



Federation of Western Thrace Turks in Europa Newsletter

NGO in Special Consultative Status with the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations
Member of the Fundamental Rights Platform (FRP) of the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights
Member of the Federal Union of European Nationalities (FUEN)

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The issues of the Western Thrace Turks were conveyed at the United Nations



The Federation of Western Thrace Turks in Europe (ABTTT), which is in a special consultative status with the United Nations (UN) Economic and Social Council, representing the Turkish community in Western Thrace attended the 87th session of the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) on 5-6 February 2024 in Geneva, Switzerland. ABTTT International Relations Director Melek Kirmacı Arık attended the session where Greece's consideration was examined on 6 February to the sessions which lasted for 3 weeks.

ABTTT attended the public non-governmental organisations (NGO) information meeting organised by CEDAW, a group of 23 independent experts, on Monday, 5 February before the session regarding Greece. In its speech at the meeting regarding the combined eighth and ninth peri-

odic reports submitted by Greece to CEDAW, ABTTT explained the religious autonomy of the Turkish community in Western Thrace, freedom of association and the Turkish women's access to justice.

ABTTT indicated that the importance of the activities of NGOs established by women belonging to minorities in the country was not mentioned in the periodic reports submitted by Greece and stated that Greece denied the Turkish identity of the Turkish community in Western Thrace, closed down associations bearing the word "Turkish" in their names, and rejected new registration applications.

Underlining that Greece has not executed the three judgments of the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) regarding the three Turkish

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associations within the Bekir-Ousta and Others Group of Cases for approximately 16 years, ABTTF underlined that one of these three associations is the Cultural Association of the Turkish Women of the Prefecture of Rodopi which was established in 2001.

Furthermore, ABTTF noted that the registration application of another women's association, the Cultural Association of the Turkish Women of the Prefecture of Xanthi, was rejected in 2017, despite the ECtHR judgments, and highlighted that the failure to register these two women's associations prevents the cultural and social development of not only Turkish women living in the prefectures of Rodopi and Xanthi, but also all women in the region.

ABTTF demanded CEDAW to call upon Greece to restore the religious autonomy of the Turkish community in Western Thrace granted by the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne and to ensure the recognition of its elected muftis, to execute the ECtHR judgments fully and immediately and register associations in full respect for freedom of association of members of the Turkish community.

ABTTF followed the consideration of Greece, which lasted all day on Tuesday, 6 February. The religious autonomy of the Turkish community in Western Thrace and the traditional legal competencies of the muftis were also brought to the agenda during the session. In the informative meeting held with CEDAW members and NGOs, ABTTF pointed out that the state's intervention in the religious autonomy of the Turkish community was a violation of their rights, that the state established state control over the community through religion, and that it did not do this against any other recognised religion in the country.

Answering the questions from the CEDAW members, the Greek delegation reiterated the official state thesis and claimed that there was a Muslim minority in the country, not a Turkish one.

Before the session, ABTTF was actively involved in the review process with the parallel report it prepared for the combined eighth and ninth periodic reports submitted by Greece to CEDAW.



We continue on our way with the same enthusiasm, determination, and perseverance

Dear readers,

We are about to commemorate 29 January Social Solidarity and National Resistance Day.

It is the 36th anniversary of when we took to the streets against those who denied our existence, that is, our Turkishness, when thousands of people in unison cried out "We are Turks!"...

We were on the streets that day, we shouted to the whole world that we are Turks.

Two years later, we were on the streets again on the same day.

They closed the roads, we crossed the barriers, we walked!

They massed police on the streets, we were not afraid, we walked!

They attacked, we did not give up, we marched!

We all said in unison: we are here, we are Turks!

The events of 29 January 1988 and 1990 were recorded in history.

36 years have passed since 1988.

What changed?

Unfortunately, nothing!

Nothing changed because those who govern our country have no good will!

We didn't give up, we won't!

Our march, which we started by taking to the streets for our struggle, continues.

Our cause is the cause of justice!

We will march until we get our rights!

The ranks are never diminishing, we are raising new generations.

We are not alone in our journey for all these past years.

We are in solidarity with other minorities and their respective organisations in Europe.

We stand in solidarity with the Federal Union of European Nationalities (FUEN), the largest umbrella organisation of national minorities in Europe, and the European Free Alliance (EFA), the voice of political parties belonging to national minorities in Europe.

