

Federation of Western Thrace Turks in Europa Newsletter



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EP Conference calls on Greece to recognise and better protect its minorities



On 2 March 2016, Csaba Sógor MEP (EPP), hosted a conference at the European Parliament in Brussels titled 'Freedom of Association in Greece: A Loophole in European Minority Rights Standards'. The conference, organised in association with the Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization (UNPO) and the Federation of Western Thrace Turks in Europe (ABTTTF), received unexpected attention as two Golden Dawn MEPs (non-attached) were caught on camera attempting to derail the conversation, immediately denying the existence of any minority other

than the 'Muslim minority' referred to in the Lausanne Treaty.

The conference heard speeches from Mr Nils Torvalds MEP (ALDE), Dr Panayote Dimitras (Spokesperson of the Greek Helsinki Monitor), Ms Eugenia Natsoulidou (Founder of the Macedonian Educative and Culture Movement of EDESSA), Ms Melek Kirmacı Arık (International Affairs Director of ABTTTF), and Ms Johanna Green (Programme Manager at UNPO). All speakers mentioned the gap between rhetoric and action, namely, that although Greece claims to protect

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its minorities' rights, this is neither true in law or in fact. Indeed, in law, the only minority group recognised by the Greek government is the Muslim minority, thus no legal recognition of ethnic minorities such as the Turks or Macedonians is in place. On this point, Ms Natsoulidou referred to the 'unsolvable problem' of the Greek constitution's Article 16(2) on the development of national and religious conscience which enables Greek politicians to dictate how the citizens should think and feel. Dr Dimitras then stressed the fact that the majority of the Greek population (including the politicians themselves) have a very limited knowledge about minority rights and issues, and that without awareness there could be no

hope of change.

Another important topic raised throughout the conference was a number of cases brought against Greece in the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR), by minority groups in Greece who had not been allowed to register their organisation because they used minority terminology in the name. In these cases the Court found Greece to have violated the groups' right to freedom of association (Article 11) under the European Convention on Human Rights. Significantly, none of these judgments have been acted on, and the speakers all pushed for the recognition and implementation of these rulings.

The conference confirmed that more dialogue and debate is

needed both at the national and European levels to overcome the politics of fear that continue to hamper progressive reform of minority rights legislation. As Ms Kırmacı emphasised, the non-implementation of the ECtHR judgments is not due simply to procedural reasons, but rather linked to the political question of recognising the Muslim minority of Western Thrace as Turkish. Finally, the conference called for the establishment of a policy framework or instrument to protect minority rights at the EU level. The European Union prides itself on its core values of respect for human rights and promotion of democracy; therefore to continue to allow Greece, a Member State since 1981, to violate the rights of its minorities is untenable.



EFA protests to EP President Martin Schulz on Golden Dawn MEPs



On the eve of the conference entitled “Freedom of Association in Greece: A Loophole in European Minority Rights Standards” which was hosted by the MEP Csaba Sógor and jointly organized by the Federation of Western Thrace Turks in Europe (ABTTF) and the Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization (UNPO) on 2 March 2016 in the European Parliament, the three MEPs of the Golden Dawn Eleftherios Synadinos, Lampros Fountoulis ve Georgios Epiteideios sent a letter of complaint to the President of the EPP Group Manfred Weber.

In their joint letter, the Golden Dawn MEPs bring accusation against the host MEP Sógor and the political group EPP he belongs to with regard to the conference, and demand the immediate cancellation of the event and an apology for such an initiative. The regarding Golden Dawn MEPs came to the meeting room just before the beginning of the conference, and verbally attacked and threatened the host MEP Sógor.

François Alfonsi, President of the European Free Alliance (EFA) which was also present at the conference through three members of its staff, sent on 3 March 2016 a letter of protest to the



President of the EP Martin Schulz, and condemned the said attack and threatening behaviour of the three Golden Dawn MEPs, by underlying this was simply unacceptable and completely against the democratic values. In his letter, Alfonsi stressed these tactics are deployed in order to scare off people, in order to paralyze debates and in order to keep a status quo in Greece when it comes to minorities, adding the Friendship, Equality and Peace Party (DEB-Party) and Vinozhito-Rainbow are members of EFA and Greece persistently ignores the ECtHR

judgments in favour of the Macedonian and Turkish minorities represented by the said parties.

