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**THE PANEL ON
THE PROBLEMS OF THE TURKISH MINORITY OF WESTERN THRACE IN
GREECE WITHIN THE FRAMEWORK OF PROMOTION AND PROTECTION OF
ALL HUMAN RIGHTS**

“HUMAN RIGHTS APPLICATIONS IN GREECE”

WESTERN THRACE TURKISH MINORITY¹

Pervin Chairoula

Abstract

Western Thrace is located in the northeast part of Greece between the rivers Evros and Nestos, in the east and in the west, and Rodopi Mountains and the Aegean Sea, in the north and in the south. It is one of the nine regions of Greece. Its area is 8578 km² and it is divided into three provinces. Ksanthi, Rodopi, and Evros. According to general estimates the number of Turks living in Western Thrace is around 150.000. More than half of the Turkish population lives in rural areas and their livelihood is primarily based on farming.

In Western Thrace the concern of assimilation in a different culture, language and religion, which is also strengthened with various political practices, had closed the minority in ghettos. Up to recent times the minority faced with unlawful application and many violations. Migration, denial of ethnic identity, violation of educational rights and social exclusion are some examples that would be examined in this paper.

Keywords: Greece, Western Thrace, Minority, Migration, Minority and Human Rights Violations

INTRODUCTION

Western Thrace is a region that extends on an area of 8578 square kilometers in the northeast part of Greece. It is surrounded by the river Evros, in the east; Nestos, in the west; Rodopi Mountains, in the north; and the Aegean Sea, in the south. It consists of three provinces: Ksanthi, Rodopi and Evros.

¹ The Greek Authorities use the term ‘Muslim Minority’ and some scholars use ‘Muslim Turks’ or ‘Turkish Muslims’. In this paper I will use the terms ‘Turkish Minority’ or ‘Turks’.

Since the early years of 19th century, actually 1920s, the existence of the Turkish minority has been one of the most important issues of the Greek state. The historical relations between Greeks and Turks affected the existence of Turkish Minority within the Greek territory. The perception of minority by the Greek administrators has been changed due to the changing relation of Greece and Turkey. Starting from the Peace Treaty of Lausanne in 1923 till 1950s the Lausanne spirit dominated the relations. However, the year 1955 was one of the turning points for the minority issues because of some specific reasons (ex: September incidents in Istanbul and Cyprus incidents). The situations started to get worse day by day. Especially during the Military Junta Regime, in the second part of 1960s, human and minority rights violations reached the highest level. These unlawful and unacceptable applications continued till 1990s. From the beginning of 1990s the minority policy of Greece towards the Western Thrace Turkish Minority started to change. With the new minority policy of Greek government in 1991 the living conditions of the Turkish Minority started to change, to become better. So, 1991 is another turning point for the Turkish people in Thrace.

The new minority policy made positive contributions to the minority's life in terms of citizenship rights. However, in terms of minority rights there is still no positive step taken in 2008, or let me say just few positive examples. So, we can say that the new minority policy of the government was to give back the basic citizenship rights that the minority couldn't have been enjoyed for years. To give some examples, with the new policy some of the problems of minority have been solved and minority people started to live a better and democratic life compared to the previous one. They could get driving licenses, permission to repair their houses, or to buy land. However, in terms of minority rights the members of the minority still cannot identify themselves as Turks, they cannot enjoy their rights to education in mother tongue properly, they still cannot elect their religious leaders, or they still cannot establish associations with Turkish names or reopen their aged associations which were closed down by the Greek authorities because of their names.

Now, I will give you some information about the migration in Thrace and the reasons behind the migration and about the issues affected Western Thrace Turkish people.

MIGRATION IN WESTERN THRACE

Migration in Western Thrace started in 1922 with the Agreement of Exchange of Population between Greece and Turkey and has been continuing up to today. Because of many reasons people mostly emigrated to Turkey, but also they emigrated to Europe, America and Australia.

If we consider migration of Western Thrace in the historical framework we can observe the reasons and the outcomes very clearly.

Very briefly I will say some words about migration in general in Western Thrace.

Actually, it is possible to see some examples of the phenomenon of migration also before 1920s, but now I will consider the migration in Thrace under the Greek hegemony.

In 1922 mostly 1.5 million Greeks and 450.000 Turks moved to Greece and Turkey, respectively with the Agreement of Exchange of Population, except the Greeks of Istanbul and the Turks of Western Thrace.