We establish co-operation with international non-governmental organisations.

We are constantly lobbying tirelessly internationally.

We explain our issues to the European Union, the Council of Europe, the United Nations and the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe.

We participate in the work of these international organisations and contribute to the reports they publish.

In parallel with every report about our country Greece, we write reports that convey the issues of our community.

Our country is no longer able to cover up the facts in the international arena.

A few days ago, at a plenary session in the European Parliament, our country was heavily criticised for not respecting the rule of law.

Indeed, the investigations show that there is a rapidly increasing deterioration in the rule of law in our country.

We have always said that the non-executi-



on of the judgments regarding the Turkish community in Western Thrace, especially in the Bekir-Ousta and others group of cases, for almost 16 years is clear evidence that the principle of the rule of law has been disregarded.

Now, criticism is being made that respect for this principle has clearly decreased, not only in our community but in all governmental areas.

Indeed, someone's true colours have been shown!

Of course, we are worried about this deterioration in our country!

We will continue to work for the restoration of our educational and religious autonomy, without giving up the principles of democracy, human rights and the rule of law, for the good of both our community and our country.

Our struggle continues and will continue with our enthusiasm, tenacity and determination on the first day!

Happy 29 January Social Solidarity and National Resistance Day!

Greetings and yours sincerely,

Halit Habip Oğlu
ABTTF President

ABTTF attended the UN Forum on Minority Issues

At the forum, the representatives of the Turkish community in Western Thrace raised the discriminatory practices against the Turkish community in Western Thrace and issues pertaining to education in access to quality education

The Federation of Western Thrace Turks in Europe (ABTTF) attended the 16th Session of the United Nations (UN) Forum on Minority Issues on 30 November - 1 December 2023. ABTTF and the Western Thrace Minority University Graduates Association (WTMUGA) represented the Turkish community in Western Thrace at the UN Forum with the theme "Minorities and Cohesive Societies: Equality, Social Inclusion, and Socio-economic Participation" which was held in Geneva, Switzerland.

The Western Thrace Turkish delegation, consisting of ABTTF International Relations Director Melek Kırmacı and WTMUGA members Kerem Abdürrahimoğlu and Meltem Giritli, raised the issues of the Turkish community in Western Thrace in the two-day meeting.

Speaking on the first day of the Forum, ABTTF indicated that the lack of equal access to quality education hinders minority children from enjoying their civil and political rights and increases discrimination in the community as a result of the marginalisation of minority children. Noting that the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne granted the Western Thrace Turks in Greece and the Greeks in Istanbul, Bozcaada and Gökçeada the right to establish and manage their own schools, ABTTF explained that Greece dismantled this educational autonomy and therefore the right to access equal and quality education was disrupted due to state interventions.

Stating that the Turkish community in Western Thrace constitutes 55 percent of the population in Rodopi, 45 percent in Xanthi, and 10 percent in Evros, ABTTF said that although kindergarten education is compulsory, Turkish kindergartens within the Turkish school system or completely privately established in the region are not allowed.



Drawing attention to the rapid decline in the number of Turkish primary schools, ABTTF indicated that despite the educational autonomy, the government's decision in 2010 to close schools with less than 9 pupils, and its implementation with respect to the Turkish schools has turned into a tool of systematic discrimination against the Turkish community. Adding that there were 188 Turkish primary schools in 2008, ABTTF noted that this number decreased to 90 in 2023.

Indicating that the main issue with respect to secondary education is the insufficient number of secondary schools, ABTTF stated that what happened regarding to the issue of double-shift schooling in Xanthi Minority Secondary and High School reveals the unequal and discriminatory treatment that the Turkish community faces by ignoring its educational needs. ABTTF indicated that despite the protests in 2019 and 2023, the demands of the Turkish community were not met, and a new school building was not



allocated. Reminding Greece's commitments and obligations within the framework of international law, ABTTF demanded the restoration of full autonomy in education.

WTMUGA, on the other hand, expressed the socio-economic discrimination against the Turkish community in Western Thrace through discriminatory practices from past to present, and said that today Western Thrace is the least developed region of the country and the Turkish community is further aggrieved due to discriminatory practices in this under-developed region.

