

Supplementary Human Dimension Meeting
National Minorities, Bridge building and Integration

ENGLISH only

STATEMENT BY THE DELEGATION OF GREECE

- RIGHT OF REPLY- (Session 2)

Due to its cardinal importance, Greece is paying a particular attention to education. Specifically:

In keeping with the EU's relevant policy, as well as with the international and regional trends in this field, as expressed in particular in OSCE guidelines, the Greek Government is firmly committed to continue its policy to uphold the right to education for the Muslim minority.

Taking, therefore, into consideration the comparative advantages of the public educational system – as opposed to minority structures – and nation-wide priorities in this field, the Greek Government stands ready:

On the one hand to improve the functioning of the existing minority schools (132 primary minority schools, 2 secondary and 2 Koranic/Islamic schools) in Thrace; on the other, to successfully accommodate the preference to the public educational system shown by the minority members who select it.

More specifically, an increasing number of persons belonging to the Muslim minority in Thrace are showing a preference for the state's mainstream educational system.

Such an accommodation is being pursued in parallel with courses aiming at preserving the linguistic and cultural characteristics of persons belonging to the minority who attend public schools. There also are at least 57 public kindergartens in minority villages, which minority children can attend before entering primary education schools.

Concerning the Higher Education, a 0.5% quota for the admission to Universities and Higher Technical Education Institutes/Institutions of students who are members of the Muslim minority in Thrace has long been introduced. The obvious advantages of this measure are the promotion of further integration of persons belonging to the Muslim minority in Thrace into the wider society, in an effective and inclusive way, and the improved access to the job market.

Furthermore, the Theology Faculty of the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki established an Islamic Studies Program in the current academic year, leading to a public university degree in this field.

Considering the religious freedom, I would like to mention that there are nearly 300 mosques offering religious services and roughly 370 preachers. Religious preachers are employed by the

civil service enjoying all relevant benefits (welfare, professional stability etc). Three Muftis offices – at the cities of Xanthi, Komotini and Didimoticho- offer the possibility to the Greek Muslims, residents of Thrace, to regulate their family and property affairs according to the Islamic law (Sharia).

Referring to the selection of the Muftis, I would like to mention that in terms of comparative law and practice, there is not a single, standard method for the selection of Muftis. Each country, Muslim or not, has the right to establish its own process, provided that such a process is in accordance with the Islamic tradition and religious rights and freedoms.

The Greek law ensures the selection of notable, distinguished teachers of Islam who will perform their religious and judicial duties in the best and most responsive way.

The so – called “elected Muftis” are not officially recognized; however, the State does not obstruct their religious or other activities, showing maximum tolerance and restraint.

Last but not least, with regard to the non ratification from Greece of the Convention mentioned, I would like to stress that it is at the absolute discretion of every sovereign state to ratify those international conventions it deems necessary.