After the exchange of population, Turks faced with some problems in Western Thrace and these problems made people move to different places. The most important problem was the land expropriation. According to some researchers the number of Turks whose lands were expropriated was around 9.000. More than half of the Turkish population lives in rural areas and

their livelihood is based on farming/agriculture. That is why the land is so important in Western Thrace.

During the Metaxas regime (1936-1941) people lived under pressure and in very difficult conditions. With the principle of defensive nationalism of the Metaxas regime the north part of the region was armed against the Bulgarians. In order to protect the country from the spread of communism, all northern regions of Greece, except the region in Evros prefecture, which is bordering with Turkey declared restricted zone. Later, in 1967, the Evros prefecture was added within this zone also. The restricted zone was not abolished till 1990s. Actually, it was the largest enclave group in the world including all inhabitants of the mountainous regions of Rodopi and Ksanthi composed of approximately 40.000 Turks² that corresponded to the almost 1/3 of the total population of Western Thrace Minority. In one of the minority newspapers it was referred to be the biggest open-air prison of the world³. Because of the hard conditions and pressure of Metaxas regime people emigrated to other countries.

The period of 1940-1950 was the hardest times of Western Thrace Turkish people. Firstly, Germans and then Bulgarians occupied the region. Especially because of the Bulgarian pressure many people emigrated to Turkey during this period.

Between the years 1950 and 1967, firstly the times of Adnan Menderes and free migration to Turkey, then 6/7 September incidents in Istanbul accelerated the migration in the region.

In 1960s migration to, especially, Athens, Germany, and to other European countries started because of economic and other reasons.

Then, the Junta regime (1967-1974) and Cyprus incidents affected the movement of people. They couldn't stand the hard conditions and pressures of the Junta regime and didn't want to pay the bill of Cyprus incidents, so they migrated to other countries, especially to Turkey.

Lately, 1988 the first and foremost cry⁴ of the Western Thrace Turkish Minority and in 1990 the violent attacks⁵ to the minority made people search another country for themselves to live in peace and harmony.

MINORITY CONCEPT AND THE INTERNATIONAL STANDARDS FOR THE PROTECTION OF MINORITIES

After having the invitation for this panel I thought to express the feelings of people within the borders, the dilemmas of west-east, the conflicts of identities, and the conflicts that the people of Western Thrace faced with or lived in their daily lives when the geography, history, political structure and the dynamics of multicultural society are considered.

² Gundem, 21 April 1998

³ Ortam, 22 December 1992

⁴ In November 1987, the Greek High Court affirmed a 1986 decision by the Court of Appeals of Thrace in which the Union of Turkish Teachers of Western Thrace and Komotini Turkish Youth Association were dissolved while the trial of Ksanthi Turkish Union continued till 2005. The Court stated that the word "Turkish" referred to citizens of Turkey and could not be used to describe citizens of Greece, and the use of the word "Turkish" also endangered public order. In order to protest this court-decision and continuous denial of ethnic identity by the Greek institutions, the Turks collectively marched to the streets of Komotini on 29 January 1988. Ksanthi Turkish Union (1927), Komotini Turkish Youth Union (1928), and Union of Turkish Teachers of Western Thrace (1936).

⁵ For the anniversary of 1988 protest, minority people organized a religious ceremony on 29 January 1990. However, a number of Greek groups decided to protest this ceremony. Violence erupted before the ceremony and Turkish people were beaten and shops belonging to Turks were damaged.

The first conflict starts with the concept of minority. There is no **standard** definition for the term ‘minority’ and it has been a problem for a long time. There have been different definitions, but, Capotorti’s⁶ definition is widely accepted to define minorities:

A group numerically inferior to the rest of the population of a State, in a non-dominant position, whose members - being nationals of the State - possess ethnic, religious or linguistic characteristics differing from those of the rest of the population and show, if only implicitly, a sense of solidarity, directed towards preserving their culture, traditions, religion or language.

Accepting a general - standard - definition may affect the state’s control on its minorities. Maybe, because of this reason the states have been reluctant to accept a standard definition.

Although the history of minority protection goes back to the Middle Ages the first international document that guaranties the recognition and the protection of minorities explicitly is the Final Act of Vienna Congress⁷. The 20th century became a turning point for the international protection of minorities. Minority rights tried to be more protected by the bilateral agreements between the European states.