The guest of the “Facts about Our Country” programme was Former UN Special Rapporteur on Minority Issues Dr. Fernand de Varennnes

The twelfth part of the online programme series of the Federation of Western Thrace Turks in Europe (ABTTF) titled “Facts about Our Country” was broadcast on 1 February 2024.

Former United Nations (UN) Special Rapporteur on Minority Issues Dr. Fernand de Varennnes, who had visited Western Thrace in 2019, was the guest of the programme.

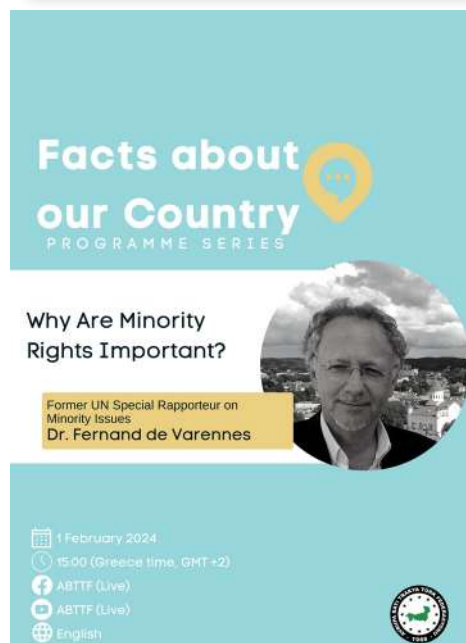
In the programme moderated by ABTTF International Relations Director Melek Kirmaci Arık, Varennnes answered the questions with respect to the definition of “national minority” within the scope of international human rights law, the general situation of minority rights in Europe, the general situation in Greece regarding the protection of national minorities, and the issues of the Western Thrace Turkish community in Western Thrace in Greece.

Varennnes indicated that the issue of the definition of “national minority” is a little bit complicated, and noted that ethnic, linguistic, and religious minorities are referenced in the UN, and that the concept of “national minority” is used especially in Europe. Noting that ethnic identity is related to culture, Varennnes underscored that the Turkish minority in Greece can be defined as an ethnic, linguistic, and even religious minority.

Pointing out that unfortunately there is a decline in respect for the rights of national minorities in Europe, Varennnes stated that at the UN level, minority rights are accepted as human rights and that the UN offers stronger protection for minority rights than existing European mechanisms. Revealing comparative examples from Europe, Varennnes explained that the rights of the German minority in Italy are well protected, whereas minority rights are not recognised in France.

Varennnes underlined that Greece could do much more in the field of minority rights and indicated that progress with respect to the rights of the Turkish community in Western

Thrace could be addressed in areas such as the right to choose their own religious lea



ders as well as education in their native language, Turkish. Noting that it is normal and useful to use the European mechanisms to try to protect the rights of the members of the Turkish community as a national minority in Greece but that the UN mechanisms should also be considered this regard. Varennnes noted that the Greek government has been reluctant to use the European mechanisms, therefore it is important for the Turkish community in Western Thrace to further take international mechanisms regarding minority rights into consideration. Explaining that the Greek government should move away from some fears that the protection of minorities will weaken the country, Varennnes recommended the

Greek government to consider the protection of minority rights from a positive frame of mind and to approach this particular issue not as a threat to national sovereignty but as a way to respect minority members as equal citizens of Greece. Furthermore, Varennnes touched upon the fact that political intolerance and prejudice is on the rise not only in Greece but throughout Europe and noted that some politicians use nationalism to blame or point the finger at minorities as if they constitute a threat, declare them as scapegoats and portray them as a threat.

Noting that it is important to become much more visible and effective in the lobbying activities, that sometimes a lot of effort is spent for this, but that ultimately success is achieved, Varennnes highlighted that the way the minorities are treated throughout Europe and the world must change, that we are currently going through an extremely difficult and antagonistic period that is almost against minorities, and that it is important to redouble efforts in this regard.

You can watch the entire programme, which was broadcast live simultaneously on ABTTF's YouTube channel and Facebook page in English by clicking the links below:

YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oXV3LJWqJVs>

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/events/1156212815342907/>

Parallel report from ABTTF to the report of the Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs

ABTTF President: “With this parallel report that we submitted to the competent authorities of our country, we demand from the government to implement a real minority policy based on sincerity, acting with the understanding of ‘for our community, with our community, not ‘for our community, despite our community’, on issues and problems that concern our community.”

