attacks is increasing day by day.

Arson Attack to Toxotes Mosque (2 September 2009): The mosque in the village of Toxotes, located in the Prefecture of Xanthi, was attacked and some unidentified person/s tried to put the mosque on fire. The window of the mosque was broken and a gallon of oil was thrown into the mosque. The carpets and air conditioners were damaged. Fortunately, the fire did not cause more damage since tightly closed windows and doors blocked any fresh air to get in to the mosque. Despite the investigations by the police, the perpetrators were not found. This was actually the third attack to the mosque in the last 5 years. In the arson of 7 March 2004, the mosque was totally destroyed and it was refurbished with the voluntary donations of the Turkish Minority of Western Thrace, with some help extended by the Prefecture of Xanthi for reconstruction. On 1 November 2007, some people tried to put the mosque on fire once more, but the heavy rain on the very same night extinguished it. On both instances, the vandal/s could not be identified and persecuted.

Attack to the Hürriyet Mosque in Xanthi (12 November 2009): The windows of the mosque in the centre of the city of Xanthi were broken with the stones thrown by some vandals in midnight. In spite of the complaint lodged by the religious staff of the mosque, the perpetrators of the attack were not found and persecuted.

Attack to the Sünne Mosque in Xanthi (6 December 2009): The windows of another central mosque in the city of Xanthi were broken, and some degrading phrases were written on its wall against the Muslim-Turks and their holy book Kuran. The vandals painted obscene pictures on the walls of mosque. In this instance too, the perpetrators remained unidentified.

Damages to the Muslim Cemetery in Tekton Village (January 2009): The local authorities in the Municipality of Vistonida failed to respect the Muslim cemetery while landscaping the area. The cemetery was damaged in order to open a road for trucks in early 2009. Some historical tombs that are older than 100 years were damaged. The Turkish Minority of Western Thrace protested against this non-respectable behavior, and minority origin member of the Hellenic Parliament from the



Prefecture of Xanthi, Mr. Cetin Mandaci, formally brought this issue to the attention of Ministry of Interior. It was claimed that the cemetery was not damaged, while also denying the fact that the cemetery was a communal property of the Muslims-Turks living in the region. Although the local authorities promised to protect the cemetery by fencing, nothing has been achieved so far.

Attack to the Muslim Cemetery in Komotini (February 2010): The historical cemetery in the centre of the city of Komotini (called Poşboş Cemetery) was attacked by people affiliated to the ultra-nationalist groups. The tombs were painted with some degrading phrases.

POLITICAL PARTICIPATION AND REPRESENTATION

Generally speaking, the Turkish minority in Greece is not adequately represented in the political and public life of Greece. Despite the existence of two minority MPs in the Hellenic Parliament and more than 200 minority people in local administrations, there are some structural limitations on the political representation of minority. After the election of the first independent minority MP to the Hellenic Parliament in late 1980s, the Greek electoral law was changed on 24 October 1990 and an electoral threshold of 3% was introduced for the first time. Since the threshold was also implemented for the independent candidates, the minority has lost the chance of being represented in the parliament through its own party and/or with an independent MP (3% of the total population of Greece means nearly 300.000 votes, whereas the total population of the minority is estimated about 150.000). Due to these regulations the minority can only be represented with the MPs elected through majority political parties in the parliament, which in turn, often proves to be a hindrance to express their thoughts and feelings freely regarding minority affairs.

As far as the local elections are concerned, the Law no 2218/1994 arbitrarily merged the electoral districts populated by the minority with that of the majority in order to prevent the possibility of the election of governors with minority background in the provinces of Xanthi and Rodopi. In this respect, Rodopi prefecture was merged with neighboring Evros, whereas Xanthi was merged with Drama and Kavala Prefectures. In order to hide the discriminatory nature of this artificial implication, this notorious system of “enlarged electoral districts” was implemented in the Attica region as well. Furthermore, the Greek government applied policies aimed to change demographic structure of the region by transferring population from the ex-Soviet Union countries. Such an implementation of demographic change increases the overall number of Christian Greek Population in Western Thrace and facilitates the election of more Christian Greeks for the local administration.

CHANGES IN LOCAL ADMINISTRATION

The government has announced a new law called “Kallikratis” on redistricting the local administration. According this new law, the number of 1034 municipalities



Western Thrace Minority
University Graduates Association

across the country will be reduced to 343, prefectures will be abolished and 13 secretary generals will be elected.

The government with these changes aimed to empower local administrations. Although these changes are welcomed by the majority of population, there are still some objections by some political parties.

This new law is to be ratified recently. The changes of the local administration affect directly the Muslim Turkish Minority's participation and representation in political life. Today, 6 subdistricts and 5 municipalities are administrated by members of the minority. Apart from almost 200 members of the minority representative in local administration across the region there are also 2 vice-prefects in Rodopi and 1 in Xanthi. Although the minority welcomes the changes in local administration, is very much concerned about the reduction of elected members.

Although it is uncertain yet, the municipalities which can be ruled by members of the minority are estimated to be only 3. The 30% quota for women which was introduced in 2002 is also considered in this law.

Bearing in mind the population rates in the region, the minority of Western Thrace call upon the Greek State to take special measures for the effective and adequate participation and representation of the minority to political life. Introducing a special quota for the minority should be considered as positive discrimination.

THE SITUATION IN RHODES AND KOS

There are also more than 5.000 Turkish people living in the Dodecanese islands, acquired by Greece in 1947 according to the provisions of the Paris Treaty signed after the Second World War. Greece officially denies the minority status of the Muslim-Turks in the region by arguing that they are excluded from the minority protection regime stipulated under 1923 Lausanne Treaty. Muslim-Turks living in these islands are faced with similar problems with that of the Turkish Minority of Western Thrace (inter alia, administration of Muslim pious foundations called waqfs, election of their religious leader called Mufti, having an access to minority education in Turkish and the like).

The Turkish minority of Dodecanese islands have also suffered from hate crimes. For example, the eight tombs belonging to the prominent religious figures as well as the Muslim cemetery comprised of 256 graves, both located in the religious complex called Murat Reis Külliyesi in Rhodes, were totally left to demolition. The small-scale restoration project initiated by the government had nothing to do with preservation of the historical-religious character of the religious complex, and the attacks to the historical tombs located in the cemetery continued in the year 2009. It was also reported that some groups have occasionally distributed leaflets to discourage shopping from the minority owned enterprises.