The League of Nations started to put more importance on the issues of protection of minorities, which was the first sign of the internationalization of the minority protection after the World War I. The minority issues were given importance in the League system mainly because minorities were seen as possible actors that would endanger the international peace and security and the League members were not in favour of another violence and war. Actually, the minority provisions constituted a significant part of the international peace structure. Moreover by taking the protection of minorities from domestic to international level, the mistreatment of minorities by nation more or less was prevented.

After the Second World War, the United Nations started to deal with the issues of minorities at the international level. In spite of the lack of a reference to minorities both in the UN Charter and in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights the UN system tried to protect the rights of minorities under the auspices of individual human rights. The term, ‘persons belonging to minorities’ started to be used in the UN documents and conventions. From such a statement, it is stressed that rights given to the minorities are based upon the understanding of individual rights not upon the collective rights.

Article 27 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), adopted in 1966 and entered into force in 1976, is one the most important UN documents regarding the protection of the minority rights. According to this Article, in those states in which ethnic, religious or linguistic minorities existed, persons belonging to such minorities should not be denied the right, in community with the other members of their group, to enjoy their own culture, to profess and practice their own religion or to use their own language.⁸

⁶ F Capotorti, *Monograph 23, UN Doc E/CN.4/Sub.2/384/Add.1-7, UN Sales No. E. 78* quoted in Eric Heinze, “The Construction and Contingency of the Minority Concept” in Deirdre Fotrtrell and Bill Bowrings, eds., *Minority and Group Rights in the New Millennium* (The Hague: Martins Nijhoff Publishers, 1999) p.43

⁷ Inis. L. Claude, *National Minorities: An International Problem* (Cambridge: Harward University Press, 1955), p.7

⁸ The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights at www.unchr.ch. For a study specific to the interpretation of the Article 27 of the ICCPR see Ayşe Füsün Arsava, *Azınlık Kavramı ve Azınlık Haklarının Uluslararası Belgeler ve Özellikle Medeni ve Siyasi Haklar Sözleşmesininin 27. MaddesiIşığında İncelenmesi* (Ankara: SBF Basımevi, 1993)

On 18th of December 1992, the UN General Assembly adopted the Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities. Compared with the Article 27 of the ICCPR, this text includes the ‘national minorities’ in the list of minorities. Although it does not give a definition of minorities, for Thornberry, it can be regarded as a new ‘international minimum standard’ for the protection of minority rights.⁹ Also, it is the first UN declaration directly and exclusively dealing with the minority issues. In the Article 2 Paragraph 1 of this declaration it is stated that persons belonging to minorities may exercise their rights, including those set forth in this declaration, individually as well as in community with other members of their group, without any discrimination.¹⁰

The European Convention on Human Rights was drafted in 1948 by the Council of Europe in which direct reference was not made to the rights of the minorities. It was only referred under the provision of non-discrimination in Article 14 of the European Convention on Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms by stating that the enjoyment of the rights and freedoms set forth in this Convention shall be secured without discrimination on any ground such as sex, race, colour, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, association with a national minority, property, birth or other status.¹¹

Considering the European level of the minority rights, the Additional Protocol to the Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms and the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities come to the forefront.

The Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, which is widely accepted as first comprehensive convention for protection of minority rights, was approved by the Council of Europe and entered into force in 1998. Although the minority rights are given as individual rights the Framework Convention allows the individuals to use these rights collectively as well. According to the Article 3 Paragraph 2 of the Framework Convention, ‘persons belonging to national minorities may exercise the rights and enjoy the freedoms flowing from the principles enshrined in the present Framework Convention individually as well as in community with others.’¹²

Besides, the Council of Europe adopted the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, on 5 November 1992 by which it aims to protect the minority languages and the education of the minorities.

In 1975, the Helsinki Final Act was signed by the CSCE (renamed as OSCE, in 1995) members that gave the responsibility for the protection of minorities to the participating states. The third basket of this Act is about the cooperation in humanitarian issues, including those of minorities. In the Principle VII of the Helsinki Final Act it is stated that ‘the Participating States on whose territory national minorities exist will respect the right of persons belonging to such minorities to equality before law, will afford them the full opportunity for the actual enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms and will, in this manner, protect legitimate interests in this sphere.’¹³

Besides, at the 1992 Helsinki Meeting of the CSCE/OSCE it was decided for the establishment of a High Commissioner on National Minorities who will be an “eminent

⁹ P. Thornberry, in Hugh Miall, ed., (1994) p. 16

¹⁰ The UN Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities available at www.unchr.ch