Alfonsi also referred to the letter of complaint of those three Golden Dawn MEPs, asking for an apology, and emphasized in the name of democracy, they should actually apologize for their behaviour. Alfonsi closed his letter by asking the EP President to take appropriate measures that are at his disposal to discipline the mentioned Golden Dawn MEPs.

ABTTF on a working visit to Strasbourg during the PACE Winter Session

FUEN member organizations ABTTF, ROISDER and VATAN raised the problems of their own communities during the meetings they held with the PACE members and the Council of Europe officials

The Federation of Western Thrace Turks in Europe (ABTTF) paid a working visit to Strasbourg during the 2016 Winter Session of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE). During this working visit from 26 to 27 January 2016, the ABTTF President and Vice President of the Federal Union of European Nationalities (FUEN) Halit Habip Ođlu was accompanied by the President of the Rhodes, Kos and the Dodecanese Turks Culture and Solidarity Association (ROISDER) Prof. Dr. Mustafa Kaymakçı representing the Turks living in Rhodes and Kos and the President of the International Society of the Meskhetian Turks "VATAN" Zhavid Aliev representing the Meskhetian Turks.

The delegation held high-level meetings with the Secretary General of the Council of Europe Thorbjørn Jagland and the Foreign Minister of the Republic of Turkey and the former President of the PACE Mevlüt Çavuşođlu in Strasbourg. ABTTF President Habip Ođlu also met with Mustafa Abduldzhemil Dzhemilev, the Leader of the Crimean Tatars and a member of the Ukrainian Parliament.

Within the scope of their working visit, the representatives of the Turkish minority of Western Thrace, Rhodes-Kos Turks and Meskhetian Turks held a series of meetings with the members of the PACE and the Council of Europe officials. The delegation met with the Chairperson of the PACE Sub-Committee on the Rights of Minorities



Viorel Riceard Badea, the Vice Chairperson of the Azerbaijani National Delegation to the PACE Vusal Huseynov, the Rapporteur of the PACE Monitoring Committee on Georgia Boriss Cilevičs, the member of the Georgian National Delegation to the PACE Guguli Magradze, the Executive Secretary of the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) Stephanos Stavros, the Head of the Directorate of the Political Advice in the



Council of Europe Alexandre Guessel and the Deputy to the Director of the

Office of the Commissioner for Human Rights of the Council of Europe Nikolaos Sitaropoulos.

During his meetings with the PACE members and the Council of Europe officials, ABTTF President Habip Ođlu provided information on the ongoing problems with regard to the educational and religious autonomy of the Turkish minority of Western Thrace and referred to the recent discriminative practices by the Greek authorities against the minority. The ROISDER President Prof.

Dr. Kaymakçı representing the Turkish community living in Rhodes and Kos noted the Rhodes-Kos Turks are not officially recognized by the Greek state as a minority on the grounds that the Dodecanese islands did not belong to Greece when the Lausanne Peace Treaty was signed in 1923 and reported about the problems having been being faced by the Turkish community living in those islands with regard to education in its mother tongue and election of its religious leaders. Prof. Dr. Kaymakçı also mentioned the miserable state of

the historical buildings and monuments of the Ottoman cultural heritage in the islands. The President of VATAN Aliev representing the Meskhetian Turks underlined Georgia has not fulfilled yet its obligation with regard to the repatriation of the Meskhetian Turks deported in 1944 by Joseph Stalin to their homeland Akhaltsih (Samtskhe-Javakheti) when it became a member of the Council of Europe and called on Georgia to immediately take all the necessary steps to ensure the repatriation of the Meskhetian Turks.

ABTTF paid a working visit to Brussels

Federation of Western Thrace Turks in Europe (ABTTF) conducted several meetings mainly in the European Parliament in Brussels on 24 February 2016. The ABTTF delegation composed of ABTTF President Halit Habip Ođlu and ABTTF Vice-President Sami Yusuf and accompanied by ABTTF Brussels Representation met with MEP Soraya Post (Sweden/S&D) and MEP Angelika Mlinar (Austria/ALDE) in the European Parliament. The delegation also came together with Dr Krisztian Manzinger who is the second secretary at the Hungarian Mission to the EU at the embassy premises.