The Federation of Western Thrace Turks in Europe (ABTTF) prepared a parallel report in response to the issues regarding the Turkish community in Western Thrace within the “2022 Report on Incidents Against Places of Religious Importance in Greece” published by the Greek Ministry of Education, Religious Affairs and Sports on 28 December 2023 and forwarded it to the competent authorities of our country.

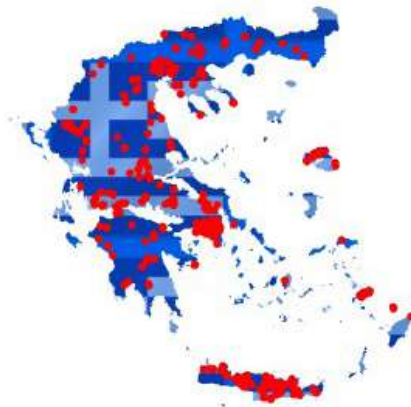
In its parallel report, ABTTF detailed the issues faced by the Turkish community in Western Thrace, which has religious autonomy in accordance with bilateral and international treaties, on religious issues and expressed their opinions and demands. Moreover, ABTTF accounted for the situation of the mosques and places of worship in Western Thrace, as well as the religious issues of the Turkish community in Rhodes and Kos, and noted the issues faced in terms of protection of historical, architectural and cultural monuments inherited from the Ottoman period in the country, and the attacks on sacred places.

ABTTF criticized the report published by the Ministry for containing incomplete, ambiguous and sometimes incorrect statements with respect to the Turkish community in Western Thrace, and noted that the issues faced by the Turkish community in the religious field were not mentioned in the report and that their religious autonomy was ignored.

Pointing out that the 1830 Protocol, the 1881 Treaty, the 1913 Treaty of Athens and the



Περιστατικά εις βάρος χώρων
θρησκευτικής σημασίας
στην Ελλάδα



ΕΚΘΕΣΗ 2022

1923 Lausanne Peace Treaty, which guaranteed the status and rights of the Turkish

community in Western Thrace in the religious field, were not mentioned in the report published by the Ministry, ABTTF explained that with the law adopted in 1991, the muftis were appointed by the state in Komoti-

ni, Xanthi and Didymoteicho. Furthermore, it was indicated that nowadays, there persists a dual structure as follows: appointed

muftis, who are not accepted by the community, and muftis elected by the community. ABTTF noted that the report published by the Ministry did not mention the relevant judgments of the European Court of Hu-

man Rights, in which our country was convicted for violating the religious freedom of the Turkish community in Western Thrace.

Highlighting that Law No. 4964/2022 titled "Modernisation of Mufti Offices in Thrace" was adopted in the Greek Parliament despite all the objections of the Turkish community in Western Thrace, ABTTF stated that with the aforementioned law, the mufti offices belonging to the Turkish community will be completely linked to the Ministry of Education, Religious Affairs and Sports and that it was further underlined that there is thus an attempt to completely eliminate their autonomous structures.

ABTTF criticised Law No. 4115/2013, which foresees the appointment of 240 Islamic religious teachers to teach Islam in Greek to children from the Turkish community in primary and secondary public schools and mosques in Western Thrace, under the auspices of appointed muftis, and which the Turkish community has opposed since the first day. It was noted that this practice, which was presented positively by the government, was a clear intervention in the religious autonomy of the Turkish community and allowed state control over religion.

Moreover, ABTTF noted that the claim that the Ministry of Education, Religious Affairs and Sports met all the demands for the repair and renovation of old mosques and the construction of new mosqu-

es in Western Thrace does not reflect the truth, adding that there is no new mosque

construction in Western Thrace today, there are applications awaiting approval for construction permits, and that that no progress has been made in the restoration of the Didymoteicho Çelebi Sultan Mehmet Mosque which had been damaged in fire.

ABTTF underscored that the office of the mufti in Rhodes has been closed since 1974, and that the management of the foundations belonging to the Turkish community in Rhodes and Kos are guaranteed by appointment, as in Western Thrace, and that there are serious issues in the restoration and preservation of mosques and other historical architectural works inherited from the Ottoman period on the islands.