¹¹ Claude, *op. cit.*, pp.164-206

¹² The Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, available at www.coe.int

¹³ *Helsinki Final Act*, Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe (Austria: OSCE, 1999) p.8

international personality with long-lasting relevant experience from whom an impartial performance of the function may be expected.”¹⁴ The mandate of the Commissioner is to intervene in the conflicts regarding the disputes between the participating states and their national minorities in the early stage and to solve them as earlier as possible by means of preventive diplomacy. Therefore, it can be said that the High Commissioner works not only as an ‘early warning device’ but also as an ‘early action maker’ of the CSCE/OSCE.¹⁵

THE ISSUES AFFECTING WESTERN THRACE TURKISH MINORITY

Western Thrace, which is composed of the Rodopi, Ksanthi and Evros provinces, is a region of Greece that has been inhabited since 2000 B.C. The earliest community living in Western Thrace was the Thracians. The region takes its name from this community.

The roots of the Turks go back to the fourteenth century. When this region came under the control of the Ottoman Empire in 1364 people from Anatolia were settled in this region.

The Athens Treaty (1913) is one of the most significant treaties regarding the rights of the Western Thrace Turks. It is a treaty signed between Greece and the Ottoman Empire that puts Greece under responsibility about the protection of minority rights. By this treaty, the Turks within the boundaries of Greece would preserve their autonomous situations within the Greek society.

The 1923 Lausanne Peace Treaty guarantees the protection of Turkish Minority of Western Thrace and Greek Minority of Istanbul.

Articles from 37 to 45 of the Lausanne Treaty define clearly the rights of these two communities and oblige both Greece and Turkey to respect the rights of minorities of Istanbul and Western Thrace. These rights of the two minorities under the guarantee of the Lausanne regime are as follows: The right for full and complete protection of life and liberty without distinction of birth, nationality, language, race or religion; free exercise of religion; full freedom of movement; the same civil and political, rights as other Greek citizens; equality before law; free use of language in private intercourse, in commerce, religion, in the press, or in publications of any kind, at public meetings and in the courts; establish and control charitable, religious, and social institutions and schools; full protection for religious establishments and pious foundations; grant all facilities and authorization to pious foundations and to the religious and charitable foundations.

During her visit to Thrace in February 2007 Minister of Foreign Affairs Ms. Bakoyannis pointed out that in Thrace there is a modern, European minority policy based on the principles of equality before the law and equal rights for Muslims and Christians, stressing that:

“This policy is determined by respect for international treaties and, in particular, the Lausanne treaty. But it is also determined by European logic; the principles and values of the community acquires that govern Greece’s policy on all levels.

This policy’s objective is clear: the creation of an open, democratic society; a society that will become a model on an international scale for respect of human and minority rights;

¹⁴ Helsinki Decisions 1992 quoted in Rachel Brett, “The Human Dimension of the CSCE and the CSCE Response to Minorities” in Michael P. Lucas, ed., *The CSCE in the 1990s: Constructing European Security and Cooperation* (Hamburg: Institute for Peace Research and Security Policy at the University of Hamburg, 1993) p.156

¹⁵ www.osce.org

that will stand as an exemplary modern European, minority policy. We are pursuing this objective consistently and with determination. We are pursuing it not in words, but by taking specific initiatives.”

In particular:

“We want to create new development prospects and opportunities for the members of the Muslim minority, to develop their potential in order for them to be able to contribute – to the best of their ability – to the whole region’s development.

Education is a key issue. We want to address the issue of school-leavers, to encourage the creative integration of young members of the minority into the education system.

We have already taken important steps in this direction...”¹⁶

To some extent I agree with Ms Bakoyannis, the new minority policy of 1991 “equality before law and equal rights” was one of the most important turning points of the minority history in Thrace in terms of citizenship rights. However, for the minority rights guaranteed by the bilateral and international documents that Greece signed and ratified there is no improvement.

Denial of ethnic identity of the Western Thrace Minority by the Greek state has been one of the most contentious issues regarding the Western Thrace policy of Greece. Until the advent of the 1967 Junta regime, the ethnic identification of the minority as ‘Turkish minority’ was not a problematic issue. However, after 1967, the ethnic identification of the minority was officially started to be prevented. In spite of return of democracy in 1974, the minority continued to be officially identified as ‘Muslim minority’ by the Greek state and the ethnic identification of the Western Thrace Minority continued to be banned.