The problems of the minority as well as the recent developments have been highlighted

The first meeting took place at the Hungarian Mission to the EU premises with the Second Secretary Dr Krisztian Manzinger. Having met Mr Manzinger almost a year ago, the delegation informed him about the recent developments in Western Thrace, particularly on the issue of death threats to the elected Mufti of Xanthi and the attack to the headquarter of minority's FEP Party.

ABTTF delegation continued its meetings at the European Parliament



and came together firstly with Swedish MEP Soraya Post who is the member of LIBE (Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs) Committee. Having expressed his gladness on meeting the MEP for the first time, Mr Habip Ođlu informed her about the fundamental problems of the minority particularly on education and religious affairs along with the works ABTTF carries out at international platforms.

The last meeting was held with Austrian MEP Angelika Mlinar in her office in the EP. Mr Habip Ođlu talked about the significant problem on freedom of

association of the Turkish minority and noted that Greece had not yet implemented 3 ECtHR rulings of 2007 and 2008 on the cases of Xanthi Turkish Union, Cultural Association of Turkish Women of Rhodope and Evros Minority Youth Association.

ABTTF on a working visit in Brussels

The Federation of Western Thrace Turks in Europe (ABTTF) paid a working visit to the European Parliament (EP) on 2 December 2015 in Brussels. Accompanied by the ABTTF Brussels Office, ABTTF President Halit Habip Oğlu and ABTTF Vice-Presidents Sami Yusuf and Mustafa Kasap met with the MEPs Jordi Sebastià and Ernest Maragall (The Greens/European Free Alliance) who both are Catalans from Spain, Nedzhmi Ali (ALDE) who belongs to the Turkish minority in Bulgaria, Iskra Mihaylova (ALDE) from Bulgaria and Csaba Sógor (EPP-Christian Democrats) who belong to the Hungarian minority in Romania.



MEPs provided with information on the problems of and current issues of concern to the Turkish minority of Western Thrace in Greece

The ABTTF delegation first met with the Co-Chair of the Intergroup for Traditional Minorities, National Communities and Languages in the EP Jordi Sebastià and Ernest Maragall. ABTTF President Habip Oğlu underlined the Turkish minority of Western Thrace has been granted educational and religious autonomy by the 1923 Peace Treaty of Lausanne and said the Greek government violates the right of the minority to education in mother tongue by declining the opening of bilingual minority kindergartens in Western Thrace.

During the meeting with Nedzhmi Ali who is a member of the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF), the political party of the Turkish minority in Bulgaria, ABTTF President Habip Oğlu explained the current problems, in particular with regard to the education, of the Turkish minority of Western Thrace and the discriminative practices it is exposed to, and requested his support on these issues in the EP. Ali

expressed his support for the cause of the Turkish minority of Western Thrace and invited Habip Oğlu to the MRF's General Assembly to be held in April 2016 in Bulgaria.

During the meeting with Iskra Mihaylova, Chairperson of the Committee on Regional Development, ABTTF President Habip Oğlu said although Western Thrace is one of the most economically underdeveloped regions of Greece, the Turkish minority municipalities there cannot sufficiently benefit from the regional and rural development funds of the European Union.

The ABTTF delegation lastly met with Csaba Sógor, member of the Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs in his office. ABTTF President Habip Oğlu underlined the serious problems the Turkish minority of Western Thrace has been facing in the field of freedom of association and expressed the three judgments delivered by the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) in 2007 and 2008 with regard to the Turkish Union of Xanthi, the Cultural Association of Turkish Women of the Region of Rodopi and the Evros Prefecture Minority Youth Association have still not been implemented by Greece.



ABTTF attended the OSCE conference on intolerance and discrimination against Muslims

The hate crimes and hate-motivated violence targeting the Turkish minority of Western Thrace expressed at the conference

The Federation of Western Thrace Turks in Europe (ABTTF) participated on 19 February 2016 in the conference entitled “A Holistic Approach to Addressing Intolerance and Discrimination against Muslims in the OSCE Region” that was organized by the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) together with the German OSCE Chairmanship. Fatih Hafizmehmet, member of the International Affairs and Lobbying Group of ABTTF and members of the Western Thrace Minority University Graduates Association (WTMUGA) Pervin Hayrullah and Onur Mustafa Ahmet represented the Turkish minority of Western Thrace at the conference held in Vienna, Austria.