Regarding the attacks on religious holy sites, ABTTF criticised the fact that the Ottoman-era Muslim Turkish cemetery in the village of Petinos (Horozlu) in the prefecture of Xanthi which was destroyed by construction machinery belonging to the Municipality of Avdira (Bulustra) on 15 and 16 March 2022 due to the intention to build football and basketball courts, a children's park, and a social facility has not yet been restored.

In its parallel report, ABTTF demanded that the educational and religious autonomy of the Turkish community in Western Thrace be restored, the muftis chosen by the government

be recognised, and the historical mosques

inherited from the Ottoman Empire in our country be restored in accordance with their original and opened for worship, considering the needs of the Turkish and Muslim population in the regions where they are located.

"Unfortunately, during the preparation of this year's report of the Ministry of Education, Religious Affairs and Sports, our community was not consulted on issues concerning it, and the official state thesis was repeated with a unilateral and discriminatory approach. We firmly reject the Laws on the 'Modernisation of Mufti Offices in Thrace' and '240 Imams', which aim to completely eliminate the religious autonomy of our community, which are portrayed as being positive steps. While there is no interference in the structure and internal functioning of the communities belonging to other recognised religions in our country, the interventions of the government targeting the religious autonomy and freedom of our community at every opportunity are unacceptable. With this parallel report that we submitted to the competent authorities of our country, we demand from the government to implement a real minority policy based on sincerity, acting with the understanding of 'for our community, with our community, not 'for our community, despite our community', on issues and problems that concern our community", said Halit Habip Oğlu, President of the Federation of Western Thrace Turks in Europe (ABTTF).



Written contribution from ABTTF to the 2024 Rule of Law Report of the European Commission

The Federation of Western Thrace Turks in Europe (ABTTF) sent its written contribution to the 2024 Rule of Law Report of the European Commission. ABTTF, which participated in the online targeted stakeholder consultation initiated by the European Commission and open to non-governmental organisations and other stakeholders in EU Member States for the report expressed the issues faced by the Turkish community in Western Thrace in order to contribute to the country report on Greece to be prepared by the Commission.

In its written contribution, ABTTF underlined that Greece denies the ethnic Turkish identity of the Turkish community in Western Thrace, indicating that Greece has not executed three separate judgments of the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) related to the Bekir-Ousta and Others Group of Cases since 2008, and this, despite the decisions of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe and all its warnings, and that it violates the freedom of association of the Turkish community.

Referring to the lawsuit filed by the Prosecutor's Office of First Instance of Rodopi requesting the revocation of the registration of the the Western Thrace Fenerbahçe Association which was established as a fans' association in Komotini on 11 October 2022, ABTTF underscored that in the prosecutor's indictment, the expression "Western Thrace" in the name of the association does not affect the territorial integrity of the country. It was further noted that the indictment claimed that it posed a danger to national sovereignty, and therefore, it was requested that the expression "Western Thrace" be removed from the name and statutes of the association and that the association in question be deleted from the registry of associations.

ABTTF emphasised that although the Turkish community in Western Thrace has



educational autonomy, the number of Turkish primary schools decreases every year due to the closures of the schools, and that there are no bilingual Turkish minority kindergartens, the number of the Turkish secondary and high schools remains quite low, and in this respect, it was reminded that this which was brought to the agenda with a question for written answer submitted to the European Commission. Furthermore, it was indicated that the issue regarding double-shift schooling, and the lack of a modern school building continues in the Xanthi Minority Secondary and High School.

Moreover, ABTTF pointed out that there are examples of marginalisation, discrimination and targeting beyond prejudice and stereotypes against the Turkish community in Western Thrace in the media in Greece and underlined that the oppression and discrimination against the Turkish community is also

seen in the political arena. Reminding that a Turkish deputy candidate who received the most votes in the prefecture of Rodopi, where the Turkish community in Western

Thrace constitutes the majority in terms of population, in the general elections in May 2023, was subjected to a political smear campaign and was targeted, ABTTF further indicated that this situation deepened the structural and systematic discrimination faced by the Turkish community in Greece.

Stating that the Turkish community in Western Thrace was granted religious autonomy in accordance with international treaties and has the right to elect their own religious leaders (muftis), ABTTF noted that, on the other hand, the muftis elected by the Turkish community are not recognised by Greece. ABTTF explained that Presidential Decree No. 52/2019 further damaged the autonomous structure of the Turkish community in the religious area and that is because the offices of the muftis were completely subordinated to the Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs and turned into ordinary public offices of the muftis were completely subordinated to the Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs and turned into ordinary public offices.