Greece in 2008 still denies the existence of ethnic Turkish identity of the minority and prohibits the collective ethnic ‘Turkish’ identification. Minority associations bearing the term “Turk/Turkish” in their titles have been banned since 1987. Minority’s century aged associations like Ksanthi Turkish Union and Komotini Turkish Youth Union were closed down because of intolerance of otherness. The establishment of new associations with the word ‘Turkish’ is not allowed; although, there are some examples for other minorities. For example there are two Armenian associations in Thrace, and maybe some more in other regions.

Other than the problems about the denial of ethnic identity, the problems related with the Islam religion and its practices have been one of the main controversial issues regarding the relations of the Turkish minority with the Greek state. Despite the minority members have been practicing their religious duties freely at their mosques, some religious problems like the election of muftis have not been solved yet.

Education is another important issue for the minority and the key for the economic, political and social development of a community. It is possibly for this reason that the problems in the Minority education have always been one of the highly criticized issues in the minority policy of Greece. In each phase of education, the Turks of Western Thrace have come across with different problems in different time periods. Greece has always been highly criticized internationally for giving a low standard of education for the minority pupils in Western Thrace. Even today, in spite of developments in other socioeconomic fields, the educational problems in Western Thrace still continue.

¹⁶ Kathimerini, 7 February 2007

There are 216 active minority primary schools¹⁷ in Western Thrace. And the quality of education in those schools falls far behind from that of in the majority Greek schools. The article 40 of the Lausanne Peace Treaty protects the right to establish, manage and control the minority schools. However, due to the governmental interferences since 1970s the character of the minority education has come to an end. And today it cannot serve for the basic educational needs of the minority.

The advent of the Junta regime had negatively affected the education of the Turkish students. The opening of EPATH (Special Pedagogical Academy for Teacher Training in Thessalonica) was one of worst affects of the Military Junta.

EPATH is an academy founded in 1968 in order to train members of the Minority as teachers for Minority schools. It was supposed that in time the EPATH graduates would replace those who were graduated from the Turkish schools or those graduates of the religious schools. EPATH started its academic year 1968-1969 with thirty students, who were all graduates of *medreses* (religious schools). The language of instruction at the EPATH is Greek.

Despite the fact that those teachers will educate the Minority children in Turkish all of the courses except Turkish are thought in Greek. Therefore, the EPATH teachers have been criticized for not knowing the Turkish language well enough to teach.

The curriculum in the Minority primary schools has been bilingual. Greek, history, geography, civics, and environmental education were taught in Greek while mathematics, physics, chemistry, religion, Turkish, art, and physical education were taught in Turkish.¹⁸ However, the Greek language taught at these primary schools was inadequate. As a result, most of the students finishing their primary educations and attending for the secondary education in Greek secondary schools faced with a problem in Greek language and most of them failed in the first or second years of their secondary education. There are just two minority secondary and high schools, and two religious schools in Western Thrace.

The compulsory education is nine years but the application in minority schools is six years. Of course there is no legal document that shows the application is like that. There is no sanction to the families who don't send their children after the 6th grade. At the beginning of 2007-2008 school year, nursery schools became compulsory, too. But the infrastructure is not ready for the minority students. There are no bilingual nursery schools and there are no Turkish nursery school teachers. People got confused about what to do and where or in which school they can send their children. After the nursery school where can they send their children? Learning a language without knowing mother tongue is to what extend logical? We're almost close to the end of the educational period and people are still confused.

According to the Article 39 of the Lausanne Treaty,

...differences of religion, creed or confession shall not prejudice any Greek national in matters relating to the enjoyment of civil and political rights, as, for instance, admission to public employment, functions and honours, or to exercise of professions and industries.

Such a statement seems to protect the rights of the Turkish Minority against plausible discrimination by the Greek state in cases of economic matters. However, job discrimination can be observed easily if we consider the numbers of employees in official places. There are more

¹⁷ Actual number is 230, but some of them have no longer students.

¹⁸ HWR, *op.cit.*, 1999, p.19

than a thousand of civil servants in Rodopi and Ksanthi Prefects' offices and there are only a few number of Turks who are civil servants but no more than fifty.

To conclude that, being a member of a minority is not easy, especially in Greece, who doesn't recognize any ethnic minorities in its territory. I can only say that I am as an ethnic Turk not a threat for my country. I am happy with my Turkish-Greek identity, and I believe that religion is a very personal thing and cannot express my identity.

Thank you very much.

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