Intolerance and discrimination against the Turkish minority of Western Thrace on the rise in the recent years

During the thematic session on “Security of Muslim Communities across the OSCE Region”, Fatih Hafizmehmet took the floor and stated the activities of racist extremist organizations have reached to a worrying point in many OSCE participating States, adding the Turkish minority of Western Thrace has also become a target of the far-right extremist neo-Nazi political party of Golden Dawn in Greece. Hafizmehmet noted the sharp rise in the hate-motivated attacks on the persons, institutions and organizations belonging to the Turkish minority as well as on the mosques and Muslim



cemeteries in Western Thrace in the recent years and referred to the attacks on the Dimetoka Muslims, Sports, Cultural and Educational Association, Mahmutağa mosque and Alankuyu masjid in the city of Komotini and the new Headquarters of the Friendship, Equality and Peace (DEB) Party which is the unique political party of the Turkish minority in 2015. Furthermore, Hafizmehmet said fully covered with masks, a group of men who introduced themselves as the “Guardians of Thrace” kidnapped on 28 January 2016 an imam

who is working at the Elected Mufti Office of Xanthi and a family friend and relative of the Elected Mufti Ahmet Mete, too, forced him to get on a minibus and threatened him saying they will kill the Elected Mufti of Xanthi, attack the children of him and are following closely the movements of the Mufti Office. Hafizmehmet underlined all the perpetrators of these attacks have remained unknown and unpunished by the Greek authorities, and called therefore on the Greek government to take immediately the necessary steps to prevent in the future similar hate crimes against the Turkish minority of Western Thrace and other ethnic and religious groups living in Greece. Moreover, Hafizmehmet urged the ODIHR to organise an OSCE High Level Conference on intolerance and discrimination against Muslims. During the same session, the WTMUGA member Onur Mustafa Ahmet also took the floor and expressed the hate-motivated attacks targeting the Turkish minority of Western Thrace.

Since the time provided for the first thematic session was over, the representative of the Greek delegation made use of his right to reply during the third thematic session and said hate crimes are not only in Greece, but in all parts of the world are committed, and the Greek police is trying to perform thoroughly its duty. He argued the community living in Western Thrace has a pluralistic character and tolerance rules over in the region.

During the third thematic session of the conference, the WTMUGA member Pervin Hayrullah took the floor and stated outside Western Thrace, it is not permitted by the Greek authorities to pray in the mosques in Greece and Athens is still the only European capital city without a mosque.



We are entirely standing alongside our elected Mufti of Xanthi Ahmet Mete!

As the Federation of Western Thrace Turks in Europe (ABTTF), we have regrettably learned through the press release of 6 February 2016 by the Office of our elected Mufti of Xanthi that an Imam, who is also a friend of family and relative of Mufti Ahmet Mete, was forced during a visit to Mufti's house on Thursday evening, 28 January 2016, by masked and gloved persons who introduced themselves as the "Guardians of Thrace" to get in a minibus and insulted our Mufti and threatened to harm him and his family.

As ABTTF Executive Board and on behalf of the Western Thrace Turks living in Europe, we are sending Imam Hüseyin Cihan who was kidnapped by the Guardians of Thrace our best wishes and express that given the insults and death threats by the aggressors against our elected Mufti of Xanthi Ahmet Mete and his family, we are entirely standing alongside him. We invite the Greek security forces to arrest the perpetrators as soon as possible and take serious measures against the concerning threats to life safety in the region of Western Thrace.

The elected Mufti of Xanthi Ahmet Mete



states in the press release that an imam working at the Mufti office was also manhandled in the past and he has been receiving threats in oral and written form since he has been elected as Mufti. This is a clear warning. In view of this alarming state, in case something happens to our elected Mufti and his family or employees of the Mufti office, the Greek state has to certainly account for this.



ABTTF Newsletter

The ABTTF Newsletter in four languages, namely in Turkish, English, Greek and German, is celebrating its eleventh year.

The ABTTF Newsletter, in which the matters of grave concern to the Turkish Minority of Western Thrace, recent developments and current events in Western Thrace and Greece, in particular pertaining to the minority issues and policies, international activities and lobbying of ABTTF aimed at obtaining solutions for the for the problems of the Turkish minority through democracy and peace and information on the activities of the associations of the Turkish minority throughout Europe and the world are dealt with, is being followed with great interest not only by Western Thrace Turks, but also by large parts of the public.

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ABTTF

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