Resolution from the European Parliament on serious developments that threaten the rule of law in Greece

European Parliament

2019-2024



TEXTS ADOPTED

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Rule of Law and media freedom in Greece

ABTTF President: “A harsh warning has now come from the EP to our country, which has disregarded the rule of law by failing to execute three judgments of the European Court of Human Rights regarding the associations of our community for almost 16 years, despite all the warnings of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe. What suits our country, which states at every opportunity that it is the cradle of democracy, is to fully respect democracy, the rule of law and fundamental rights, as clearly stated in the EP resolution, and to immediately eliminate the current threats to EU values in the country so that they will not arise again”.

In its resolution adopted on 7 February 2024, the European Parliament (EP) indicated that it had serious concerns that the rule of law was threatened in Greece and called on the European Commission to act.

In the resolution, which was adopted in the

EP Plenary with 330 votes in favour, 254 against and 26 abstentions, it is highlighted that there are grave concerns about the very serious threats to democracy, the rule of law and fundamental rights in Greece.

The decision underlines that journalists in Greece are subject to physical threats, verbal attacks, and abusive lawsuits, including those initiated by Prime Minister Kyriakos

Mitsotakis’ entourage, and notes that there are concerns about press freedom in the country.

The resolution condemns the instrumentalisation of “national security threats” for the purpose of wiretapping political opponents, including MEPs, and calls for effective investigations with the help of the European Police Office (Europol). In the resolution, which requests to reverse the legislation that placed the intelligence service under the direct control of the Prime Minister, concerns are further expressed with respect to political pressure, intimidation and harassment of the officials who are scrutinising the government.

Moreover, the resolution also pointed out to the excessive use of force by the police in the country, the deficient quality of subsequent investigations and court rulings, alleged corruption, the length of judicial proceedings and conflicts of interest, including the infiltration of the police by organised crime. In addition, ill-treatment and systematic push-back against migrants is also mentioned, along with attacks against civil society, smear campaigns and legal harassment, particularly against human rights activists, are noted as being worrying.

The resolution calls on the European Com-

mission to make full use of the tools available to address the breaches of EU values in Greece, including assessing the use of EU funds under the Common Provisions Regulation in accordance with the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights.

“This latest resolution of the EP regarding the rule of law is a very important warning to our country Greece, and the government. This resolution is a declaration that our country cannot cover up the facts in the international arena by constantly hiding behind excuses, disregarding the EU values of which it is a member and its obligations arising from the international treaties to which it is a party. A harsh warning has now come from the EP to our country, which has disregarded the rule of law by failing to execute three judgments of the European Court of Human Rights regarding the associations of our community for almost 16 years, despite all the warnings of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe. What suits our country, which states at every opportunity that it is the cradle of democracy, is to fully respect democracy, the rule of law and fundamental rights, as clearly stated in the EP resolution, and to immediately eliminate the current threats to EU values in the country so that they will not arise again”, said Halit Habip Oğlu, President of the Federation of Western Thrace Turks in Europe (ABTTF).

The Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe examined the Bekir-Ousta group of cases

ABTTF President: “After 15 years, Greece is talking about its intention to establish a Committee of Experts to investigate the execution of the judgments in this group of cases and prepare recommendations for the Greek authorities. Don’t get me wrong, no decision has been taken on this issue yet, there is only some intention! Our country has been stalling us and the Committee of Ministers on this issue for so long that it is hard to believe that this step is a real one”.

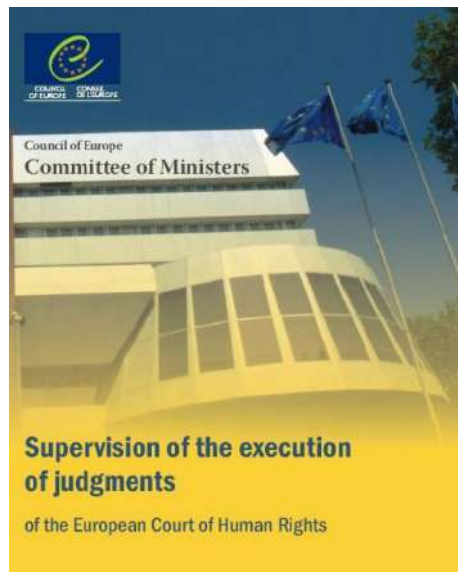
At its meeting held in Strasbourg on 5-7 December 2023, the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe reviewed the Bekir-Ousta and Others Group of Cases regarding the violation of the freedom of association by Greece of the Xanthi Turkish Union, the Cultural Association of Turkish Women of the Prefecture of Rodopi and the Evros Prefecture Minority Youth Association belonging to the Turkish community in Western Thrace.

