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Dear President,
Distinguished representatives,
And esteemed NGO Delegates,

Greece only recognizes a “Muslim minority in Thrace” and denies the existence of an ethnic Turkish minority in Western Thrace. The legal status of the Muslim minority is based on the Treaty of Lausanne of 1923 and the educational and religious autonomy of the Turkish Minority of Western Thrace has been in practice until the Greek military junta regime in 1967. The educational and religious autonomy of the Turkish Minority of Western Thrace has been undermined and diminished by governmental practices over years through legislations without prior consultation or opinion sharing with the representatives of the Turkish Minority.

Due to the lack of implementation of commitments related to freedom of religion or belief undertaken by Greek authorities, the right of the Turkish Minority of Western Thrace to elect its own religious leaders is not recognized. After problems in 1985, the minority elected its own muftis in 1990. However, public authorities did not recognise the muftis who were elected by members of the Muslim community, the muftis (elected) were prosecuted and sentenced to prison for the illegal use of religious symbols. Mr. Mehmet Emin Aga, the elected Mufti in Xanthi in that period was adjudicated in several times and sent to prison. In January 1995, Mr. Aga was sentenced by the Court of Appeal in Larisa up to ten months of a charge on the ground of “usurping the title of Mufti”, and then sent to the Larisa Prison. Through the subsequent trials on similar charges, Mr. Aga was sentenced to an eight- year of imprisonment. In 1996 Mr. İbrahim Şerif, the elected Mufti in Komotini, stood up in a trial in Thessaloniki “for false pretence of authority”, and was sentenced to a six- month imprisonment, though he was released after appeal. In August 2015, İbrahim Şerif has received a subpoena to give a deposition to the attorney general and has given his deposition. Mr. İbrahim Şerif will be adjudicated in a case appealed by a Greek citizen on the ground of usurping the Muftiate.¹

Greece doesn't still recognize the right of the Turkish minority of Western Thrace to elect its own religious leaders and rather it appoints muftis on the ground that the muftis have judicial powers on

¹ <http://www.birlikgazetesi.info/haberler/10612-2015-08-27-12-20-00.html>

civic issues. There is a duality today, the Muftis appointed by the State and the Muftis elected by the Turkish minority in the region. The Greek Governments notes although the elected Muftis are not officially recognized, the state does not obstruct their religious or other activities. We would like to stress that Muftis (elected) do not use any legal judicial authority on civic issues and they are only serve religious services for members of the Minority.

Today, Greece doesn't still recognize the right of the Turkish Minority of Western Thrace to elect its own religious leaders. The Presidential Decree published in Official Gazette on 17 December 2010 extended the terms of office of Cemali Meço, the son of Mufti (appointed) of Komotini Hafuzidris, by 24 December 2010, upon the request of Minister of Education and Religious Affairs. And, lately, on 5 August 2011, the terms of office of Mehmet Emin Şinikoğlu, the Mufti (appointed) of Xanthi was extended for ten year, till August 2021.

The Greek Government insists that there is no a unique method internationally for the selection of the Muftis and claims that the religious leaders of the Minority are being selected, through fully transparent and inclusive procedures, by a pool of esteemed teachers of Islam that are members of the minority with the full involvement of the minority as a whole is the procedure. A parallel is often underlined between the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate in Turkey, and the muftis in Western Thrace. The Patriarch is elected by the Holy Synod after the submission of the list of would-be candidates to the public authorities, the muftis are rather appointed by the State on the ground that the muftis do have legal authority on civic issues.

Greek authorities stated that they are examining possible ways of introducing new elements that would allow an even more representative and transparent process for the selection of the Muftis. Any efforts to improve this framework by Greek authorities should be in accordance with the rights and freedoms granted to the Minority by international treaties. A dialogue mechanism on equal footings should be established by Greek authorities and the best interest of the Minority should be the priority in solution of the Mufti issue.

ABTTF urges the Greek authorities to hold a dialogue with members of the Turkish minority of Western Thrace in order to find a long lasting and satisfactory solution to the problem of mufti in a way that would not diminish by no means autonomous establishment of the Turkish minority of Western Thrace in accordance with the Athens Treaty of 1913 and Its Third Protocol.

Law on Muslim Preachers (4115/2013), which replaced the Articles 36 to 39 of Law 3536/2007, envisages of appointment of 240 "Quran teachers" who will offer their services in the public schools of primary and secondary education and mosques in Western Thrace under the auspices of the official muftis who are appointed by the State itself. Law 4115/2013 start implemented in August 2013 and 63 religious officers, among whom only 3 are university graduates, started to teach Islam and Quran in Greek in public schools of secondary education in Western Thrace in January 2014 despite strong opposition by members of Turkish minority. The new legislation would allow the Greek government to exercise state control over religion through the appointment of Muslim preachers i.e. Imams to mosques under the realm authority of the official Muftis in Xanthi, Komotini and Didymoticho in Greece.

We regret that the Turkish Minority of Western Thrace has no right to take a part in decision-making processes in issues which directly affect its daily life. Federal Union of European Nationalities (FUEN) also expressed its regret and stated that the strong opposition expressed by the Turkish deputies in the Greek parliament has been disregarded and thus Turkish minority has been prevented to have a say in decisions which would directly affect its daily life.² European Muslim Initiative for Social Cohesion (EMISCO) expressed its deep concern about the situation in

² <https://www.abttf.org/html/index.php?link=detay&cid=4708&grup=4&l=en&arsiv=0>

Western Thrace and noted that the legislative regulation violates the religious autonomy of the Minority by abrogating the right to choose their own clergymen to teach Quran.³

We would like to stress that the State should not involve in /intervene to any matters regarding issues of faith, belief, or the organization of a religious group, and it should extricate itself any matter which might be considered internal. The ecclesiastic of the Eastern Orthodox Church of Christ, which is the prevailing religion in Greece, are public servants, but they are appointed/elected/selected by the Church itself, and the State is not allowed to involve in/intervene to any matter internal or doctrinal to the Church.

Reminding the 1989 Vienna Ministerial Council Decision stipulating that freedom of religion or belief includes respect by participating States the right of religious communities, among other things, to select, appoint and replace their personnel in accordance with their respected requirements and standards as well as with any freely accepted arrangements between them and their State,

We call upon the Government of Greece:

- not to diminish by no means autonomous establishment of the Turkish Minority of Western Thrace in accordance with Athens Treaty of 1913 and Its Third Protocol,
- to recognize the right of the Turkish Minority to elect its own religious leaders and repeal Law 4115/2013,
- to fully guarantee and realize that the members of the Turkish Minority would enjoy the same treatment and security in law and in fact as other Greek nationals in the management and control of their religious institutions and that they could exercise their religion freely therein,

³ <http://www.emisco.com/2013/01/22/press-release-situation-in-western-thrace/>