In the decision announced today (8 December), the Committee of Ministers indicated that although 15 years have passed since the ECtHR judgments and the legislative amendment adopted in 2017, the ECtHR judgments are still not executed. The Committee of Ministers noted that the associations in the Bekir-Ousta group of cases have exhausted the possibilities available to them within the domestic legal system and that the Greek authorities must now take effective general measures to execute the judgments. Moreover, in the decision, the Committee stated that it welcomed the fact that as a result of the meeting between the Secretariat and the Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs which took place 8 November 2023, Greece expressed its intention to establish a Committee of Experts which would serve the purpose of advising the Greek authorities on the next steps to be taken in the Bekir-Ousta group of cases.

The Committee of Ministers underlined Greece’s obligation to fully and effectively exe-

The screenshot shows the Council of Europe website interface. At the top, there is a navigation bar with links for Home, About the CM, Meetings and events, Our Work, Guide to procedures, Documents, CM Search, and Your account. Below this, there is a section for 'Related documents' with a search bar and language options. The main content area displays the title 'MINISTERS' DEPUTIES' and 'Decisions' with the reference 'CM/Dec(2023)1483/H46-15'. The specific decision is titled '1483rd meeting, 5-7 December 2023 (DH)' and 'H46-15 Bekir-Ousta and Others group v. Greece (Application No. 35151/05)'. The subject is 'Supervision of the execution of the European Court's judgments'. A reference document 'CM/Notes1483/H46-15' is listed. The 'Decisions' section is titled 'The Deputies' and contains three points:

1. recalling that these cases concern violations of the right to freedom of association due to the domestic courts' rulings not to register associations and a decision leading to the dissolution on grounds criticised by the European Court as non-Convention-compliant;
2. reiterating once again the fundamental importance of freedom of association in a democratic state, as emphasised by the European Court;
3. reiterating also their deep concern that, more than 15 years since the leading judgment in this group, and despite the legislative amendment adopted by Greece in 2017 which allowed



cute all ECtHR judgments in accordance with Article 46 § 1 of the Convention on the respondent States and called upon the Gre-

ek authorities to provide information to the Committee of the steps it has taken ahead of the examination in June 2024.

President of the Federation of Western Thrace Turks in Europe (ABTTF) Halit Habip Oğlu made the following statement: “7 December 1983, the date when the signboards of the Xanthi Turkish Union were taken down... 40 years after the signboards of our first Turkish association in Western Thrace

were taken down, the official legal status of our Xanthi Turkish Union has still not been

restored. The Xanthi Turkish Union, which went to the ECtHR after a 22-year internal legal struggle, and our other two associations, which were not allowed to be established, have been waiting for the execution of judgments of the European court for the past 15 years. Easier said than done, 15 years! After 15 years, Greece is talking about its intention to establish a Committee of Experts to investigate the execution of the judgments in this group of cases and prepare recommendations for the Greek authorities. Don’t get me wrong, no decision has been taken on this issue yet, there is only some intention! Our country has been stalling us and the Committee of Ministers on this issue for so long that it is hard to believe that this step is a real one. We will of course continue to follow the process until the examination in June 2024, and we will not allow this to turn into another process aimed at stalling the Committee. As associations and non-governmental organisations, we will continue to inform the Committee of Ministers”.

You can access the full text of the decision at here:

https://search.coe.int/cm/pages/result_details.aspx?objectid=0900001680ad83c3

Response from the European Commission to the question for written answer regarding the imposition of double-shift schooling in the Xanthi Turkish Minority Secondary and High School

The European Commission responded to the question for written answer titled “Double-shift schooling in Western Thrace” submitted by Members of the European Parliament (MEP) François Alfonsi (France, Greens / EFA), Loránt Vincze (Romania, EPP), Herbert Dorfmann (Italy, EPP) and Yana Toom (Estonia, Renew) on 14 November 2023.

In the response delivered on 7 February 2024 by Commissioner for Innovation, Research, Culture, Education and Youth Iliana Ivanova, on behalf of the European Commission, it was indicated that, in accordance with Article 165 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, Member States are fully responsible for the content of teaching and organisation of education systems and their cultural and linguistic diversity.

Ivanova stated that since there is no common legal framework at the EU level that grants the general right to provide education in the mother tongue in schools in the Member States, the choice of the language of instruction in a specific territory remains within the purview of the Member States, adding that the European Commission has no competence concerning the recognition of minorities or the use of minority languages, as these are the responsibility of each Member State and that it is thus for the Member States to ensure that the fundamental rights of minorities are respected in line with international agreements and their internal legislation.

Ivanova stressed that the European Commission encourages Member States to benefit from EU financial instruments in areas of early childhood education, reducing early school leaving and investing in education, skills, and lifelong learning, and reminded that EU Cohesion Policy funds can be mobilised towards this direction. Furthermore, it is noted that under the regional programme ‘Eastern Macedonia & Thrace 2021-2027’,



an amount of € 29.75 million will be invested for the creation and upgrading of education infrastructure.

In the question for written answer submitted with the initiative of the Federation of Western Thrace Turks in Europe (ABTTF) with the joint signature of four Members of the European Parliament, it was underlined that double-shift education has been in place for many years at the Xanthi Minority Secondary and High School due to the lack of sufficient and suitable classrooms, but that students and parents alike oppose double-shift schooling. Moreover, it was indicated that a protest demonstration was held between 18 and 28 September 2023, where the protesters demanded the end of double-shift schooling and a new school building, but have

not yet received any response from the authorities.

In the question for written answer, Alfonsi, Vincze, Dorfmann and Toom asked what actions the Commission could take to protect the rights of EU citizens belonging to a national minority, ensure equal access to quality education in this region of Greece and safeguard linguistic and cultural diversity.

Furthermore, the four MEPs also asked what steps the European Commission could take to protect members of the autochthonous Turkish community, whose rights guaranteed by international treaties are not respected and whose existence and identity are under threat.

*Image: www.anadoluiimages.com



The hearing of the claim for damages filed by ABTTF against the newsbreak.gr news website was held at a higher court

The hearing of the claim for damages filed by ABTTF against the news site newsbreak.gr, which published defamatory and false news about the Federation of Western Thrace Turks in Europe (ABTTF) in 2021, was held in Athens on 9 November 2023.

ABTTF President Halit Habip Oğlu attended the hearing held at the Court of First Instance with several judges in Athens together with ABTTF's lawyer Antonis Kachrimanis. The court postponed the hearing to a later date.

On 27.10.2021, on the news site newsbreak.gr, headquartered in Athens, a news article was published about the 21st Ordinary General Assembly of ABTTF, titled "Provocation by ABTTF with the flag of Western Thrace in Germany", containing baseless accusations against ABTTF. Thereupon, ABTTF filed a claim for damages against the newsbreak.gr news site and the company that owns the site, in the Court of First Instance with a Single Judge in Athens, regarding the aforementioned news article. At the hearing held on 16 February 2023, the court made an interim decision and referred the case to the Court of First Instance with several judges in Athens, which is a higher court.



"I was present with our lawyer in the courtroom for the hearing of the claim for damages we filed against the newsbreak.gr news site, which published unfounded and false news about our Federation, at the Court of First Instance with several judges in Athens. The court postponed the hearing to a later date to be determined. I will attend that hearing again on behalf of our Federation. I have full faith that the court will make a fair decision. I trust our country's courts and justice system", said Halit Habip Oğlu, President of the Federation of Western Thrace Turks in Europe (ABTTF).

ABTTF Newsletter

ABTTF Newsletter, which has been distributed since May 2005, is published in Turkish, Greek, English and German.

ABTTF Newsletter covers matters of grave concern to the Turkish community in Western Thrace, current developments in Western Thrace and Greece, ABTTF's international activities and lobbying as well as the activities of ABTTF member associations and plays an important role in promoting the Turkish community in Western Thrace.

ABTTF Newsletter is sent to homes by mail and can also be obtained from our member associations.

In order to receive ABTTF Newsletter by mail and for further information on the newsletter:

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